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INVENTORY OF PAIN:
WATCHING THE ASIAN BODY ON WESTERN SCREENS
and
BUT THE GIRL

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Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
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ABSTRACT

The title of this thesis, “Inventory of Pain,” draws on Edward Said’s idea that Orientalism was an attempt to “inventory the traces upon me [him], the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals” (25). In this thesis, I make an inventory of the painful traces upon me and others like me from being constructed both vaguely and specifically as an “Asian” body in Australia. In my work, being constructed as an Asian body is not taken as an abstract or theoretical idea. Rather, it is described as a material and mundane, sticky and violent, lived and living experience.

I use mainstream Australian and American films and television shows as case studies to discuss the implications of not just these Othering texts but of being seen and of seeing oneself as “Other” through them. I focus on mainstream screen texts because of the way that the racially inscribed film and media stereotypes they frequently deal in become part of our cultural memories. While such stereotypes are not determinative they still have what Kent Ono and Vincent Pham call a “controlling social power”; in a recent study, Chyng Sun et al. found that while stereotypes of Asian characters on screen were seen as accurate by many of those surveyed and for Asian-Americans these stereotypes evoked a sense of pain. It is this sense of pain that I want to press into, as, in response to this pervasive cultural memory, I write and think through my own memories of encountering the Asian body on screen.

Alongside the critical dissertation, is a novel which forms another inventory of pain, entitled *But the Girl*. It is a re-working of the Euro- and andro-centric bildungsroman genre, around a South-East Asian-Australian girl. To write my selfhood and identity, pushed to the side so often, is an act of self-aggrandising. It is to say: “So often, I have identified with you, Jane Eyre, Holden Caulfield, Anna Karenina, but now you will identify with me.”

In both the critical and creative portions of this thesis, I inventory pain. In making pain an inventory, I take the raw material of wounding and transform it into a resource to be drawn upon. In making pain an inventory, I write not only about what they say but what we feel.

DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

- (i) This thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy Creative Writing except where indicated in the preface;
- (ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and
- (iii) the thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jessica Yu', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jessica Yu

PREFACE

Some sections of this dissertation are modified versions of material written and published or presented during my candidature. These sections have been published as academic papers, short stories or presented at conferences and festivals.

Critical Work

Chapter One:

“Postcolonial Writing and Affect: Putting the Personal into the Postcolonial” presented at British Commonwealth Postcolonial Conference 2019. Savannah, Georgia, 15 February 2019.

Chapter Two:

Yu, Jessica, forthcoming, “When We Say Smart Asian Girl We Don’t Mean Smart (White) Girl: The Figure of the Asian Automaton and the Adolescent Artist in the Kunstlerroman Genre”, *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture*, Pennsylvania State University, United States of America.

Chapter Three:

Presented the paper, “Realising the Asian Body on *MasterChef Australia*” at South West Popular/American Culture Conference 2019, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 21 February 2019.

Chapter Four :

Creative Work

“Tongue” forthcoming in the Liminal Anthology.

“Excerpts from *But the Girl*” presented as part of Edinburgh Art Festival at Rhubaba Gallery, 2017.

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INVENTORY OF PAIN

WATCHING THE ASIAN BODY ON WESTERN SCREENS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

RACIAL GRIEF, THE ASIAN BODY AND NOURISHMENT AS METHODOLOGY

In his introduction to *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said writes, “In many ways my study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals.” (25). When I read these words for the first time, I felt the tautest strings inside me slacken. Yes, I knew what it was to be dealt with as a person whose face was symbolic of some nebulous yet all too familiar entity. At times, I would inhabit the body of the person staring at me and I would think, *Not another one* and *they’re all like that*. But also, I would hear the voices of those around me speaking: *I don’t know who you are*. I knew what it meant to have someone else “making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it ... teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (Said 3). I was “it”. The theory of “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3) is, in a sense, a theory of how this style has dominated, restructured and had authority over me. Said describes Gustave Flaubert’s portrait of the Egyptian dancer, Kuchuk Hanem as an automatic body which symbolised a “dumb and irreducible sensuality” (186–7). Hanem’s was a re-named body that couldn’t speak, allowing Flaubert, that sensitive Frenchman, to possess it through language. Hanem’s body was my body.

As I read Said’s words, I felt that, like his, my research must not lose sight of the lived reality of being an “Oriental”. And it struck me that much of my existing academic research was done with the thin and worn pretence that I was studying literary theory and not my own experiences. By discussing the reverberations of colonial power with a detached air I was left feeling the depersonalised hollowness which Lisa Ruddick thinks of as the inevitable outcome of playing the “game of academic cool” (“Nothing is Cool” 71). How could I write about these things as if they had never happened to me and everyone I know? The question that succeeded this realisation was so difficult to answer that I wished I hadn’t posed it to myself. What would it mean to write and research in a

way that didn't deny my experiential knowledge of Orientalism? Part of the answer was in using existing research in postcolonial studies but turning away from full commitment to what Said calls conducting research "as severely and rationally as possible" (26) and what post-critical and feminist scholars such as Rita Felski, Bruno Latour, Lisa Ruddick and Susan Fraiman might call the detached, tough guy pose of the academic (Fraiman xii; "Nothing is Cool" 72; "Near Enemy" 4; Latour 228; *Limits of Critique* 2).

This thesis is both motivated and methodologically formed by my personal experiences. Said asserts that in his study of Orientalism he has never "lost hold of the cultural reality of, the personal involvement in having been constituted as, 'an Oriental'" (26). However, where Said's experiences as "an Arab Palestinian in the West" (27) is the *implicit* starting point for *Orientalism*, my lived experience of inhabiting the body of an "Asian girl" living in Australia is the *explicit* focal point of this study. Similarly, where Said describes in passing his affective experiences of being a racial "Other" in the West as "disheartening" (27) and the longevity of Orientalism as "a depressing matter" (326), I foreground my research and research methodology in the grieving and rehabilitation of the wounded self. It is through this practice that I hope to find the words I can use to make reparations to unseen wounds.

1.1 Identity Politics and Survival Tactics

At some point, I needed to make an inventory of my pain. In doing so I am, as Zadie Smith writes in *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013) the oldest thing, drawing a circle around myself and people like myself:

But, Fatou, you're forgetting the most important thing. Who cried most for Jesus?
His mother. Who cries most for you? Your father. It's very logical, when you
break it down. The Jews cry for the Jews. The Russians cry for the Russians. We
cry for Africa, because we are Africans. (27)

...

Surely there is something to be said for drawing a circle around our attention and
remaining within that circle. But how large should this circle be? (24)

Yes, I start to think that maybe there is something selfish about studying the things that I experienced; I don't know if this thesis is defensible, even to my own mind. As I read writing by writers whose experiences are adjacent to my own, I am aware of the

smallness of the circle I am drawing. There is something of the child's automatic egotism which draws concentric circles of fascination around the self. No, I don't know what I think anymore. These are the very moments when I remember how Rebecca Solnit writes that the self-doubt that shadows many women has its own unique toolkit that the overconfident lack: the ability to understand, listen, progress and correct yourself (5). Conversely, too much self-doubt leads to paralysis (Solnit 5). In the quiet moments when I consider my research, I oscillate from wide-awake self-awareness to its near enemy: self-consciousness to the point of shame.

My self-doubt is only a part of a wider societal disdain for those who advocate on behalf of themselves. In *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (2006), Linda Alcoff and Satya Mohanty write that where once identity-based movements were seen as confirming democratic values, they are now perceived as a challenge to them. Alcoff and Mohanty chart common criticisms of identity-based movements such as their narrowness, opportunist posturing and relationship to essentialist theories of identity (1–2). In a crucial moment of uncertainty, I read Alcoff's rebuttal to my own lack of courage: "Those who dismiss so disdainfully all projects of self-naming and self-empowering as identity politics have not needed to affirm themselves through the creative strength that comes from finding missing parts of one's self in experiences and histories similar to others" (*Visible Identities* 115). Alcoff and Mohanty argue that identity-based activism must be understood as a "form of legitimate social inquiry, one that often complements and indeed deepens more distanced and disinterested forms of academic analysis" (5). For Alcoff and Mohanty, identity-based thought humanises the distanced attitude of academic research and deepens its understanding of social realities:

Minoritized peoples often use subjective experience to criticize and rewrite dominant and oppressive narratives. The legitimacy of some subjective experiences, we argue, is based on the objective location of people in society; in many crucial instances, "experiences" are not unfathomable inner phenomena but rather disguised explanations of social relations, and they can be evaluated as such. (4–5)

The social location of minorities makes them especially poised to make new meaning of social relations. This idea is also championed by Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd who write that "those who are dominated are better at understanding the effects of misused power, in a better position to document and analyse" (13). I need to

know that this is something I still have up my sleeve. I need it because as Trinh Minh-ha reminds us, “the *minor*-ity’s voice is always personal; that of the *major*-ity, always impersonal” (28). Scholars like Alcoff, Mohanty and Minh-ha expose the ways in which hegemonic forces might move the minoritised writer to think that their speech is unimportant, “personal” or “subjective” or even engaged in “playing the race card,” as if the lived experience of identity were nothing more than a piece of paper to keep inside one’s wallet or to place on the table depending on one’s mood. These scholars are right in addressing those external perceptions of our experiences, but I still want to know: what if these racist perceptions have moved from being external voices to becoming the words on my own lips, spoken so dismissively to myself? In other words, how can my practice become a way of not only surviving the strong-arming of dominant culture but also the ways in which this culture presses hard into the softest parts of the self.

One of the ways of surviving a dominant culture is creating coalitions with others who share an antagonistic relationship with this culture. According to JanMohamed and Lloyd, minority groups, in spite of their very specific differences and positionalities, share the common experience of being dominated and excluded by the majority (2). Therefore, the authors propose that the disparate voices of minority discourses should be brought together to “collectively ... examine the nature and content of their common marginalization and to develop strategies for their re-empowerment” (2). In my own work of charting strategies of surviving a dominant culture, I focus on the Asian-Australian diasporic experience whilst carefully drawing from the work of different writers and theorists speaking from a range of different locations, identities and movements. In particular, I read and use the work of black feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Barbara Christian and Asian-American studies theorists such as Viet Thanh Nguyen, Anne Anlin Cheng and Trinh Minh-Ha as well as the Latinx and whiteness scholar Linda Martin Alcoff. I also read the work of Asian-Australian writers and scholars such as Carole Tan, Merlinda Bobis, Olivia Khoo and Audrey Yue but I have not limited myself to drawing on the work of writers whose experiences and identity are adjacent to my own. This is because survival strategies are strengthened by thinking in solidarity with other minority groups. Thinking in solidarity with other minority discourses need not, as JanMohamed and Lloyd stress, enforce homogenisation across groups but is rather strengthened by the diverse experiences and concerns which are specific to each group. Having said this, I read, write and think with a particular respect for the ideas of those whose experiences are not my own.

The question that I asked earlier still stands and with the help of JanMohamed and Lloyd I am able to ask it in the first-person plural: how will we ever begin to recover from the way dominant cultures press into the softest parts of the self? I find a possible answer in bell hooks' work. Hooks reminds us, in *Talking Back: Talking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989) that "it is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppressor within that we must resist – the potential victim within that we must rescue – otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, to liberation" (45–6). Hooks emphasises the importance of recovering the fractured self for women of colour, centring the wounded self rather than the ideology weaponized against it. Hooks' assessment of the fact that the racialised self is everywhere under siege propels her writings on the various ways in which she and others like her are able to survive the felt experience of cultural domination. In her essay "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" (1990), hooks describes her own experience as a black woman from a poor family in segregated Kentucky who moved into the privileged spheres of the urban centre and the university. Hooks' account of her unwillingness to "surrender every vestige of who we were before we were there" and the subsequent necessity of "creat[ing] spaces within that cultural domination if we are to survive whole, our souls intact" (82) is searing. Hooks recognises but refuses the seductions of cultural assimilation or being exhibited as an "exotic other" (82). In answer to these compromises of the self, hooks chooses to remember what she calls "the margin": the childhood home with fried pies, turnip greens and hot water cornbread, the place on the other side of the train tracks which marked the physical boundary line of a racially segregated community. This evocative use of memory has, for hooks, the ability to "redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain and suffering, and triumph in ways that *transform present reality*" (my italics) (81). Hooks stresses that reclaiming the margin as a place of resistance is a way of surviving the oppressive nature of being shunted into that very same place:

Understanding marginality as a position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people. If we only view the margin as a sign marking the despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way, the very ground of one's being. It is there in the space of collective despair that one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk, there that one's mind is fully colonised, there that the freedom one longs for is truly lost. ("Choosing the Margin" 84)

Postcolonial scholars such as Graham Huggan and Gayatri Spivak have explored the complex and potentially compromising position of marginality as a space of resistance. Huggan is particularly sceptical of the efficacy of resistance in a Western late-capitalist culture in which “postcolonialism and its rhetoric of resistance have themselves become consumer products” (10). He further asks whether “writing about displacement [might] relegate you not only to the margins in terms of resistance but in terms of being a ‘minor’ writer” (85). Spivak describes this process (in academia) as neo-colonialism “fabricating its allies by proposing a share of the centre in a seemingly new way (not a rupture but a displacement): disciplinary support for the conviction of authentic marginality by the (aspiring) elite” (222). Huggan and Spivak’s concerns are legitimate ones; they raise questions about the possibility of genuine resistance from within, questions that I have often asked of myself.

I have been cut to the heart by the suggestions by friends, family and colleagues that I was “chosen” to sit on writers’ panels, write for magazines and give interviews because I am who I am. “They like to see an Asian face. It makes them look good,” as my mother told me. “Diversity is important,” said a friend, touching her orange shock of hair, when things were going well for me. I am asked to comment on feminism, I am asked to comment on diversity, I am asked to comment on race. I do as I am asked. But all I want to give to the audience, to the interviewer, to the person I am looking at, is poetry. I speak about resistance on a stage set up by another person’s hands.

Asian-American studies sociologist Yen Le Espiritu describes Asian-Americans who have a “vested interest” in their racial identity as “panethnic entrepreneurs” (*Asian American Panethnicity* 166). Writer and academic Viet Thanh Nguyen extends Espiritu’s idea, suggesting that the “dialectical relationship between a capitalism that exploits race and democratic struggles that have fought for greater racial and economic equality has transformed race into both a point of struggle and a commodity” (4). Nguyen asserts that panethnic entrepreneurs such as the Asian-American intellectual classes use what he calls “flexible strategies” in response to contemporary Western culture’s exploitation and commodification of race. These “flexible” strategies cannot be neatly categorised as “assimilative” or “resistant”; rather, the boundary lines between these binary oppositions are blurred. I agree with Nguyen’s assertion that the categorisation of immigrant acts as either “assimilative” or “resistance” is reductive. However, I disagree that the new paradigm for discussing immigrant acts must necessarily be one which emphasises the need to capitalise on racial identity. Though racial identity and even resistance can be

commodified, I can still refuse to be complicit in this process. This refusal is necessary for me because, as hooks writes, handing over one's pain or experience to be made exotic and rarefied fractures the self. How to make this refusal is a question that is difficult to answer. Linda Hutcheon writes that it is possible for those at the margins to enact resistance even as they remain within the purvey of the centre (197) and for hooks, it is not just a possible but a pivotal mode of remembering and reclaiming the heavily contested site of selfhood. The inwardness and personal nature of "choosing the margin" is, for me, a way of resisting the commodification of my body and racial identity. It is a way of stepping outside of the gaze of the audience, the interviewer, the stage set up by someone else.

1.2 Grief and the Wounded Body

The psychical impact of racism upon the racial other and the problem of expressing racial grief are traced by Anne Anlin Cheng in *Melancholy of Race* (2000). Usefully, Cheng distinguishes between racial grief and racial grievances and argues that grief is the more unwieldy of the two. Cheng argues that

we are a nation at ease with grievance but not with grief. It is reassuring (and requires less patience, as Frost says) to believe in the efficacy of grievance in redressing grief. Yet if grievance is understood to be the social and legal articulation of grief, then it has also been incapable of addressing those aspects of grief that speak in a different language – a language that may seem inchoate because it is not fully reconcilable to the vocabulary of social formulation or ideology but that nonetheless cuts a formative pattern. (*Melancholy* x)

For Cheng, the airing of the racial grievance, a social complaint about the tangible experience of discrimination (*Melancholy* x), is more manageable for committees, governments and regulators than the concept of racial grief. Cheng describes racial grief as something invisible and interior: "intangible wounds that form the fissures underneath visible phenomena of discrimination" (*Melancholy* x). She also characterises racial grief as a complex web of immediate and involuntary affective responses to racism: "shock mixed with expectation, anger with shame, and yet again shame for feeling shame" (*Melancholy* x). Racial grieving, an interior process through which racism is experienced and reflected upon, is rich and fertile ground for understanding the "continuous interaction between sociality and privacy, history and presence, politics and ontology" of

race relations (*Melancholy* x). It is what Alcoff and Mohanty call the private, “unfathomable inner phenomena” which can be used to make sense of public life (4–5).

Cheng, like hooks and, in a sense, Huggans and Spivak, is aware of the potential dangers of baring racial wounds as a racially othered subject. Cheng acknowledges that talking through what she calls “the melancholia of racialized peoples” must appear “to reinscribe a whole history of affliction or run the risk of naturalizing that pain” (*Melancholy* 14). How do we talk about the things that happened to us without becoming passive objects, limply licking the salt in our “imaginary” wounds, bereft of the agency it requires to fight back, to heal, and to transfigure pain into beauty? How do we avoid our pain being commodified, romanticised and naturalised? How can the tracing of racial pain and grief become a creative project for self-restoration which inconveniences rather than reinforces the assumptions that dominant culture makes about us? How can we fully experience the reverberations of racial grief without falling into what hooks describes as “deep nihilism” that “penetrates in a destructive way, the very ground of one’s being,” that allows the mind to be “fully colonised” (“Choosing the Margin” 82)? In other words, how can we write about the damage of racism in ways that do not perpetuate this damage?

It is difficult not to have one’s emotional wounds recast as an entrepreneurial pose which makes one interesting, refined, sensitive and artistic (Sontag 32–3; Jamison n.p.). The idealisation and naturalisation of pain is one thing. Another problem of speaking wounds is one Susan Sontag identifies in “Illness as Metaphor” (1979). In Sontag’s text, she describes the ways in which illness is often thought to be caused by the patients themselves. In particular, illness is seen as the physical manifestation of a patient’s mismanagement of their mental or emotional state. For instance, tuberculosis was once seen as a disease resulting from an excess of emotion and cancer was seen as a disease causally linked to emotional repression (Sontag 49). The return to wellbeing for the patient was straightforward once the patient had a demonstrable “capacity for self-love” (Sontag 48). Sontag’s theory shows the danger of admitting illness: you are seen as not only physically deficient but psychologically so, because your lack of self-love is what inhibits your recovery. Her theory might be used to articulate the difficulty of expressing racial grief over racial wounding: your grief can be seen as that which causes your psychological wounds rather than the other way around.

I thought about this idea, of one’s grief as being that which causes the psychical wounds of racism rather than the other way around, when I was at a postcolonial conference towards the end of my PhD degree. In the morning, I spoke briefly about how

to think about Orientalism, not just as an academic, but as someone who had spent their life being constructed as an Oriental in the West. At lunch, an older woman asked to sit with me. She was alone and she was not an academic. She asked me why I thought of myself as an Oriental or as an Asian or South-East Asian person when, most likely, no one else ever thought of me in that way. I wondered whether all the other people at the conference secretly wondered the same things as her but would never dare to ask what she had asked. That was when I realised that she thought, in some obscure way, that *I* was the one causing racial wounding, by suggesting the hurtful nature of racism.

1.3 Rehabilitating the Wounded Body as Methodology

Earlier, I made reference to bell hooks' essay "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," which explores ways of creating space for herself and others like her in elite institutions "if we are to survive whole, our souls intact" (82). In another essay, "Homeplace (a site of resistance)," hooks focuses specifically on the historical importance of the homemaking work of black women to black resistance:

Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects ... where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. The task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of black women providing a service; it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm each other and by so doing, heal many of the wounds inflicted by racial domination. ("Homeplace" 78)

In her essay, hooks writes about how the homemaking work of her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother to nourish their families has allowed her to write and survive. This sentiment, though echoed in a very different context, resonates with me. How else could I write if my dignity, value and humanness were not restored to me by the sleepless labour of my parents both within and outside of the home? If my racial wounds had not been healed by the caregiving of my parents, how would I have survived?

My mother was neither a homemaker nor career woman. She was a nurse who worked full-time the night shift of the Emergency Department at a public hospital. She chose the night shift because it earned a little more than the day shift and because if she worked at night, she could work a second job as a nurse who treated housebound patients in the day. At 8:30pm I watched her leave for work, at 8am she came home and slept. At

12pm she would start cooking and, with a knife in one hand and a whiteboard marker in the other, she would teach me phonetics. I would be so afraid to admit I didn't understand the relationship between "cat" and "bat". She said I had a habit of ignoring whatever she taught me. Sometimes after dinner she would take me on her home-nursing visits. The elderly people would offer me biscuits and cordial. At 8:30 she would be backing out of the driveway again. I would watch her blinding headlights and the way her head turned away, towards her side mirror.

When I started researching for this dissertation, I was interested in the idea of home. I read Simone de Beauvoir who described domesticity as an entrapment within matrimonial monotony and wifely labour and Carol Pateman who writes that "the dichotomy between public and private is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately what the feminist movement is about" (281). I knew better than to tell my mum about these ideas. She was, she is, too busy for them. But when I received an invitation from a friend to her house for afternoon tea with a note saying that to reverse five hundred years of sexism, the sourcing, preparation and transportation of baked goods would be taken care of by the male attendees, I couldn't resist but share it with her. I was laughing and the phone-line went quiet on the other side. After a pause she said: "You know, the *ang moh* women, I hear them talk at work. They always, I don't know. They always feel cheated of something. But for me, it was always a joy. I never felt cheated." I didn't say anything, and I forgot about it for a while. Six months later, I came across the work of the sociologist Yen Le Espiritu. Espiritu explains that

At the same time that middle-class white women were being driven into a cult of domesticity, women of colour were coping with an extended day, juggling subsistence labour outside the family and domestic labour within it. Thus, the analytical division between productive labour (labour that economically sustains family life) and reproductive labour (labour that reproduces family life), when applied to women of colour must be modified because productive labour is necessary to achieve even minimal levels of family subsistence. This book will show that most Asian-American women, like other women of colour, do not separate paid work and housework. Their work outside the home is an extension of their domestic responsibilities, as all family members – women, men, and children – pool their resources to ensure economic subsistence or to propel their family up the economic ladder. (*Asian American Women and Men* 10)

It does not matter that sexism assigned my Mum that role.

This is the thing that matters most: if I was told I couldn't speak English, that I couldn't speak at all, I knew I could go to the home where I was taught phonetics on a small whiteboard in the kitchen. The kitchen where I had been shown my intrinsic value at great personal cost to the people who created it. Somehow there were always complicated yam-cakes topped with fried shallots left out on the counter, frozen rice porridge to defrost, chilli paste mixed with fried anchovies somewhere and lots of pens and pads of paper my dad had found forgotten by students on the university campus where he worked as a technician. When a teacher told me my bad manners should shame the parents who raised me, I could go to a place where I didn't have to always be on my guard.

My parents. They were wordlessly assigning preciousness to my body and spirit that the outside world objectified and pushed around as if it were nothing. I know this now. It didn't always feel that way then. They spoke a language of love I was not yet competent in understanding. Even now, my comprehension often fails me, the phone line is shaky, it cuts out and goes quiet without cause.

My personal experience of being nourished by my Malaysian-Chinese immigrant parents is the foundation and framework for the methodology of my thesis. Nourishment as a form of resistance against and rehabilitation from the ideological and material attacks of white culture upon the racialised body underpins my researching, reading and writing practice. That is, I hope that the academic and creative writing produced and submitted in this dissertation will constitute a form of nourishment for Asian immigrants in the West. I also acknowledge that through my research of the existing academic literature in Asian-American and Asian-Australian studies as well as literary fiction which deals with the same experience, I am sustaining myself. In this first introductory chapter and my succeeding chapters, I turn my face away from the traditional structure of the literature review. The literature review, a way of surveying, organising and evaluating previous research, seems to me a way of exerting control over occupied land in order to argue for one's claim to "new" territory. But I have no fear of admitting my influences, these critical and creative texts are here to repair racial wounds. As I highlighted in section 1.2 of this chapter, I, like hooks, excavate buried histories of racial pain and signification as part of this healing project. Like hooks, this research is not a re-enacting of that pain but a "private joy," (*Talking Back* 61) the brief moment when the wound is exposed so that it might be cleaned and dressed.

Turning away from violent methodologies (such as the critique and the traditional literature review) which trace, as Minh-ha writes, a “progression that systemically proceeds from generalities to specificities, from outlines to fillings, from diachronic to synchronic,” (48) this thesis is a deconstruction and re-construction site for academic research methodologies. I refuse the distanced, self-interested and authoritative effect of this act and opt instead for an interdisciplinary methodology. Admitting to a bricolage of influences, I construct a methodology which doesn’t attempt to overpower its material, but rather is guided by the desire to rehabilitate the wounded raced body.

I am not any more naïve about the critical and creative texts I read than I am about the imperfect love of a parent or the chaotic love of a daughter. Thinking via Rita Felski, I contend: the critique does not need to come from the cool performance of self-distancing. The critique can come from a voice as harsh and as generous as an angry lover, a fierce mother, a proud father, an older brother. Nourishment is a deeply personal and embodied methodology. It is a way of thinking about, reading and writing texts, which turns away from the traditional academic method of violent critique, from a penetration of the text which Minh-ha calls “ripping open the mother’s womb”. Nourishment as a methodology is a way of reading texts to sustain myself and writing texts to sustain other selves.

1.4 On Choosing Writing

As part of my research on inhabiting a racially wounded body inscribed as Asian in the West, I turn to writing literary fiction that deals in some sense (whether obliquely or plainly) with this same experience. My reasons for turning to fiction as a resource for understanding the relationship between the hypervisible body and its invisible racial wounds are crucial. The first is that, like so many others, from an early age, reading and writing fiction about recognisable experiences has become for me a way of rehabilitating the wounded self. I don’t mean that reading and writing are sentimental practices for me; rather, they are vital ones. As Barbara Christian writes (in a quote that does not belong on a coffee cup, sweatshirt or pencil): “I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me, literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is.” (77)

The second reason why I choose to write fiction is in some ways contradictory to the first reason I have given. I choose to write fiction precisely because of its

unimportance, its stymied ability to effect social change. What I mean by this is that literature is vital in that it saves lives but superfluous in that it can't make the political/structural changes that might make these lives not need saving. The failure of literature to effect social change, particularly in comparison with political activism or writing, gives it, as Sianne Ngai – thinking via Adorno – writes, an air of ridiculousness (838–9) or as Cheng writes, an embarrassing sense of its own self-indulgence (*Melancholy* 25). This becomes apparent when postcolonial or new historicist critiques of postcolonial texts desperately attempt to turn the texts of othered peoples into anthropological data or political manifesto. As has been noted by other scholars such as Amanda Anderson and Rita Felski, the claims of such criticism overextends itself: “we see frequent attempts to endow literary works with what Amanda Anderson calls aggrandized agency, to portray them as uniquely powerful objects able to single-handedly impose coercive regimes of power or to unleash insurrectionary surges of resistance” (Felski, *Uses of Literature* 8). When postcolonial critics or other ideologically motivated critics attempt to contort the politics of a text in this way, there is indeed a sense of their overcompensation for the lack of rationality, political purpose or clarity of fiction. However, it is, according to Ngai via Adorno, the very powerlessness of art that makes it uniquely capable of expressing the experience of powerlessness (838). In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno finds agency in the impotence of art, particularly in high modernist works, writing that: “through their powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world they emphasize the element of powerlessness in their own content” (104).

What makes a powerless form powerful in its expression of powerlessness? As Barbara Christian writes, the playfulness and dynamism of fiction as a form, defined expressly by its opposition to theory, make it formally apposite for the survival and dissent of people of colour:

People of colour have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing ... is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (68)

The opportunity for oblique, creative dissent and playfulness which fiction's powerlessness allows is as an affective mode of joyous survival for Christian. As Said

writes, Orientalism's logic of essentialism (2), or as Asian-Australian academic Merlinda Bobis describes it, "colonial prescription" ("Confounding Light" 4) is linked to its oppressiveness. Thus, it seems appropriate that the formal traditions of oppressed peoples should take on the form of texts that are, by contrast, dynamic and sphinx-like.

Rather than viewing the instability of the subjective as an indulgence, Cheng suggests that it would be a great loss "not to look at the subjective dimension of race for fear of its unwieldiness" and urges us towards "the most unmanageable instances of political mediation" in order to see "what it really means to adopt a political stance" (*Melancholy* 25). The subjective as a productive realm for understanding political and social relations about race is one also, of course, advocated for by Alcoff and Mohanty. I want to argue that there is nothing more subjective than fiction, a form defined by its repudiation of and freedom from adherence to political expedience or social data and yet, paradoxically, known for its ability to prophetically excavate buried social meaning-making.

Together with the fiction I produce for the creative component of this thesis, I use interdisciplinary analysis in the critical part of the thesis to inform my study: elements drawn from literary theory, post-critical writing, creative practice, postcolonial theory, race studies, Asian-American studies, sociology and affective theory. Literary analysis, as we have already seen via feminist and post-critical scholars such as Felski, Fraiman, Latour and Ruddick, has been criticised for its circular, alienating and aggressive approach to texts. Alongside this, criticisms by women writers of colour such as Barbara Christian, bell hooks and Trinh Minh-ha have also been explored. For Christian, the forms and traditions of Western theory are incommensurable with the identities, experiences and content of minoritised writers. Not only are these forms and traditions controlling and ungenerous in their self-distancing but they are bereft of the irreverence, playfulness, voluptuous capacity for storytelling and "spiritedness" which characterise not only the writing of racial minorities but the survival tactics of such peoples. Merlinda Bobis even characterises postcolonial studies as a Western discipline and voice which academics from "other" countries must "put on" to in order to be heard ("Confounding Light" 4). In response to these oppressive languages and forms, bell hooks addresses the reader, asking: "[d]are I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of domination – a language that will not bind you, fence you in or hold you?" ("Choosing the Margin" 81). This is the kind of language I want to make meaning with. Trinh Minh-

ha describes her rejection of this oppressive way of thinking and speaking and movement towards a new language in this way:

I am profoundly indifferent to [the] ... old way of theorizing – of piercing ... through the sediments of psychological and epistemological “depths.” I may stubbornly turn around a foreign thing or turn it around to play with it, but I respect its realms of opaqueness. Seeking to perforate meaning by forcing my entry or breaking it open to dissipate what is thought to be its secrets seems to me as crippled an act as verifying the sex of an unborn child by ripping open the mother’s womb. It is typical of a mentality that proves incapable of touching the living thing without crushing its delicateness. I undeniably prefer the heterogeneity of free play in a dice game to the unity and uniformity of dissection, classification, and synthesis towards a higher truth. (48–9)

Minh-ha uses painterly language to avoid dictating the particulars of her approach but this is what I see: respectfulness towards the opacity of texts, gentleness towards living things, stubbornness or persistent rigour in “turning around” or finding new perspectives, and an attitude of irreverence or “play”.

1.5 Seeing the Body

There are, as Said, quoting Gramsci, wrote, “an infinity of traces” (Said 25) inside me from my experiences. A constellation of shiny points in a black space in which I first started to self-hate. To understand my own experiences, I have to trace them back to their historical antecedents. This is the way that pain becomes an inventory, a source of knowledge to draw on for understanding. It is understanding which gives me the ability to speak to a dominant culture which presses hard into the softest parts of the self. It was my twenty-fourth birthday when I first used the term “minority” in front of my father-in-law. He is a GP who worries about his patients long after he has closed the door on his office. He listens to people for longer than their appointments should go and believes them when they tell him they are hurting. This good man asked me about my research and I told him about it. He asked me, “Are Asians really a minority? I think they’re more of a majority”. It was then that I remembered the time that my husband had told me that his mum had said, “It’s funny they call themselves a minority ... I feel like the real minority when I go into the city,” another good person. It was some time later that we had another conversation about my in-laws’ feeling unsafe when walking in Footscray and

seeing a group of young black men. When my husband objected to this, his mother said carefully, it wasn't about their race, it was about the fact that they were young men with nothing to do. "So, you could say, we were the real minority in that situation," his father concluded, delivering it like the end of the long, fragmented argument that had begun between them. All this talk of the "real" and the "not real," the "we" and the "they". It makes me see that the "we" in these stories are the real and the "they" the unreal. As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, "Racism is not merely simplistic hatred. It is, more often, broad sympathy towards some and broader scepticism towards others" (123–4). The scepticism that makes expressing a wound without it being re-cast as an entrepreneurial pose so difficult is also what makes the expression of wounding so vital. The rigorous and complete tracing of racial pain and its origins all the way from my own young body to the historical gaze of the coloniser is a shaming of that sceptical voice. It is a way of making the invisible visible.

What strikes me about the logic of my in-laws' scepticism is that my body is hypervisible to them ("I feel like the real minority when I go into the city") and that because of this, my wounding is invisible and even deniable ("It's funny they call themselves a minority"). They are not alone in their line of thinking. My best friend was at a gallery opening when a man turned to her and listed all the various places in Melbourne where he had seen Chinese people (the park near his workplace, the CBD, St Paul's Cathedral). My soft-white-bread high-school boyfriend took an art class where he was asked to modernise John Brack's *Collins St., 5pm* and his teacher began drawing glasses over all of the figures, saying "they all wear glasses don't they". The Asian body is mass-produced and hypervisible to the white gaze (R. Lee 5; Santa Ana 15). I've known that for a while, but it has recently occurred to me that there is a relationship between this hypervisible body and my invisible wounding. In the next section of this chapter, which has thus far been about invisible wounds, I turn my attention towards the relationship of these invisible wounds to the hypervisibility of my body. And in thinking about my own body, I think about the bodies that have come before, the bodies that were first looked at, quantified and described; in short, the history of European racialisation and perception of non-white bodies.

Viet Thanh Nguyen writes that Western culture renders the masculine and white body "unmarked" whilst designating the non-white and female body as a "marked subject whose differences are rendered visible and corporeal" (Nguyen 18). These visible markers not only serve to identify and draw attention to the body but naturalise racial and

social discourse by locating it in biological terms. Visible markers such as hair texture and skin colour become inscriptions upon the body, legible in the language of racial discourse. Writing about the experience of inhabiting a black body in France, Frantz Fanon said with scorching insight that he was “fixed” by his appearance. The physical markers that were inscribed upon his body and were interpreted as evidence of his essential blackness:

I’m not given a second chance. I am overdetermined from the outside. I am slave not to the “idea” others have of me, but to my appearance ... The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am fixed ... the Negro’s clothes smell of Negro; the Negro has white teeth; the Negro has big teeth; the Negro has a broad chest. (95–6)

Writing after Fanon, Shirley Tate expounds on his pronouncement about the black body, asserting that it is “visible only through what is already known of the stereotype” (210). Fanon writes that he is burdened by physical features which are, as bell hooks says, near impossible to mask (*Talking Back* 212–3).

When I was in year eleven, I told my English class that I imagined being a white person would be like being a blank canvas but to be a non-white person was to be something else entirely. I can’t remember what else I said, but I can safely guess that I would have tortured the metaphor till it was wrung of its poetry. Probably something about feeling painted over and overdetermined where my white peers were able to determine who they were freely. We didn’t discuss whiteness in our classes, I remember that much. The other students and my teacher were gravely offended by my outburst. Danielle, one of the girls – school captain, loved animals, teachers called her “stable,” only ate sausage rolls when drunk – asked me if this was a privilege “we” all had in us from birth or ...? I can’t remember the rest of her question, but I remember thinking it was a dead-end. I watched my English teacher turn his head away in disgust.

In this thesis, I think of discourses of racial stereotypes as embodied, embedded within the flesh of non-white bodies. This is something which Benedict Anderson puts so well when he writes:

A word like “slant,” for example, abbreviated from “slant-eyed,” does not simply express an ordinary political enmity. It erases nation-ness by reducing the adversary to his biological physiognomy. It denies, by substituting for,

“Vietnamese;” just as *raton* denies, by substituting for, “Algerian”. At the same time, it stirs “Vietnamese” into a nameless sludge along with “Korean,” “Chinese,” “Filipino,” and so on. (148)

The “slant” is not a feature of the Asian body, it is the Asian body, the Asian itself. I argue, alongside Sara Ahmed, Shirley Tate and Robert Lee, that the discursive act of constructing stereotypes is also a corporeal one because it draws boundaries between one body and another. Of course, this historical line-drawing begins with the initial contact between coloniser and colonial subject. Linda Martin Alcoff writes that in the early stages of colonialism, explorers created taxonomies of human beings and mapped their settings in order to anxiously exert control over the “new” peoples and places they had come into contact with. The genealogy of thought which links perception of non-White bodies and taxonomies of bodily differences to their racial classification reveals what Alcoff calls the “Western fetish with classification” (*Visible Identities* 180). Benedict Anderson writes towards this particular experience, discussing the way the census, map and museum “profoundly shaped the way in which the colonials state imagined its dominion – the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain and the legitimacy of its ancestry” (164). Anderson describes the “passion for completeness and unambiguity” (166) of the early twentieth-century British colonial census-makers in the Straits Settlements and Peninsular Malaya. He describes how under each racial category of the 1911 census, is a subcategory labelled “Others,” a category in which misfits and half-casts, neither-here-nor-theres and everwheres are smoothed over and made cohesive. This is something my dad, who was trained by the British navy and lived under colonial rule in Malaysia, often tells me. He ascribes to the *ang moh* a talent for keeping records. A race of minute-takers, clipboard-holders and born secretaries.

Scientists, anthropologists, anatomists and physicians in the colonial context would use visible and physical characteristics in order to “discern identity and difference, equality and inequality, beauty and ugliness among animals and human bodies” (West 55). The “scientific” methods behind these racial taxonomies and scales focused intently upon the body. For example, Michael Keevak writes that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the measurement of human skulls was used to create distinctions between “Ethiopian,” “Mongolian” and “European” skulls, and later, in the mid-nineteenth century, this method was expanded to include measurements of the entire

human body. By the end of the nineteenth century the French anatomist and anthropologist Paul Broca was using skin colour as a way of determining race.

I imagine myself, my body in another time and place. How would it have been? Sitting at a table with Dr Broca. His cheeks sagging like two raw chicken breasts. His whiskers feathering away from his face like balls of dust. Broca placing a lovely spinning top loaded with different coloured disks beside my arm. The colours spinning, spinning together. Browns and yellows and greys. Such ugly colours. When I was younger, they said I had skin like fresh milk. *Gah eh peh nia*, I heard it sighed as I walked into rooms of relatives sitting on the settee, the floor, the rattan stools. He adjusts the disks, replacing the colours with more red and white and brown. I think of the rice powder my mother put on my face when I was young. Cool and soft. I think of the peg placed on my nose to make it higher. I think of the line in the Songs of Solomon I liked so much at convent school: *Look not upon me, because I am dark, because the sun has darkened me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but my own vineyard have I not kept* (1:6). Broca places the colour plates on the table and records their numbers in his book. No.'s 37, 44, 51. I go home to my family and tell them about the giant, meaty man I saw; we laugh at the greedy, red-haired *ang moh*.

1.6 Watching the Asian Body on Screen

In my research, I focus on the ways in which racial stereotypes and racist perceptions are inscribed upon Asian bodies in the West. I use the word “bodies” and not “selves” because the word “bodies” gestures towards the way othered selves are objectified, are made nothing more than bodies. But I also use the word bodies to reclaim the Asian as not just a signifier but a body of flesh and blood which is soft and hard, tender and difficult, sick and well, hurt and hurting, real and living. It is a way of asserting the human-ness of a body in world which emphasises its object-ness. I identify twenty-first-century embodied racial stereotypes through a wide range of texts, including media, film, literature and pop culture. I discuss media and film stereotypes because as Kent Ono and Vincent Pham write, although it would be naïve to believe that these stereotypes have a causal relationship with racial attitudes and behaviours, these representations do “consolidate desires for continued racial, sexual, and gendered power” (5) and constitute a “powerful aspect of our collective memories” (4). Watching the Asian body on screen gives us many ways to think about both the “crushing objecthood” (“Shine” 1023) and potential agency involved in inhabiting an Asian body. The thick visual culture of the screen text helps us

ask questions such as: what does the white gaze really see? And is there anything we can do to mess with this seeing?

On one hand, the ways in which the white gaze contains, defines and controls the racialised body are clear. As I noted earlier, for Frantz Fanon the white gaze is what makes him who he is. It doesn't just look at his body, it determines his body. And yet, Sarah Chinn asserts that

the language of blood, skin and bodies seems amazingly mobile and adaptable to any number of agendas, at times the structures of domination are so adamant and impenetrable that language and materiality seem merged and the body is only a site of subordination ... But the ways in which bodies resist their inscription as pure legibility are innumerable. (22)

While this thesis is about understanding the way the Asian body has been acted upon and written all over through racist discourse, it is also about acknowledging that bodies are also selves and therefore, as Maria Zamora writes, "living text(s) ... constantly bearing and transforming meaning" (7). If the body can be co-opted for racist discourse, it can also be used for its subversion. The body is both "inscription" and "self-determined expression" (6). This thesis is about that constantly mutating and shifting argument between the body limp and made to do what systems of subordination tell it to and the body, uncontrollable, unyielding and re-modelling itself on its own terms.

For scholars such as Anne Anlin Cheng, Rey Chow and Josephine Lee, to watch the Asian body on screen is to parse the antinomies of the racialised body's objecthood and agency. In her essay on Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* (2007), Chow focuses on the masochistic sex scenes between Mr. Yee, a Chinese traitor working for Japan during the 1938–42 Japanese invasion of China, and Wang Chia-Chih, a freshman who is part of a nationalistic group of University of Hong Kong students plotting to capture Yee. Wang is tasked with seducing Yee over an extended period in order to lure him into a trap. In the brief moment before he is about to be killed by the student patriots, however, Wang advises Yee to flee. Yee escapes and has Wang and her associates tortured and executed. Chow uses Wang's pleasure during the graphic, masochistic sex scenes with Yee as a metaphor of sorts for the act of writing about histories of "having been rendered object" as an Asian scholar:

As a considerable number of ethnically Asian scholars and students, “minorities” raised in Asian and non-Asian languages, join what used to be an esoteric Western academic establishment (Asian studies) dominated by white (and mainly male) researchers, the extra dimension of the historicity of having been rendered object needs to be recognised as a dimension of creativity, one that bears a sticky, messy historical imprint – a claim to a (collective) memory of being aggressed against and the masochistic pleasure and pains that typically accompany such a claim. (562)

Here Chow points out the way that writing about the historical objectification of the Asian body as an Asian scholar is an exercise in agency of this same body, a masochistic experience which turns pleasure to pain and pain to pleasure. It is an example of the way that objecthood is strangely intertwined with agency, a closeness which Chow describes as “sticky” and “messy” (562). In a similar vein, Cheng writes about the mesmerising “staging and erasure” of Anna May Wong’s body on screen (“Shine” 1038–9). For Cheng, when we speak about the body of the celebrity woman of colour on screen, we address the intimacy between “agency and objectification, persona and impersonality” (“Shine” 1024). In other words, the body of the woman of colour on screen is a rich text through which we can parse both the intimate connections and contradictions between the way this body is seen and the way this body makes itself seen. Josephine Lee offers a different example of the tensions between objecthood and agency in the presentation of the Asian body on screen. She describes the casting of an Asian rather than a white body in a role based around Asian stereotypes as a decision which tangos with the objectness of the role and the potential agency (however limited) of the actor. She writes that where a white actor playing an Asian character simply embodies a straightforward stereotype, thereby leaving white audiences in control,

the presence of the literal Asian body has the potential to provoke another reaction, in its apparent excess of the role in which it is placed. There is an aspect of the performance that is no longer under full spectatorial control, that cannot remain a codified sign of the Oriental. (J. Lee 97)

Watching the Asian body on screen is a chance for us to reflect on both the degrading and potentially destabilising nature of being tasked with the playing of a racial stereotype.

In light of Cheng, Lee and Chow's ideas about the fraternal twins of agency and passivity, my enquiry into the nature of the relationships of racial stereotypes, the white gaze and the racialised body is not a passive or defensive one which merely identifies stereotypes; I discuss the ways Asian bodies such as myself respond to these stereotypes: through self-fashioning, shuffling under the white gaze, lowering our eyes at the gaze, looking back at this gaze, laughing in the face of this gaze. In each chapter to follow, I explore the embodiment of a stereotype, tracing both colonial and contemporary racialised imagery of the Asian body. I then describe the affective experience of this racial "look," shifting the point of view from looker to looked-at.

In the rest of the thesis, I foreground screen texts and not literary ones (despite what literature means to me) for deeply personal reasons. I was raised by a dad who professes to only read machinery manuals, a mother who (like so many people not born into wealth) feels tired and too-busy at the sight of a book, a grandmother who was illiterate. In contrast to the irrelevance of books to my family and to so many of my friends outside of the academy, television is a godsend after dinner is done, Netflix a revelation, *MasterChef* a religious experience, Airport West Village Cinemas a treat. I wanted my dissertation to mean something to the family and communities that raised me up to write it. I didn't want to write about people they had never heard of, books they had never laid eyes on and characters they will never know. My family are not anti-intellectuals and they aren't stupid; they were proud when they watched me bring stacks of books from the university library home, saying I had read more in a week than they had in a lifetime. But. But. But I didn't want to write things only people who share my privileges, education and dumb luck are affected by, are all too familiar with, are able to understand.

1.7 Chapter Structure

Chapter One of this thesis has been an introduction to the idea of inhabiting a body marked both specifically and vaguely as "Asian". In it, I have been thinking about the idea of grief, about racial wounding, identity politics, a methodology of nourishment. It also figures as a literature review of sorts as well as a meditation on what it means to write a literature review.

Chapter Two, "Smart (White) Girls," focuses on media and pop cultural representations of Asian immigrant families as the foundation of model minority mythology as well as Yellow Peril discourse. I discuss the significance of yellow skin to Yellow Peril discourse of Asian invasion and threat. I also explore the trope of "all Asians

looking the same,” reading this alongside the idea of the repetitive and automatic nature of the Asian body in the context of the model minority family. I argue that the silent, staring and conservative Asian family is used in popular films of adolescent and young adult Bildungsroman ((500) *Days of Summer*, *Juno*, *Lady Bird*) as a foil for rebellious and artistic protagonists who must resist the urge to socially conform represented by this family.

Chapter Three, “*Gweilo* Food,” makes its focus the derealised Asian body and its realisation through competitive cooking shows such as *MasterChef Australia*. I use Judith Butler’s idea that the bodies of racial minorities are “derealised” and therefore placed outside of the framework of the human. Butler writes that the derealisation of minoritised bodies occurs through their depersonalisation: unlike real live humans, these bodies do not have names, faces, families, hobbies or homes. If the derealisation of the minoritised body occurs through its derealisation and depersonalisation, then does it follow that its recuperation into the realm of the “real” will occur when it is made familiar, quotidian, personally affecting and recognisable? In this chapter I ask how the preparation and offering of food on screen can function as a way for the Asian body to be transformed from the unreal to the real and recognisable.

Chapter Four, ‘*Lover/Other*,’ discusses representations of the Asian body in love as well as the call for representation as a call for love. I think critically about the way the rom-coms, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* (2018), present the idea of a post-race utopia as a moment in time when the fantasy of interracial love (not just romantic love but all love that crosses racial boundaries) is no longer a fantasy. Using a postcolonial feminist framework yoked to affective theories of attachment, I discuss the pleasures and the pains associated with this kind of post-race fantasy.

1.8 And so

And so the critical and creative halves of my thesis are both ways of grieving the things that have happened to those who inhabit these racialised bodies. This grieving process, I hope, also leads me to ways of healing and making reparations to the fractured self. My interest in making an inventory of these traces upon my body led me to my research: an interdisciplinary project which uses Asian-American studies, identity politics, postcolonial theory, literary theory, affective theory, sociology and creative practice in order to honestly map my experiences and, adjacent to this, the writing of Asian

immigrant experiences. I make maps because I believe that by rigorously tracing, understanding and excavating the buried experiences of Asian immigrants in the West, I am enacting an excavation and recovery of the self. When I write about how race was first inscribed upon bodies like mine, how racist discourse began to become intertwined with the raced body itself, I am narrating the history of hate and self-hate in order to regenerate. This is me tracing the genealogy of pain. I have to find its beginning in order to mark its end.

CHAPTER TWO

SMART (WHITE) GIRLS

THE ASIAN AUTOMATON AND THE ADOLESCENT ARTIST

I am fifteen and my maths teacher thinks I should be doing better at maths than I am. I am fifteen and deluded by visions of my own artistic genius. Of course, my art teacher, like any other sensible adult, refuses to have a bar of this, but she also doesn't think I have an inner life. I drop the subject. I write and write and write. A girl in my VCE English class asks why the best students at English in the class aren't even English. I know what she means. I'm fourteen, the new Harry Potter book has come out and we are all clutching the huge tomes, debating potential meanings and endings. A student in the year below me asks if I can even read. My best friend defends me, saying I was born here and I'm the best at English in the class. I love her, I still love her. When we're a little older she admits we only struck up a friendship late in high school because initially in the jostling and painful PR-image management of early high school, she didn't want to be associated with a "quiet Asian girl".

I love university. I love reading and being left to my own devices and writing what I want. I like my new friends. But I notice they don't like me nearly as much as I get better at being at university, a place that seems to drip with its prizes, grants, scholarships, letter and number symbols of something. I'm not sure what. A funny family friend, Caleb, calls me "well-decorated". Less funny people come up with new ways to describe me: *Jess is too cold. Jess is too hard to read. Jess is too smart. Jess is intimidating. Jess won't say a word. Jess is careerist.* I read it in an email sent late at night from a so-called mentor, I hear it from my husband's boss, I beg my in-laws not to say it anymore. I look in their eyes. I anticipate the charge. I think: my body is illegible, it withholds itself from you. And yet, ironically, in describing it as such, it has become as Sarah Chinn writes, "legible, knowable and controllable" (Chinn 5). I avert my eyes and look around the room as if taking in the world.

My adolescent delusions of the original artist haven't fully left me. When I discuss these slights with my similarly self-absorbed friend, who picked up all the prizes in her fashion design course, she recalls her peers describing her as "hard-working" as if it was an unfair advantage. "They never said how creative I was," she pouts. She is the true daughter of her Beijing parents – mother: poet/painter and father: art critic – and being original is something so in her blood, she bleeds it. I tell her I feel the same. This is the collective seeing which sees us only through what is already known of the stereotype (Tate 210).

I am in grade four. I have a teacher we all admire like a celebrity. She has wavy blonde hair clipped to the top of her head and she spends most of our class time letting us waste expensive art materials. Thick gold pens, tissue paper, nice paint in rough, painful layers. My teacher asks us what a stereotype is. I watch her neat cursive on the board creating that spidery compound word. I think of it as a sound system, metallic, armoured in useful buttons. She interrupts our silence:

"For example. Do all boys like sport?"

"Yes!"

"Do they? No. That's a stereotype. Some boys prefer staying indoors. What other stereotypes can you think of?"

"All girls have blue eyes and blonde hair," I say quickly raising my hand like a flagpole.

"No," she says and points at the next dangling hand.

I'm still unsure if I was right or wrong. All I know is that what I meant, as a ten-year-old girl, was that none of the girls we drew in coloured pencils had my hair or eyes. The girls on pads of paper we dreamt up had blonde hair bouncing off their heads, round blue eyes, triangle-shaped dresses and exaggerated eyelashes. These girls were the "standard type," even the "only type" and in that sense, I think I was trying to tell someone that this wasn't true. The only girls that are girls, the only girls that are human, the only girls that are themselves.

Only later would I understand what it meant to be not a "girl" but be an Asiatic, to walk around as a corporeal summary of stereotypes about myself. Only later would I see that the stereotypes I could think of were ones that described myself.

2.1 *What We Mean When We Say Smart Girl*

Have you noticed that when we say when we say Smart Asian Girl we mean something different to Smart (White) Girl? The figure of the Smart White Girl in the *Kunstlerroman*, teenage, indie-film genre and her foil, the Asian Automaton, are the focal point of this chapter. I argue that the (white) female protagonists of *(500) Days of Summer* (2009), *Lady Bird* (2018), and *Juno* (2007) must overcome the call for social conformity represented by figure of the Asian Automaton. In these films, the Asian daughter and her family are represented as a foil and a fake for the lippy savants, unruly girls, and decisive tastemakers at the centre of these films. The protagonists of these films are pioneering a new kind of personhood; they are the new woman, the new family, the new mother, the new daughter, the new individual of the free world. The stare of the Asian daughter is a repression and a rebuke which must be rejected by the films' white female protagonists in order for them to individuate themselves from these external pressures and come of age as both artists and women.

The figure that I call the Smart White Girl is an artistic, quick-witted, unconventional young female protagonist whose developmental arc is shaped by her desire to flout gender and social norms. Juno in *Juno* (2007) becomes pregnant as a teenager but rather than caving to the social shaming which surrounds teenage pregnancy, proudly continues her pregnancy in order to facilitate the adoption of her child. Summer in *(500) Days of Summer* (2009) is relentlessly pursued by her love interest Tom but refuses to make a romantic commitment, flouting rom-com stereotypes of needy women desperate to be married. *Lady Bird* makes it her ambition to move away from her hometown of Sacramento and go to college in a "city with culture" like New York. The foil to the Smart White Girl, which I call the Asian Automaton, is a representation of the Asian family via either a literal representation of a family or an Asian daughter tasked with bearing her family's cultural values.

I deliberately use the imprecise term "Asian" to denote the vague way in which these films deploy bodies both generally and specifically marked as "Asian". As a South-East Asian, second-generation immigrant born and living in Australia, I am marked every day in the societal context I inhabit as "Asian". I am not described by passers-by, teachers, colleagues or friends using the specific terms, "Asian-Australian" or even "South-East Asian" or "Chinese-Malaysian-Australian," I am described as "Asian". Similarly, in these American film texts, the "Asian" characters rarely have speaking lines and they certainly

have no backstory to mark their exact racial locality. Are they South-East Asian immigrants? Fifth-generation Asian-Americans? Travellers from Japan? These are questions left unanswered because what matters in these films is that their bodies are marked as Asian and therefore become what Josephine Lee calls the “codified sign of the Oriental” (97). These Asian bodies are simply symbolic of a vague collective of people who “all look the same,” their individual bodies simplified into a homogenised mass of stereotypes about the Oriental.

In these films, the body of the girl is a site of contention for the moral superiority of one culture over another. The Smart White Girl is not just a girl, she is a symbol of the charismatic rebellions, artistic ambitions, and individual freedoms of Western democratic culture. As Asian-Australian Studies scholar Olivia Khoo writes, the feminine “spreads, reproduces, multiplies and procreates” (20). Asian girls in Australia are not just girls, they are wives and daughters not only carrying culture and tradition but disease and the potential for contamination through miscegenation (Khoo 20). These wives and daughters become symbols of the model minority family itself, particularly in the way that traditional gender roles uphold this structure. The perceived sexism of the Asian family fits into the stereotype of Asian oppression as opposed to Western freedoms (Chung 22). Thus, filmic representations of the subjugation of Asian daughters stuck within this familial system and even mindlessly dedicated to the continuation of this familial system are intended to highlight the moral superiority of the white, middle-class family and its emancipated women.

I assert that these films represent the bodies of Asian girls and their families as “Asian Automaton” through the techno-Orientalist gaze. Techno-Orientalist scholars such as Christine Cornea, David Morley, Kevin Robins, Lisa Nakamura, and David S. Roh have pointed out that where Edward Said’s Orientalism presents Asia as exotic, traditional, archaic, splendid and sensual, techno-Orientalism renovates this imagery, replacing it with an Asia which is hyperfuturistic, hypertechnological, and imagines Asian bodies as “gatekeepers, facilitators and purveyors of technology” (Roh 13). The techno-Orientalist gaze has been identified by Christine Cornea and Seo-Young Chu in American science-fiction and fantasy films *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Street Fighter* (1994) and in action or adventure films *Die Another Day* (2002) and *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932). In this chapter, I pull focus away from science-fiction, action, and adventure genres – genres which are likely to incorporate literal machinery into their narratives (robots, cyborgs, humanoids, weaponry) – and discuss coming-of-age young

adult and new adult films with a strong realism bent. The Asian Automaton is not presented in these films as a literal automaton but can be thought of as a metaphorical automaton.

I draw particularly on Seo-Young Chu's essay "I, Stereotype: Detained in the Uncanny Valley" (2015) that compares Asian subjects read through the lens of Yellow Peril stereotypes to robots suspended in Masahiro Mori's Uncanny Valley. Mori's robotics theory of the Uncanny Valley shows us that the more humanlike a robot is, the more sympathetic it appears until it reaches an approximately 85% humanlike appearance. At this point, our sympathies with the robot dip because its human likeness becomes uncanny and disturbing. In her essay, Chu compares this phenomenon to uncanny ethnic stereotypes which "elicit intellectual uncertainty over whether a 'type' of person is genuinely human and alive" (78). To this end, Chu describes stereotypes as "weapons of mass dehumanization targeted against specific groups of people" (78). My focus on Asian bodies as metaphorical cyborgs is influenced by Chu's emphasis on the representation of Asian bodies as robots in the Uncanny Valley and the stereotype as a weapon facilitating their dehumanisation. Unlike Chu, however, I define "automaton" not as a literal part-human, part-machine but as a stereotyped Asian subject who is represented as so socially conservative, conformist, unoriginal, and emotionless that there is some uncertainty over whether they are "genuinely human" and have any sense of an inner life.

I extend Chu's idea of the stereotype as a dehumanising technology to suggest that like the automatic, Asian body, the repetitive technology of the stereotype acts as a foil for artistic individuation. The etymology of the word stereotype can be traced back to the Greek *stereos*, meaning solid and *typos*, meaning impression (Chu 79). Stereotyping originally referred to a form of print technology, popularised at the beginning of the Victorian era, in which rather than moving pieces of type, plates with type already fixed together were used. By the twentieth century, stereotyping had superseded block-printing methods because rather than requiring hand-setting, the fixed mould of the stereotype allowed whole pages of text to be printed quickly and easily. The stereotype was also known for its accuracy, the fixity of its form guaranteed a process of "mechanical reproduction devoid of human error" (Chakravorty 12). As a technology, the stereotype is well known for ushering in mass culture given the low cost and high speed at which it could reproduce books, newspapers, pamphlets, advertisements and other print texts. In a sense, the stereotype, as we understand it now, remains true to its technological origins,

given its almost inhuman repeatability, fixity and ability to proliferate quickly. Cultural critics such as Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and Michael Riffaterre have lambasted the stereotype in literature for the repetitiveness which is so central to its nature. Barthes describes the affective qualities of this repetition as nauseating and tiresome. It is “the word repeated without any magic” (Barthes 42). In a similar vein, Jörg Schweinitz describes the stereotype in film as “‘standard’ ... the absolute opposite of positive critical terms such as ‘artistic,’ ‘creative,’ ‘nuanced,’ ‘true,’ ‘individual’ or ‘original’” (xiii). The stereotype as a representational tool is described in Manichean opposition to the original vision of the artist. Thus, I think about the way that the qualities of the stereotype itself, unindividuated, boring, inhuman are displaced onto the Asian body through stereotyping of it as an automatic, not entirely human, body.

2.2 (500 Days of Summer) and *Yellow Perilism*

Does anyone else remember watching *500 Days of Summer* (2009) all those years ago and the scene in which Tom (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and Summer (Zooey Deschanel) lie down together in an IKEA showroom bed? I remember it vividly because up until this point in the film I had struck up an aspirational identification with the female lead Summer: how clever and original it was to play house in IKEA, how good it would be to cut my hair into bangs and wear dresses hemmed with scalloped eyelet lace, how luxurious to deliberate over whether you wanted “something serious” or not. Summer is an unusually beautiful young woman; the film labours this point with a montage of statistics quantifying her charm in monetary terms: she quotes a Belle and Sebastian song in her high school year book and there is a huge spike in sales of *The Boy with the Arab Strap*, she works at an ice-cream stand called The Daily Freeze and that year there is a “212% surge in revenue,” whenever she rents an apartment the price of the rent averages “below 9.2% the market value,” her commute to work averages “14.2 double-takes daily”. I wanted to be beautiful and clever like Summer.

Summer and Tom are about to kiss but then there is an interruption to their romance: Tom says to Summer, “Honey, I don’t know how to tell you this but there’s a Chinese family in our bathroom.” Summer looks up with dinner-plate eyes and adjacent to the IKEA bedroom they have occupied is indeed a bathroom crammed with a Chinese family. In a film that is tasteful to the point of being twee, I was embarrassed to recognise myself in this Chinese family crammed into the showroom bathroom. A mother with a stiff, simple expression, ugly bobbed hair and glasses, a father pushing his glasses up his

nose and holding his thick ugly belt, an older daughter with a bad yellow and white tie-die dress and tacky lip gloss, a son with no expression or movement and a younger daughter with a look of prurient conservatism on her face. Each of them but the youngest overweight, all of them sweaty and yellow and every haircut homemade. The Chinese family stares at Tom and Summer with what I think is supposed to be judgement, though for the most part their collective facial expressions are too blank to mean anything at all.

There is a Chinese family in Summer and Tom's bathroom. The bathroom is the smallest room in their imagined house, they squeeze themselves around the sink somehow and it is the most private room in their house, here their bodies are locked away like secrets behind closed doors. On the other hand, it is not really their bathroom: it is a showroom in an IKEA store somewhere in America. This is America's bathroom, the public are welcome to stroll in and caress all the fittings. The Asian family in Summer and Tom/America's bathroom neatly encapsulates the idea of an Asian immigrant population who have installed themselves as what Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong calls, "permanent houseguests in the house of America" (6). The Asian immigrant family has unexpectedly invited themselves over to the house of America and white citizens, like ruffled hosts, oscillate between benevolence and disapproval of the comings and goings of these unexpected guests. This metaphor is not just relevant to American racial discourses. I was three years old when Pauline Hanson spoke in parliament about Australia being "swamped by Asians". Again, the offence of taking up a whole country was compared to the invasion of the most private of spaces; Hanson argued that "if I can invite whom I want into my home, then I should have the right to have a say in who comes into my country." While Hanson's rhetoric of an Asian invasion was denounced by many, it is worth noting that it was through endorsement of Hanson that John Howard became prime minister in 1996 and that this rhetoric became popular amongst the white working class in Australia (Khoo, Small and Yue 6). Hansonism's predecessor, the White Australia Policy, was a series of policies, effective until about 1973, which kept non-white (particularly Asian) immigrants from entering Australia. The lynchpin of the White Australia Policy was the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. Under the Act, all non-Europeans seeking entry to Australia needed to pass a dictation test in a European language of an immigration officer's choosing (Yarwood 29). Significantly, the "Education Test" was a measure designed to stop Asian immigration to Australia without explicitly banning Asian immigrants. This covert policy was intended to appease the

British Government who opposed an outright racial ban on the grounds of offending colonial subjects in Asia and allies in Japan (Willard 113).

Asian-Australian Studies scholar, Merlinda Bobis writes of these events – the White Australia Policy, Hansonism, the immigration policies of the Howard government – as a spectre which continues to loom over contemporary Australia (“Asian Conspiracy” 1). This spectre of Yellow Perilism represents Australia’s long-held fear of Asian contamination and its associated economic, cultural, and moral loss of Australia’s racial purity. Australia and its specific geographical proximity to East Asia, its invasion complex, and history of fear are what come to mind when I see this Asian family crammed inside a white couple’s fantasy bathroom on screen. Australia is, indeed, a house where the Asian immigrant must hesitate at the threshold. This is why I’m literally stopped at the border, at customs, in a line of other travellers of Asian appearance whenever I return to my home city, Melbourne. The bags must be sniffed by dogs and searched for contamination, the Asian bodies placed in a long line and regulated. According to Rosemary Marangoly George, in the Hollywood vision of homecoming, home is “elastic, unendingly accommodating and ultimately big enough to hold everyone” (18). However, George points out that the very concept of home is defined by its border control, characterising it as a place demarcated by “select inclusions and exclusions” (2) and “closed doors, closed borders and screening apparatuses” (18). Significantly, there is a welcoming façade for the Hollywood idea of home which belies its covertly locked and bolted doors. This hypocrisy mirrors Australia’s official immigration policies. The Asian body when crossing Australian borders must be watched and watched and watched (just as the audience watches the Asian family onscreen).

As Bobis writes, “The body remembers. The body knows. And the body is always placed on the line as we cross all borders” (“Border Lover” 135). The Asian body knows, remembers, watches itself being watched. This is why the perception of the body is, in and of itself, a kind of threat. I suppose this is why tough, bad men wearing bunched-up leather in movies say, “Are you lookin’ at me?” engaging in a kind of circular dialogue with the looker. The look, as Jean-Paul Sartre writes, is that which dominates, it reminds the looked-at that: “I am vulnerable, I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place that I cannot in any case escape from ... in short, I am seen” (259). Jeffrey Santa Ana writes that perception determines racialisation, and this is what continually construes the Asian body as an aggressor within the game of profit and loss of capitalism (1–2). In her discussion of the tapes showing Rodney King being brutalised by four white

policemen, Judith Butler questions what is and isn't visible to the white gaze. She writes that if it was possible for white jurors to interpret these tapes as showing a black man threatening the police, then it is possible that for the white gaze, "what is seen is not always already in part a question of what a certain racist episteme produces as the visible" ("Endangered" 16). Thus, to inhabit a racialised body is to be in a crushing state of permanent hypervisibility and yet it is also a state of invisibility because they are always looking at you yet fundamentally incapable of *actually seeing you*.

The white gaze determines what the yellow body is. It backs the yellow body into a wall and keeps it there. Why then do these films pretend that it is the other way around? Why the yellow gaze restricting the white girl's artistic, social, emotional emancipation and not the white gaze holding the yellow body down in a painful act of perception and misperception? I contend that these films frame the yellow gaze as a threatening, restrictive gaze in order to appropriate the struggles of people of colour. It is, if you will, a depiction of "reverse racism," of both the impotence of the yellow gaze and yet its implicit threat. It is also a denial of white power over other bodies in order to privilege a compelling Smart White Girl vs the world underdog narrative. It is a continuation of the Yellow Peril narrative, there *they* are again taking over the white body, frightened, smaller than small. It is a way for racialised fear to imagine Australia as a fragile white body vulnerable to economic penetration and contamination (Khoo 18). The historic struggles of Asian immigrants in America are erased, like the Asian family crammed in the bathroom there is literally no room for them. It becomes about an Asian family in a bathroom, outnumbering a white couple searching for personal growth on a bed rather than a whole country's history of legislating against, recoiling from and keeping out the racial Other.

The Asian family is staring at Summer and Tom. The scene is framed to make us believe this, but it is Tom who says, "Honey, there's a Chinese family in our bathroom." Tom who initiates the staring, Tom and Summer who look and look and look. The feeling of being watched is so familiar to me. That is why I find it hard to believe that an Asian family in IKEA would have the gall to stare at a beautiful white couple on a bed. No, I don't watch them; they watch me. And the idea that I would dare to stop and stare is a white fantasy of exoneration. The thing I most recognise of myself in that squashed and backed into a corner Asian family is the feeling of being made a spectacle of, of being looked at. The Asian family is looked and looked and looked at by Tom and Summer and the countless others watching them on their screens. *Hey you, yeah you. Are you lookin'*

at me? I'm afraid to ask the provocative question and I leave my backchat locked inside me: *The way you look at me is a wound*. Like the Asian family, I silently turn and walk off screen, I do what the white gaze wants me to do most, which is to leave the scene entirely.

What is a Chinese family doing in “our bathroom”? This is the uneasy question which Yellow Peril discourse asks of itself. Yellow Perilism describes fear of a united Asian invasion of Western borders and eventually, the world (Santa Ana 19). Yellow Perilism imagines Asian immigrants as invaders on a broad scale, including “military invasion and foreign trade from Asian, competition to White labour from Asian labour, the alleged moral degeneracy of Asian people, and potential miscegenation between whites and Asians” (*Men and Women* 89).

The Asian body is a threat and an intrusion attempting to insert itself in the triumphant narrative of the host country. Summer and Tom's almost kiss is frozen and forgotten when black Asian eyes appear, staring voyeuristically. The Asian family appears as a collective because, as Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, the Asian body is never individual but a body politic that has sidled up too close and personal to the national body politic (79). The discourse of Yellow Peril expresses anxiety about the dangers of a rush of foreign bacteria at risk of being localised in the national body. The Asian family is squeezed like a pus-filled pimple in the bathroom, that most intimate of spaces, the site in which bare skin is exposed and bodily fluids are expelled.

That Yellow Perilism takes its name from yellow skin is crucial. Yellow Peril discourse is a discourse of skin as national border. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey write that the coloniser's fear of contamination is linked to the corporeal experience of the raced body's proximity. The threat of touch is felt as an offense and the performance of disgust is a way of pulling away from this threat. The skin takes on a particular significance in performances of bodily disgust because skin is such an unreliable border. The proximity of another's skin is also what makes it necessary for racialised skin to be contained and made separate through white discourses of otherness. Skin is the moment before the cut or the embrace, and being a border, so vulnerable to being transgressed, it must be walled in by words.

The skin of the Asian family in *(500) Days of Summer* is sweaty, yellow-brown, stretched out by fatness. This is skin shiny with grease in contrast to the creamy matte complexions of Summer and Tom, sweatless even after they have raced each other to the bedroom section of IKEA. The Asian family's skin is porous, rich with bodily fluids,

yellow with disease. This is skin which, in its fleshiness, its stretching to accommodate fatness, signifies excess, an overflow, a dangerous nearness. This is skin that with its fluids, fatness and disease is uncontrollable. This is skin which disgusts white audiences. This is skin which disgusts Asian audiences, leading my pretty friend from Hangzhou to say defensively, “not all Asian people look like that”. Both of us rejecting the family in the film, trying to avoid being mistaken for them, refusing self-recognition or identification with that skin that is so saturated with signification.

Robert Lee writes that the only Asian person that is yellow is the “Oriental”; realistically, Asian people come in a myriad of shades and hues (R. Lee 2). We don’t use the word “yellow” to describe ourselves. We describe our skin as *peh* (white) or *oh* (black). The idea of yellow skin is pivotal to Yellow Peril discourses because it localises otherness in the Asian body. The Asian family wears its high-vis skin as a florescent warning sign, describing their own otherness, a symbol of disease and danger. In *Becoming Yellow* (2011), Michael Kuey writes about the negative connotations of the colour yellow in Western thought:

“Bad yellow” has traditionally carried suggestions of treachery, jealousy, and falseness. In medieval Christian art yellow was the color used for Judas and the Jews; in modern contexts yellow is still a color of warning, as in traffic lights or school buses; in modern English a yellow person is cowardly. (59)

Yellow skin cannot be trusted, yellow skin is morally and physically diseased. Mixed into this pigment is the essential nature of Asian people: tradition-bound, arrogant, duplicitous and inscrutable. The yellowing family stare into the camera and as I stare into the TV screen, I realise that this is what they see when they see me.

2.3 (500 Days of Summer) and *Model Minority Armies*

Homi Bhabha writes that the stereotype must be “anxiously repeated as if ... that [which] needs no proof can never really, in discourse, be proved” (94–5). This ambivalence is, in a sense, a strength of the stereotype as a strategy of colonial discourse. The stereotype has both the capacity and the inherent need to be made and re-made for different contexts. Yellow Peril discourse remixes itself as model minority mythology in America of the 1960s. In a sense, this is both a break and a continuation; a fresh image of Asian immigrants in the West was birthed to make sense of a threat that was both old and new. The original *New York Times* article that is often described as crystallising this idea is a

double-page spread called “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” published on January 9, 1966 and written by the then Harvard professor of sociology, William Peterson. The article details the historical difficulties faced by Japanese Americans such as their internment in camps during World War Two, and then goes on to celebrate the upward mobility of this same ethnic group:

Barely more than twenty years after the end of wartime camps, this is a minority that has risen even above prejudiced criticism. By any criterion of good citizenship we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born Whites. They have established this remarkable record, moreover by their own almost totally unaided effort (20–21).

Kent Osajima first coined the term “model minority” in 1996, to describe a trend in the way Asian immigrants began to be perceived in the 1960s as a response to African American and Latinx protests against racial discrimination. Kent Ono and Vincent Pham write that during this period, “white scholars, political leaders and journalists developed the model minority myth in order to assert that all Americans of colour could achieve the American dream not by protesting but by working hard” (80). Thus, the white construction of the model minority as a kind of conservative rebuke to radical thought, to protesting and to revolution, dates back to its historical origin. The on-screen Asian body as symbolic of conservative social structures and censorious of those attempting to rebuild or reject these structures is suggestive of this history

Model minority mythology pins all of this success on the Asian immigrant family which Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong describes as “a much analysed and greatly romanticized institution ... held up as the truest realisation of traditional American values, which whites have lamentably forsaken” (38). However, this is not a simple switch; rather, there is a sense that the same values which built Western society, have been appropriated by Asians and used in overdrive. As Angie Chung writes in *Saving Face* (2016):

Mainstream media and academic literature tend to view Asian-Americans through a binary racial lens that both extols and dehumanizes Asian parent-child relations based on stereotypical generalizations about their strict discipline, passive obedience and hierarchical orderliness. The model minority myth claims that it is this structural stability that enables immigrant parents to promote traditional family values on filial piety and good work ethic to the next

generation. Yet, juxtaposed against the middle-class (white) American family, the monolithic Asian immigrant family appears as an emotionally deficient and psychologically dysfunctional space that reinforces patriarchal oppression and sacrifices humanistic values in order to breed obedient over-achievers. (45)

Like Chung, Yoon Sun Lee writes that while the model minority myth might purport to aggrandise Asians, it distorts them (Y. Lee 5). The “Asian family values” which are extolled as in some way more American than the family values of white (true) Americans are, in a way, grotesque. These values don’t just show us as emotionally mature, intelligent students with stable parents, but nose-to-the-grindstone test-takers with emotionally repressed parent–child relations, parents who are “pushers” (as my mum was called by my brother’s grade one teacher), passive kids who have no individuality or originality (just aggressively skilled in rote learning) and the sons and daughters of unending filial pressure. They are white, Protestant values in overdrive, taken to the extreme by Asian imitators of the American dream. Furthermore, this stereotype miniaturises the achievements of Asians by discounting them as foreigners, nerds or social misfits. While the idea of the model minority originated in America and is more prominent in an American context, model minority discourse is still one of the most significant ways that Asian families and individuals are codified in contemporary Australian life. Hence, we have the giggly idea of the “Asian 5,” a grouping of STEM subjects which Asian-Australians might take in their final year of high school. Hence, the idea that for an Asian person to aspire to be a lawyer or a doctor is a cliché or a symptom of pushy parenting. Hence, the embarrassment of my friend Ivan who says it is “sooo Asian” that he is an accountant. I was surprised to learn later in life that being a lawyer or an accountant or engineer were prestigious careers for smart white kids from nice families. I had been raised in a country that thought these careers were the work of automatons and ciphers, should they be done by the crazy, funny kids I grew up with.

The model minority is a term that means you imitate rather than create. You are a “fake” imported from Asia rather than a genuine, Australian-made R.M. Williams boot. You are Walter Benjamin’s art object in the age of mechanical reproduction, your authenticity jeopardised by your repetitive, mechanised nature (221). Yes, the model minority means people who don’t differentiate themselves from each other, who are really repetitions of one another like the Asians you see who “all look the same”. The model minority means you are in the pursuit of pure capital, unable to weigh the careful worth

of Bourdieu's cultural capital. Asians buy all the big fashion labels like Chanel and Prada (as a girl in my friend's fashion design lecture commented). They don't understand the irony of Summer's vintage stylings, the coolness of Tom flicking through a pile of records. In short, the model minority is a race of automatons. The machinic rhetoric and dehumanising imagery that surround the model minority myth is strangely reminiscent of the stereotype printer and even the stereotype itself. The stereotype printer, a machine which mass-produced print media without the help of human hands, an impersonal, non-human process with beyond-human capacity for speed and repetition. The stereotype, a discursive strategy derided for being banal, a staple, boring, repetitive, dehumanising the opposite to the singular, original vision of the artist. The Asian Automaton, a stereotype made strangely to look like the technology of the stereotype, embodies the qualities of both the machine and the discursive strategy. This figure is the perfect foil for the authentic tastemakers, new women, aspiring artists and critics who fill the teenage *Kunstlerroman* genre.

The Asian family in the bathroom stares at Summer and Tom with a look of stern censorship. They are as still as a tableau, apart from the motion made by the Asian father when he adjusts his glasses as if he cannot quite comprehend what he is seeing. These bodies "all look the same," they betray no emotion, their stare is blank and pointed, they lack the social skills required to look away. These bodies are silent and their expressionlessness allows us to speak on their behalf. This is the family of Asian automatons: dull, intact, same-same, patriarchal, disciplined. These bodies lack originality and vitality, they are clothed in tacky clothes in tacky colours (purple, yellow, white) that sit outside the tight colour scheme of the rest of the film (blue, grey, brown). They are motionless bodies and motionless people, who might well be upwardly mobile but are unable to think slantwise, downwards, sideways. The romantic spell is broken for Summer, she laughs at the conservative Asian family. She sees the family in the showroom like a picture in an IKEA catalogue and realises she doesn't want to buy in on a life that is mass-produced on the factory line. Summer and Tom are playing house in IKEA. Summer's fifties-style fit and flare skirt and headband and Tom's vest and suit parody post-war conservative family values whilst flippantly trying them out like a vintage style. After seeing the Asian family, Summer makes her choice explicit, she tells Tom that actually she "isn't looking for anything serious". *(500) Days of Summer* is about the desire to do something original and daring, a longing to be something more than an automated arm in the patriarchal-capitalist machine (Tom is a greeting card writer who is

gathering the courage to become an architect, Summer is a beautiful girl who doesn't want to settle down). In the *Kunstlerroman* of this romantic comedy, the static Asian family is set up in striking opposition to the individualistic spirit of this white American non-couple, these innovators of their own fates.

2.4 *Lady Bird and the Artistic Genius of an Adolescent Rebel*

That scene in *(500) Days of Summer* had faded in my mind until I saw *Lady Bird* (2018) with an old friend at the Nova Cinemas in Carlton. The film made me cry (not that this is any great feat, I often cry to the trailers of films that are shown before the movie I have paid to watch) but it also made my friend, emotionally consistent and independent, cry (which is a great feat).

"It helped me understand my mum," I said, after the movie had finished.

I was thinking of the nurse in scrubs with the sharp tongue and the self-absorbed daughter.

"Same," my friend nodded with raw eyes.

"Really? You're such a good daughter."

"But the Catholic stuff. And just the misunderstanding."

We walked over to Readings bookstore and the girl at the register told us that she too had cried throughout the film.

"The mum was my mum," she said.

The film was so cleverly written that it had made each of us imagine we had the unique experience of recognising ourselves and our mothers in it. This was my experience of the film for the most part. That is until, somewhere near its tail-end, *Lady Bird* winds up in hospital after breaking her arm on her first night out in New York. She wakes up dizzy, with mascara splattered over her eyes, to a lonely and unfamiliar scene: a hospital at night, each bed empty but the one beside hers. In a blur she sees the other patients, an Asian mother and her small son. They are staring gormlessly at *Lady Bird* and the camera stares back. Again, I had the vertiginous sensation that the protagonist I had so deeply resonated with was not supposed to be me at all. *Lady Bird's* mother wasn't my mother and I wasn't *Lady Bird*. No, my mother was a woman with forever foreigner's culture shock, staring at this brilliant and complicated white girl. I was the young son with the broken arm, uncomprehending the cool girl recovering next door. I was silent because there was nothing inside of me.

The little Asian family of mother and broken-armed son who stare at the camera in silence and are stared at in turn by the protagonist, represent the small lives of the model minority family. For *Lady Bird*, this moment is one of freedom from her family, the realisation of her financially near impossible dream to study art in New York, her desire to live an interesting, artistic life “in a city with culture” away from provincial Sacramento. Lady Bird’s own relationship with her mother is tumultuous and difficult but ultimately loving. This boy’s relationship with his mother is straightforward and ordinary; these kinds of people don’t have the strength of spirit to individuate themselves from their parents, their inherited values and sense of self (Chung 45). The boy and his mother stare at a person whose life is symbolic of all that they do not and cannot ever understand. The boy and his mother are also the only people in the film that, in any sense of the word, resemble me physically.

2.5 *Juno and Modern Motherhood*

I rummaged through my mind for other instances of this vertiginous sensation of misrecognition. This feeling that the interesting and artistic girl I saw myself as when I was a teenager was not me, but an altogether different girl. And I located this feeling as first occurring in the film *Juno* (2007), a film my friend bought me out of a bargain bin for Christmas one year. It was a good present; I re-watched it semi-regularly sitting on the floor in my parent’s lounge room. Similar to *Lady Bird*, it was the story of an original girl with adolescent delusions of grandeur. The twist was that she also happened to be pregnant. The first time an Asian character would come on the screen in *Juno*, it would be a shock for me: I so rarely saw Asian girls with speaking parts in films that it drew my attention. The girl was a pro-life protestor and classmate of Juno standing outside an abortion clinic in a puffy pink jacket, glasses and a blue beanie. She lifted a pro-life sign that read: “No Babies Like Murdering” and chanted squeakily, “All Babies Want to Get Bored”. Her accent is at times meant to be that of an Asian girl with bad English but it is inconsistent: her blurred tenses clear up after she finishes chanting and begins speaking and as Juno walks away from Su Chin, she yells in a markedly American accent: “Your baby probably has a beating heart you know, it can *feel* pain, and it has fingernails.” The scripted fragmented English, which Frantz Fanon writes is a symbol of less-than-humanness (Fanon 2) is accidentally pieced together by the Canadian accent of the Canadian actress, Valerie Tian. As I write in Chapter One, Josephine Lee proposes that casting an Asian actor in the role of an Asian character has the potential to disrupt the

seductiveness of the stereotype for the white spectator. For Lee, the literal presence of a real Asian body means that the performance is no longer under the white audience's control, it must mean more than just an Oriental stereotype (97). I propose that this is particularly the case in films like *Juno*, which represent the Oriental as a passive nerd, incapable of artistic agency. In this scene, Valerie Tian's very presence as a canny and comedic Asian-Canadian actress and not an emotionless swot disrupts the very stereotype she is supposed to embody. Similarly, in the moments when she fails to produce a stereotypical generic foreigner's "Asian" accent, and slips into her natural Canadian accent, emphasizing the "r" in "fingernail" and "miracle," we see the actual Asian-Canadian, Valerie Tian the actress, peeking through the role.

Identifying with Juno flattered my sense of self as a teenager; her dialogue was predicated on at-times saccharine, tough girl witty dialogue at every turn, drenched in irreverence, irony and adolescent world-weariness. She wore cool clothes in that Portland hipster style, watched 1980s horror movies; when you are fifteen, these small acts of self-fashioning are the sum total of your being. But here was Su Chin, the only girl on screen who looked anything like me. I was lucky to have her in a way. I recognised that. But I was embarrassed by Su Chin's version of adolescent girlhood: it felt like it came from a whole other era. Su Chin is sincere in a way that implies her naivety, her conservative family upbringing and timidity. And to be unable to shed a distinctly Protestant earnestness in a film enamoured with its own ironic aesthetic and dialogue best described as teenagers mouthing off as eloquently as real teenagers hope they sound mouthing off, is a very bad thing indeed. Su Chin's childlikeness is expressed in her full face and brightly coloured clothes: pink puffer jacket and bright blue beanie, her poor grasp of English. Standing opposite Su Chin is Juno, dressed ironically in the colour palette of the seventies: mission brown, orange, cream, rolling her eyes and never losing her cool. Su Chin's automated line, "All babies want to get borned" and repetitive gesture, the touting of a homemade sign that reads "No babies like murdering," are both naïve in their silliness and robotic in their repetition. She is brainwashed by her conservative family. This is surely a girl stuck within model minority mythology, parroting the patriarchal oppression of her family, politically deaf and dumb, an automaton speaking the words scripted for her. Su Chin's body is stuck in the deferential pose of a forever daughter.

Though it doesn't seem like it, Juno and Su Chin end this scene on the same ideological page. Juno decides to keep her baby, convinced in part by Su Chin's dialogue. "Fingernails?" Juno repeats thoughtfully after Su Chin tells Juno her baby already has

fingernails. Later in the clinic, we see a montage of fingernails as Juno watches as one woman tap her nails on a clipboard, another woman paints her nails red, another woman scrapes at the varnish on her nails, another woman scratches the skin on her forearms and yet another woman nibbles at her nails. The collective percussion of these women scratching, scraping, biting and tapping their nails builds until it becomes unbearably loud in Juno's mind. She eventually runs out of the clinic, having had second thoughts about the abortion she booked. Juno's choice is framed as a rebellion against society's shaming of teenage mothers, an emotionally authentic and courageous choice that her stepmother sums up by calling her "a little Viking". By contrast, Su Chin's values are framed as parroted, passed on to her from a religious organisation or socially conservative society or patriarchal family structure. She repeats her facts about unborn babies blandly and automatically. She is unable to make her mind up for herself.

The second Asian woman to appear in the film is the ultrasound technician. Like Su Chin, this woman has conservative family values and is overtly judgemental about Juno's teenage motherhood. The ultrasound technician's job is literally to observe Juno's body with a scientific gaze, aided by her machinery. This observation of Juno's pregnant body quickly turns to an implicit judgement of her sexual morality and social responsibility. When she learns that Juno is adopting out her child, she exclaims, "Oh, well, thank goodness for that!" and, when pressed further, explains, "I just see a lot of teenage mothers come through here and it's obviously a poisonous environment to raise a baby in." According to Kent Ono and Vincent Pham, "of the eight APIA [Asian Pacific Islander American] characters in known occupations on prime time television in 2004, five hold advanced degrees, often in medical sciences" (83) and like most of these Asian medical professionals, the ultrasound technician is presented in stark contrast with white medical staff. Where Asian medical professionals are most often represented as technically skilled and interested in their own career prestige more than in the patients they come into contact with, white doctors are depicted as caring, administering not just drugs and bandages but a human touch (Ono and Pham 84). In response to the ultrasound technician's snide remark, Juno's stepmother, Bren, dresses down the woman:

Bren: What is your job title exactly?

Ultrasound Technician: I'm an ultrasound technician, ma'am.

Bren: Well, I'm a nail technician and I think we both ought to just stick to what we know.

Ultrasound Technician: Excuse me?

Bren: Oh, you think you're so special because you get to play Picture Pages up there? Well, my five-year-old daughter could do that and let me tell you, she's not the brightest bulb in the tanning bed. So why don't you go back to night school in Mantino and learn a real trade.

Bren's dressing down is greeted with high-fives, approving smiles from Juno and her friend, and the phrase "Bren, use a dick, I love it!" Juno has a fraught relationship with her stepmother but Bren's defence of her is the decisive beginning of their reconciliation. When Bren completes her rant about the hollowness of the ultrasound technician's medical credentials compared to her authentic white working-class "trade," she asks the ultrasound technician if "that ever occurred to you?". The ultrasound technician's college degree makes her an arrogant, selfishly ambitious, swot with no idea about the "real world" of "real trades". In contrast to this, in *Lady Bird*, the protagonist's fight to go to a prestigious college in New York is a sign of her tenacity, brightness and refusal to fit into the social mould set for her. This is what it means to be a Smart (White) Girl and not a Smart Asian Girl. A Smart Asian Girl's intelligence is automated. There is something routine, repetitive and therefore miniaturised about the body of the Smart Asian Girl. There is something singular, creatively brilliant, blood, sweat and tears about the body of the Smart (White) Girl. The difference is, of course, that one of these bodies is not a body at all, it is an Automaton which appears only somewhat convincingly and extremely uncomfortably human.

2.6 The Aesthetic of Pastness

The first time I understood that I was "Asian" and not white I remember being asked by kids at school who I was, and I said "Australian," and they said "no". I remember being in grade one and some older girls pulling their eyelids down into slits and singing "ching-chong-ching-chong". I remember they asked me to copy them and I did, pulling my eyelids back too, as we laughed. We were playing under the big tree with the soft, torn bark and it was warm. When I was a few years older, my mum said, "When you were small you used to think you were white, you know." I thought I was white.

This is the same loop of misrecognition that has attended me well into my adult years. What does it mean to live on in this loop of recognise and misrecognise? What does it mean to be told by a film, a closed face, a downwards sloping voice, that I am just a girl under a tree, stretching the skin out from under her eyes? I don't know what it means.

What I do know is that, as a teenager, I was so careful not to dress or style myself in a way that was recognisably "Asian". My friends (white, white, white and white) were uncomfortable with me saying this aloud; "but you *are* Asian," they would say. I was friends with girls who played netball and drew up their walnut hair in high ponytails. I avoided dating the Asian boys at school with their black, mossy hair. I was interested in silk scarves, twin-sets, peter-pan collars, culottes, all those twee, pseudo-vintage Anglophile outfits that smelled like dust gathering. I was nursing an artistic spirit and I wanted you to be able to pick it from a distance. I wanted to be the "pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming" in Keats' poem and if I could have become a pretty girl dying from consumption, I think I would have been one. And yet:

Me on Yahoo Answers: *I think my crush doesn't find me attractive cos I'm Asian. What should I do?*

Best Frenemy: "You would look SO FOB in that."

Boy I shouldn't have kissed on NYE: "Are you trying to be an Asian Lisa Mitchell?" (No, I AM Lisa Mitchell).

Boy I shouldn't have hung about with (on the other Asian girl in our year level): "Jess, you came to muck-up day in a fucking mime costume. Vee dressed as a nurse. Who do you think we're going to find more attractive? She doesn't just have an accent, she has a speech impediment, and it's hot."

Richard Dyer writes that "stars are a remarkable social phenomenon – an elite, privileged group who ... do not excite envy or resentment (because anyone may become one)" (7). I don't agree. When I was a teenager, I didn't feel like I could ever become those charming, artistic girls on screen and my Asian body coursed with an admixture of dead-end aspirations, supplicative longing and a hot pink envy that he would never understand. I knew that when I asked for my hair to be cut into long, straight bangs like Summer, my hairdresser said bemusedly "there you go, conservative!" It was a haircut immediately deemed by the luminously light-eyed boy I was trying to impress as "so Asian," whatever that was supposed to mean. I knew that for the American-themed eighteenth birthday party I attended, I dressed up as neurotic, pseudo-intellectual Diane

Keaton in *Annie Hall* (1977) and that that happened to also be the same night that the birthday girl and all her friends surrounded me in a circle, pointed at me and began a happy, urgent chant that went: “You’re my token Asian friend, you’re my token Asian friend.” I went home and wondered if the vest, tie, slacks and big hat I’d thought meant I was an intellectual girl in a Manhattan gallery, cleverly emphasising her femininity by dressing up as a boy had instead meant something so much simpler: a sexless Asian nerd in corporate dress. I knew that when I wore my dad’s mission brown jumper and white undershirt to school to try and imitate Juno’s Portland-hipster, seventies look, the red-haired boy I sat with in history class said: “You look like one of those ice-creams that goes brown, white and,” his voice shook with the sheer joy of living as he said it, “yellow.” I never saw an Asian girl on screen decked out like me because if “hipster” fashion predicated itself on pastness then by this, they meant an Australian, American or better still, British pastness. I knew this because when it was time to dress up for our school’s “Medieval Day,” Mum put me in a kimono and clogs, the pastness we had hanging in our cupboards, and everyone asked me why I was dressed as a geisha for Medieval Day (*Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) had just come out so it was on a lot of people’s minds).

I think that nostalgia aesthetics were so important to me back then because they meant, as Daniel Harris writes, that I could move from being an unindividuated consumer of shiny, new things to a clever curator of pastness (33). And I knew that being “Asian” meant being associated with the dumb new money of the crudely shiny Prada bag or the latest iPhone. I tried to re-write the text of my body by donning all those tersely buttoned up vintage blouses and high-waisted shorts. I knew this because when my friend Gerard found out that my dad owned a treasured digital SLR camera he said it was because he “was Asian” and by that I guess he meant mindlessly rich. In fact it was the opposite, my Dad he told me he owned an SLR camera for the same reason he had owned the film cameras of his younger years: because he had a reverence for the everyday immanence he saw all around him and felt a need to document it.

And it sounds like too small a grievance to air, amongst the other grievances which loom over this harsh world, but I remember feeling that nostalgia aesthetics that meant so much to me at one time were designed with someone else in mind. The popular orange lipstick that spoke of a fifties whirring siren beauty always made my skin look jaundiced, the pastel colours lost all their softness on sharp, black hair, the delicate, lightly freckled paleness of the girls on almost every cover of indie magazines *Frankie* and *Yen* was

impossible to imitate no matter how much skin-whitening sunscreen I used. It always felt like a grievance much too small to speak of but somehow Angela McRobbie gives it just the right words. She writes:

This is a kind of racial violence within the celebratory white visual economies of the fashion beauty complex which goes almost unnoticed. The post-feminist masquerade derives its meaning from the hey-day of (white) Hollywood glamour, and from the conventions of high fashion glossy magazines like *Vogue*. The retro, nostalgia for this kind of whiteness ensures that the new masquerade, if not unavailable to black or Asian women, is then only available at the cost of negating modes of style and beauty associated with blackness, with cultural diversity and ethnic difference. (65)

In other words, I didn't look good in white-face. And I grew up in a cultural moment that pined for the bygone aesthetics of whiteness in its cleanest, purest, most perfect format.

I was excluded from the aesthetic of nostalgia because it is, after all, an aesthetic that daydreams about a time when people like me did not walk the streets and suburbs of Melbourne. Svetlana Boym writes that

modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history. (8)

This nostalgia sounds to me like the kind of fantastical grieving which Ghassan Hage describes as “the discourse of anglo decline”. Hage describes this discourse as one that

bemoans what it sees as the attack on the core British values of traditional White Australia and where the figure of the ordinary ‘mainstream’ Australian, the ‘traditional Aussie battler’, is perceived as a victim of a conspiracy to change the very nature of the country. (*White Nation* 20)

Crucially, this challenge to White Australia is a spatial one. It is not “Asians” which this discourse claims to be against, but the presence and proliferation of Asians in

Australia that threatens whiteness (*White Nation* 18). As Boym writes, Australia's status as "absolute ... home," with its aura of edenic innocence was made possible by its "clear borders and values" (8). This home, Australia, has been invaded by the abrupt presence of Asians and other non-white immigrants, its racial and cultural purity disrupted, the citadel's walls and ideals trampled over and broken down. The invaders felt they had been invaded themselves and so the victors became the victims, the displaced of this earth.

Upholding the fantasy of a white utopia is the sheer visibility of white power: politicians, customs officers, police officers, judges as well as "Australian myth-makers and icons ... from shearers and surfers to television and radio 'personalities', to movie actors and rock stars" (*White Nation* 190) are almost all white. These highly visible symbols of white dominance allow white Australians, even those of little economic or social power, to believe that because they have the racial identity of those who are in power, they too enjoy the possibility of acquiring and asserting that power (*White Nation* 211). The rare presence of visible Asians or other non-white people in power disrupts this narrative, creating a long lament, a nostalgia for a utopian past that never existed. The not so rare presence of non-white, upwardly mobile people becomes an awful eyesore. And don't think that Asian bodies don't know it. Every time I told my mum I walked into a club or venue or ceremony or wherever and I was the only non-white person in sight, she would urge me to find some way to return, to make my presence frequent and felt. She needed me to bear her face in those places, whipping my face this way and that like a national flag. She wanted me to wear my skin like a high-vis vest that couldn't be mistaken by anyone who saw it. When I won an award at the university, she attended the ceremony and said with bitter disappointment, "there are a lot of Asian faces here" as if I'd deceived her. "Not as many in my majors," I said as if offering her a consolation prize. The man who called me up to the stage said my name all wrong and the shoes I wore were too heavy for me to walk in a straight line. The destabilising presence of these kinds of bodies means that occupying positions of social and economic privilege is no longer a "strictly white affair" and that there "can no longer be a privileged essential link between being white and the national dreams of social mobility" (*White Nation* 213). The aesthetic of nostalgia remembers this link. The fashion of nostalgia evokes this link even in the present time, it says that perhaps there are some privileged Asians taking up space in faraway suburbs, select-entry schools and working in medical clinics but that, in the end, whiteness is still closely linked to cultural capital, to the discretions of old money, even if the crude indiscretions of new money are an eyesore one might see anywhere these

days. It means that there's still something that "we" have over "them". It helps "us" remember a time when "they" were safely elsewhere. As McIntyre writes, it evokes a "prelapsarian past" (426) before all their financial woes were our fault. I wore a black, turtle-necked dress borrowed from a friend to pick up my award. Was I trying to be a poet or something? I can't remember. My mum told me it sat horribly on my body and she was probably right.

In *Juno*, the ultrasound technician's cold, careerist mindset is symbolised by her use of the ultrasound machine, the only piece of modern technology in the film. The ultrasound technician is strangely attached to her piece of machinery, it symbolises her own technically skilled yet inhuman character. This shiny, hard-edged prop makes a stark contrast for the nostalgic aesthetic of the film, released in 2007 about contemporary times but featuring only landline "hamburger" phones and not mobiles, acoustic guitar/folk music, old vests, cardigans, patchwork quilts, car-shaped bedframe and raspberry liquorice straps. *Lady Bird* and *(500) Days of Summer* share the same interest in an aesthetic of nostalgia: *Lady Bird* buys a *Playgirl* magazine rather than looking porn up online and uses computers that are big, grey and bulky and *Summer* and *Tom* shop for records in vintage clothing. These nostalgia aesthetics are not merely hip or visually pleasing, they allow the person who dons them to become a curator of pastness, cannily selecting the aspects of the past that they enjoy and editing out the bad bits. The rejection of contemporary times which these films and *Smart White Girls* enact is a rejection of a time in which whiteness as an aesthetic and norm is beginning to be critiqued, problematised, eroded, outmoded. When the *Smart White Girls* are pitted against the Asian Automaton characters, and their futuristic, mechanistic techno-Orientalist aesthetic, a kind of racial violence is enacted. The aesthetic of pastness was the way that I embodied *Lady Bird*, *Tom* and *Summer* and *Juno* all at once. The aesthetic of pastness is the aesthetic of the White Australia Policy, of interracial love taboos, of Hansonism, of border control. The aesthetic of pastness is the aesthetic of good, wholesome whiteness left well enough alone.

2.7 *Fin*

You are watching the Asian family on screen watching you. Their black eyes blank like a television screen turned off. You want to identify with the protagonists on screen. Your screen is not just a mirror, it is a slimmer. You are probably watching alone. You are watching a *Kunstlerroman* about something or someone new, a character who is an artist

or an architect of their own fate. You are ogling a rebel with a mouth full of cynical talk, cool irony, lippy repartee. You are watching this kind of film and an Asian family, an Asian girl comes on screen, staring at the protagonist, staring at you. You stare back.

CHAPTER THREE

GWEILO FOOD

REAL ASIAN FOOD AND THE REAL ASIAN BODY

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler writes that the bodies of marginalised peoples are “derealised” and therefore placed outside of the framework of the “human” (34). Butler asserts that there is an intrinsic link between the derealisation of minoritised bodies and the enacting of violence towards these bodies: “If violence is done against those who are unreal then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated.” (*Precarious Life* 33). However, she makes clear that it is not dehumanisation which sanctions violence but rather that discourses of derealisation are, in and of themselves, acts of violence: “It is one thing to argue that first, on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all ... it is another thing to say that discourse itself effects violence through omission” (*Precarious Life* 34). It is this violent discourse of omission that I am concerned with in this chapter, particularly as it relates to the derealisation of the Asian body through discourses of fear. If the Asian body is, in some sense, not a real body, then what kind of body is it? To reprise Seo-Young Chu, Yellow Peril stereotypes of the Asian body as a threat detain the Asian body in the uncanny valley. Yellow Peril stereotypes create an uncanny sense that the Asian body is “humanlike” rather than “human,” a shell devoid of “inner life or first-person sentience” (80). This uncannily humanlike body’s presence amongst genuine article bodies is a threat to the real that requires surveillance and detection (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 1).

In her discussion of the “unreal” and “ungrievable” Arab bodies killed as part of the “War on Terrorism,” Butler uses the example of Daniel Pearl, the American journalist who was murdered by terrorists, who is “so familiar ... so easily humanised to me [her]” (*Precarious Life* 37) to describe what makes a “grievable life”. She writes:

Mourning Daniel Pearl presents no problem for me or for my family of origin. His is a familiar name, a familiar face, a story about education that I understand and share ... in relation to him, I am not disturbed by the proximity of the

unfamiliar ... his story takes me home and tempts me to stay there. (*Precarious Life* 38)

The familiar is a key criterion of the human and this criterion is rooted in quotidian details of the personal; names, faces, “a story about education that I understand and share” (*Precarious Life* 38). By contrast, Butler writes about how the bodies of Palestinians and Afghan people killed are made unfamiliar and anonymous, characterised by an absence of personal, individuating detail. She asks: “Do they have names and faces, personal histories, family, favo[u]rite hobbies, slogans by which they live?” (*Precarious Life* 32). The familiar, as Sara Ahmed writes, becomes the familial and the unfamiliar is established as a source of danger (*Strange Encounters* 2–3).

If the derealisation of the non-white body occurs through its derealisation and depersonalisation, then does it follow that its recuperation into the realm of the “real” will occur when it is made familiar, everyday, personally affecting and recognisable? Is this possible? Can my face ever become a “familiar face”? My face. My mum always referred to the difficulty I might experience in this world with “my face”. My face became a metonym for my race.

3.1 The “Real” Face of Australian Television

MasterChef Australia has often been lauded for its racial diversity in comparison with other Australian network television shows (Pojibe; Kalina, Killalea). Of these “ethnically diverse” contestants, Asian-Australians make up the highest number. From season one to season ten, 83% of *MasterChef*’s top twenty-four finalists have had an Anglo-Australian or European background, 13.8% have been Asian-Australian, leaving just a handful of Middle Eastern contestants (1.25%) and a single Torres Strait Islander contestant (0.41%). Furthermore, of the ten *MasterChef* seasons aired to date, three of these have been won by Asian-Australians, while the rest have been won by European or Anglo-Celtic contestants. Debra Killalea, in her news article on the diversity of reality television competitions such as *The Voice* and *MasterChef Australia*, describes *MasterChef* as “the real face of Australian TV” (Killalea). The statement, “the real face of Australian TV,” aptly captures the way in which “realness” is an embodied quality, one which is negotiated and implicated in representations of racialised bodies. The realisation of ethnic bodies is, in a sense, the manifesto of *MasterChef*; the bodies of *MasterChef*’s ethnic (mostly Asian) contestants are given the rare opportunity to perform recognisability,

realness and ordinariness through the act of cooking and offering food. These contestants compete for the quality of “realness” through the preparation of food, which symbolises their recognisable experiences of family, nostalgia, childhood, love and home.

Diane Negra asserts that this powerful fantasy of food prepared at home and eaten amongst family members is commonplace in recent film, television and advertising but is no longer typical of actual homes or familial settings. She argues that these “fetishistic depictions of food and food preparation work,” purified from the alienating, industrialised nature of modern food production, betray a yearning for the “decomplicated forms of familial and social life” (69) of a bygone era. Negra asserts that whilst White America no longer identifies itself with this traditional idea of home and family life, the fantasy of traditional, warm, emotionally intact ethnic family prevails. Thus, the depiction of ethnic food laboriously prepared by ethnic bodies and enjoyed by ethnic families on screen becomes a way that white identities can recover a sense of community and belonging. She writes:

Food stands in for a way of life our contemporary culture has largely left behind and that we now identify with an American immigrant past and with cultures other than our own. Fetishized food further stands in for those white ethnic identities left behind by many Americans in the course of the twentieth century. It is a conduit through which we invent, claim and perform a sense of heritage from which we have been alienated in other ways. The intense consumption of images of ethnic food betrays nostalgia for those kinds of familial and social relations enjoyed by the protagonists in the ethnic family fantasy films, those forms of community we now think of as “lost”. (69)

In this chapter, I argue that through the preparation of the home-cooked food of one’s heritage, the Asian body in the reality television cooking competition is recuperated into the framework of the human and the real. The unfamiliarity and impersonality of the “unreal” minoritised body is transformed into a recognisable body associated with the deeply familiar and personal domestic space. When Butler asks of derealised bodies, “[d]o they have names and faces, personal histories, family” (*Precarious Life* 32), the Asian body cooking on screen is able to look down the barrel of the camera closing in and answer: *Yes, I have a name, a face, a history and family shared with you through the preparation and offering of this meal.*

3.2 Poh Ling Yeow Cooks Herself

The potency of the image of the ethnic cook preparing ethnic food to recover a lost sense of homeplace and heritage is clearly demonstrated through the popularity of *MasterChef Australia* season one runner-up Poh Ling Yeow. Yeow is, in the words of judge Matt Preston, “one of the most-loved *MasterChef* contestants *ever*” (season 7, episode 21). Her popularity with audiences became self-evident when she lost the grand final to competitor Julie Goodwin and many viewers felt that they had been “ripped off” and even went so far as to suggest that the judging was rigged (Seale 34). After *MasterChef*, Yeow wrote three cookbooks – *Poh’s Kitchen* (2010), *Same But Different* (2015), *Poh Bakes 100 Greats* (2017) – and presented two cooking shows: *Poh’s Kitchen* (2010) and *Poh & Co* (2015–). While her first series, *Poh’s Kitchen*, received lukewarm ratings, her second cooking show, *Poh & Co* (2015), which aired on SBS in 2015, was far more successful, receiving the highest ratings of any cooking show on SBS that year, beating out internationally known chefs such as Heston Blumenthal and Australian television presenters and chefs such as Maeve O’Meara, Luke Nguyen and Adam Liaw (Dwyer n.p.).

Crucially, Yeow’s culinary success has always been tied up with her ability to express her ethnic identity through food and conceal her proficiency at cooking. In a 2018 radio interview on ABC with Richard Fidler, Yeow explains that when she auditioned for *MasterChef*, the judges rejected her initial audition dish, a French nouvelle cuisine item:

I started making this dish which was a thing that I found in *Gourmet Traveller* and they *hated* it. They said “what are you doing? What’s your heritage? You’re cooking this weird French nouvelle like tragic thing like what are you doing?” And I was like “oh my gosh, very small window in which to stick my foot into the door”. And I was ... “well, well, I was going to cook this dish, abacus beads but I just didn’t want it to be like a cultural cliché like you know, Asian face, Asian food. I thought I’d do something Western. European” ... and they go, “what! Abacus beads, what’s that?” And I go, “it’s like a taro gnocchi, I guess. It’s from my mum’s side of the family.” And they’re like, “well, you’re an idiot for not cooking that ... And they’re like “okay, we’re going to send you out right now.” It was like 11 o’ clock at night ... raced back, cooked it, they loved it, got through.”

In Yeow's recount, the *MasterChef* judges do not only reject Yeow's first audition dish, they express disbelief and confusion about why she has cooked it in the first place. Closely questioning Yeow, they ask her what she is playing at, cooking nouvelle cuisine, Henri Gault and Christian Millau's rebellious break with French tradition. Crucially, nouvelle cuisine was, for these rule-breakers, "an attempt to transform the culinary field into one associated with the legitimacy of 'art' rather than 'craft'" (Ashley 179). In response to Yeow's offering of this kind of dish, the baffled judges, immediately ask her about her "heritage," a word which describes the opposite of creative rebellion, racial identity as an arcane possession, preserved and protected by each new generation. Diane Negra argues that unlike the earliest television chefs such as Graham Kerr and Julia Child, the contemporary ethnic celebrity chef performs a culinary practice which "is less of an art form and more of a craft, one that is not learned so much as it is recovered through heritage memory" (71). The ethnic chef's craft is deintellectualised and sensualised, emerging "naturally" from an embodied sense of "heritage" (Negra 70). Similarly, Lisa Heldke points out that "foods from non-white cultures cannot be artistic creations in the same way European foods can be" (51). I expand her idea, arguing that chefs from non-white cultures cannot produce artistic creations in the same way European chefs can. The judges make it clear to Yeow that she will not progress to the next round of auditions if she associates herself with rebellious French cuisine, asking her instead why she isn't serving them traditional food of her heritage. In other words, they are asking her to be true to herself (as they see her), to reveal her ethnic identity rather than demonstrate her skill or artistry to them.

Reality television audiences are "critically astute" (Hill 62) and highly cynical about the veracity of what they are watching (Hill 64). Importantly, audience criticism of reality television's complex relationship to reality tends to centre around the authenticity of the performances and stories surrounding the everyday people who feature on these shows (Hill 59). As Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn assert,

Audiences often gauge the authenticity or truthfulness of reality TV on a scale of emotional realism and personal revelation. The reality TV subject is enjoined to share their pain, their surprise or their joy in a realm of mediated sociality and the most successful contestants of series such as *Big Brother* are often those who have allegedly remained 'true' to themselves and who have been frank with their audience. (5)

Thus, authenticity for reality television viewers is intertwined with the intimacy created between viewer and subject through sincere or “true” acts of self-disclosure. In the case of *MasterChef*, performances and storytelling occur not through revealing interviews and scenes of everyday life but through competitive cooking. The comparisons between food and language in writing on food are rife: we “express ourselves” (MacClancy 2) through food and search for food which “speaks to us”. *MasterChef* utilises this time-old idea of food as language by representing each contestant’s culinary practice as a channel for communicating their authentic inner selves to audiences.

But wait, what is authenticity (if it exists at all)? I argue that “authentic food” is the epitome of “the real” and is therefore uniquely equipped to express the real, live selfhood of contestants on reality cooking competitions such as *MasterChef*. But wait, what exactly is authentic food? Rick Flowers and Elaine Swan argue that authentic food is food prepared by ethnic people and authenticated by the pink mouths of white people (38). It is “made in the same way it has always been made, in the place where it is from” (Lopez 157). Authentic food, which is prepared by ethnic people, is more “real” than food prepared by white people. This is because, while in one sense the bodies of racial minorities are “unreal bodies,” in another sense they are also *all too real*. In her important essay, “Eating the Other,” bell hooks describes the white appetite for otherness and writes that “encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening” (370). The Other is seen as having “more life experience ... [being] more worldly, sensual and sexual” (368). Somehow, the bodies of Othered people are more visceral, physical, more “real”. Thus, ethnic food, springing naturally from the ethnic body, has the capacity to be the most “sincere,” “emotionally expressiv[e]” (Negra 62), “true to oneself,” “honest,” and “authentic” of all cuisines.

Ironically, the quotidian nature of authentic ethnic cuisine; home-cooked, simple, ever-the-same, traditional, is exactly what makes it so predictably exciting to white taste buds. The judges demand that Yeow makes abacus beads. They need to try the delicacy. By contrast, Yeow’s nouvelle cuisine is rejected because, paradoxically, conquering the dangerous and exciting “symbolic frontier” (“Eating the Other” 368) of Chinese food prepared by Chinese hands is less threatening than sampling the “familiarity” of French cuisine in the same hands. This is because, as Graham Huggan writes, exoticism “renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and ... effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery” (13). The

judges ask ‘what! Abacus beads, what’s that?’ delighting in their apparent surrender to the manufactured mystery of an Other’s real cuisine.

3.3 The Acceptable Face of Multiculturalism

We had a young Humanities teacher who liked to educate us on not just communism and capitalism and the Vietnam War but on life. She took us on an excursion to a Vietnamese restaurant in Richmond called Thy. I remember sitting in that hot tin portable classroom one afternoon and her making us promise before we left that we wouldn’t just order beef and black bean. She rolled her eyes a little bit and laughed as she said it.

None of us ordered beef and black bean but almost all of us ordered fried rice. I ordered pho and a three-colour drink. The restaurant was crammed with red lino chairs and old lanterns. I was observing this when my teacher looked at me and said, “It’s alright, Jess.” I suppose she had been hoping to comfort someone for their unease in a space which she so badly wanted to be new to us. There was obvious pride in sitting where she was, showing her plebeian white students from the inner and outer north-west what it meant to be clever and cultured. But this was a life she knew nothing about, immigrating, running a restaurant, cooking food meant for other bodies.

I’m not sure why she chose me to comfort, the non-white student in a class of white students. I didn’t think about the table being sticky or the food being “different” because I sat in these kinds of places all the time. Generally, my family chose pho places that were bright with white light, filled with mirrors and tight corners. I didn’t know it counted as an “experience”. Why did she absurdly choose the “Asian” girl to be walked through her educative experience?

Racist speech is so different in real life than it is in movies or books or essays. It’s elliptical, it eludes you, it has its own sacred mystery. You could slot the experience into some explanation about race and authenticity and food. But you can never fully resolve the human heart in that way, pinning it to a piece of card like a butterfly. I felt dully angry at her in the way a teenager does at someone they can’t raise their voice at. But I don’t know what she felt in that moment. I still don’t know what she feels.

Ghassan Hage, in his study on ethnic restaurants in Cabramatta, writes towards my experiences when he argues that

cosmo-multiculturalists have a preference for otherness appearing in the wild, as it were. They do not value otherness which is too readily available. Nor do they

value it when it directly aims at seducing them as consumers. They value it when it appears as narcissistically available to itself ... they want it to seduce them by appearing as if it is not trying to seduce them. ("At Home" 140–1)

Like a boy who wants to feel that he is the one pursuing a girl, cosmo-multiculturalist eaters want to feel that they are the discoverers of virgin territory. The girl, who is all the more seductive when she modestly lowers her eyes and doesn't seem too forward, is like the ethnic Other who appears to "play(s) no active role in seeking an encounter with the explorer" ("At Home" 143). For Hage, this is a way in which migrant subjects are strangely erased in the cosmo-multiculturalist's pursuit of their "heritage," centering the "classy and more often than not an 'Anglo'-cosmopolitan eating subject" ("At Home" 118) instead. Is Yeow the migrant subject wanting to be erased as she enriches the Anglo subject by cooking what my Cantonese friends call *gweilo* food?

Flowers and Swan point out that "eating the other" is "constructed as caring for the other" (40). They highlight the colonial benevolence and evasion underpinning the spectacle of generosity which is white people patronising ethnic restaurants: "the concept of benevolence says our intentions are good; look at the good things we do, rather than showing how white people benefit from race privilege and the legacy of colonialism" (29). Yes, I think, *they are so proud of being here and their desire for curry, for hot pot, for pho, exonerates them from the "guilt of the past,"* ("Eating the Other" 369) *cuts them off from any sense of "historical connection"* ("Eating the Other" 369) *to colonial violence*. Biting back to this idea that by eating the other, the white subject is caring for the other, Sara Ahmed writes: "Eating involves the bodily processes of consumption: one swallows, digest, farts and shits ... The white consuming subject is invited to eat the other: to take it in, digest it, and shit out the waste" (*Strange Encounters* 117). *They eat us up, take us in, wipe their mouths, shit us out.*

The contemporary celebrity chef aims to distinguish himself from the "feminine domestic tradition and, as a professional chef, demonstrates his superiority to it" (Ashley et al. 182). Contemporary celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver, Gary Rhodes and Nigella Lawson do not present domestic labour as a moral duty or a way to care for others (de Solier 478). Instead, cooking is represented as a form of self-care and self-pleasure, a leisurely, sensual experience which gratifies and entertains the chef himself (Ashley et al. 183). This style of cooking is designed to entertain rather than to instruct and is characterised by its visual nature, culminating in a dizzying spectacle of culinary

proficiency (Ashley et al. 182). It is a way for chefs to act as “cultural intermediaries or ‘new intellectuals’” (Ashley et al. 184), showing off their cultural capital then blowing it all by letting you in on their secrets. When asked about this kind of “cheffy” cooking by Richard Fidler, Yeow says:

That style of cooking is very much cooking with your ego, the food that I like to eat is food that’s cooked from the heart, and food that has a history and food that has a life of its own because it’s been passed down from generations. (Fidler)

Unlike her contemporaries, Yeow not only embodies the opposite of this professionalised image, she decries it. Yeow represents herself as spectacularly unqualified to professionalise her culinary practice, “I’m no chef and proud of it” (*Same v*). However, she asserts that she does have qualifications in another sense: as a “certified feeder” (*Poh’s Kitchen* 8). In the introduction to her cookbook *Poh’s Kitchen* (2010), Yeow writes, “growing up with a mum and Koo Poh or great aunt (who’s made a career of shoving mountainous plates of food in front of me with the instruction – ‘eat it all!’) are what has turned me into a certified feeder” (8). Importantly, Yeow’s certification as a cook comes not from an educational institution or even her title as runner up of *MasterChef* season one, rather her qualifications come from her Chinese-Malaysian matrilineal heritage. Yeow’s defining of her culinary practice against the selfishness of professional cooking and alignment of herself with the unselfishness of being a “feeder” merge her identity as at once selfless woman and nourishing racial Other. This feminisation of Yeow’s Asian heritage contributes to both the amateur and other-centred nature of her culinary practice. The feminisation of Yeow’s ethnicity alleviates the threat of her otherness, making her a consumable source of nourishment which exists in stark contrast to self-aggrandising celebrity chefs. Where the culinary practices of these celebrity chefs aim to showboat their expertise in front of their audiences, Yeow’s feminised and racialised “caring for” practices are designed to educate and enrich white appreciators of Asian cuisine (“At Home”, Hage 136).

When Sneja Gunew famously wrote that “Food as we know, has long been the acceptable face of multiculturalism” (13), she was writing with the kind of rebellious discontentment every other non-white person living in Australia understands. “Food,” I imagine her rolling her eyes as she wrote the next bit, “as we know”. As you know, as I know, as we all know. It hurts to be hurt in such a boring, obvious way. Then I think of the sad sigh she might have made when she wrote, “has long been”. The time that it’s

been this way stretches way back before me, the sadness extends itself way beyond my small lifetime. “[T]he acceptable face of multiculturalism” is the killer line. It hints at all the other unacceptable faces and it gestures towards the many unacceptable bodies attached to these faces. Jenny Zhang puts the feeling – of being an unacceptable body in a culture which takes your food as an acceptable face – bluntly. In her short story, “We Love You Crispina,” Chinese-immigrant, Xiang Bo supports his family “by biking through rain and snow to deliver Chinese food to rich white people who hated us but loved our food” (Zhang 35). In the compressed way of short stories, Zhang’s brief mention of Xiang Bo makes me see the lovely, perfect snow of Christmas cards falling all over. In one cold ache, Xiang Bo swings his skinny body over his bike and the door of a big house opens to a tense, difficult-to-imagine interaction. How well can it go? A person who hates him but loves his food. Xiang Bo keeps pedalling, burdened by the sweet and heavy blanket of whiteness turning his face the watery colour of a bruise. *They hate us but they love our food.*

In her cookbooks *Poh’s Kitchen* and *Same But Different*, Yeow includes food glossaries which almost exclusively describe Asian ingredients. Despite that fact that both cookbooks offer recipes from a variety of cuisines, their glossaries only include Asian ingredients such as dried shrimps, glutinous rice and lap cheong. Yeow does not include the specialised European products used in her recipes – Italian 00 flour, fondant, vanilla bean paste or amaretto liqueur – in these glossaries despite the fact that these ingredients, too, can often only be found in specialised stores. The implicit universalising of European ingredients and mystifying then demystifying of Asian ingredients constructs Yeow as an ethnic chef with “no raison d’être other than to enrich the Anglo subject” (“At Home” Hage 136; Gunew 13). It’s unfair to her but I feel betrayed by this and so does my mum. My mum watches Yeow come on screen and criticises the thickness of her *kuih dadar*, the glow-in-the-dark colour of her curry, the silliness of her selfhood. I say nothing. I feel strange. For so long, I longed to see myself reflected in the glowing screen and now I have Poh and it’s made things worse. She sees me here but she isn’t speaking to me. She looks away, consumed, as she tends to the needs of the white audience. Here I am, on screen, finally visible. And here I am, lying on the couch, even more invisible than before.

3.4 *The Unacceptable Face of Multiculturalism*

Season seven of *MasterChef Australia* saw a small controversy when top twenty-four contestant Mario Montecuolo was discovered to have had professional kitchen experience. In addition to being head chef and owner of the Enmore venue Bar Racuda, Montecuolo had also been a sommelier at a different restaurant. Montecuolo emphasised that he had not intended to mislead anyone; rather, he attributed his unbridled passion for food as the reason for the mistake: “I am so passionate about food I got carried away without realising what I had done in the past would be considered too much” (qtd. in Willis).

About a week later, a second controversy occurred off-screen for the show when *MasterChef* viewers began asserting that Indonesian-Australian contestant Reynold Poernomo had breached *MasterChef*’s requirement that its contestants not have professional restaurant experience. The discussion over Poernomo’s credentials began after episode six was aired and in response to a “guilty pleasures” theme he produced a red apple-shaped dessert called “Forbidden Fruit” using the molecular gastronomy techniques popularised by chefs such as Heston Blumenthal and Ferran Adria. *MasterChef* fans accused Poernomo of having worked as a chef at his mother’s pastry catering company. Suspicious viewers left comments asserting that Poernomo had cheated on the *MasterChef Australia* Facebook page: “You want to make us believe his mum only let him do the pots in her restaurant? This guy is more than just a home cook,” and “He should be kicked off the show. Blatantly breaking the rules. Not good” (qtd. in Willis). Significantly, there was no such outrage from fans when Montecuolo was revealed to be overqualified for his “spot” on *MasterChef*. In fact, there were multiple comparisons in news articles and social media comments between Montecuolo and Poernomo, often asserting that if Montecuolo had to go, then Poernomo certainly had to also. In one of these comments on the *Masterchef Australia* Facebook page, Montecuolo’s innocence was reiterated by *MasterChef* fan Nick Harland who wrote, “Why is this guy [Poernomo] allowed to work professionally for his parents place, but the bloke from Enmore is kicked off? Just curious, seems strange to me” (qtd. in Croffey).

Most reality television shows tell us that they are representing the ordinary lives of real people, in whom we might plausibly recognise ourselves (Seale 32). *MasterChef Australia* makes this aspect of its show particularly explicit, repeatedly announcing that its contestants are the “Top 24 Amateur Cooks in the Country” (Seale 34), including

montages of contestants in their homes packing their bags and kissing family goodbye as they leave for the *MasterChef* kitchen, constructing “back stories” and labelling each contestant by their age, state and occupation (e.g. Reynold, 20, NSW, student) (Kirkwood 97). An individual contestant’s capacity to, as Graeme Turner writes, “perform a particularly spectacular version of ordinariness” (n.p.) as well as the producers’ careful framing of this ordinariness are crucial to maintaining the rags-to-riches narrative of *MasterChef*. Kirsten Seale describes the difficulty of emphasising the ordinariness of contestants given the show’s self-professed aim to turn its amateur cooks into professionals. She points out that the “much-repeated refrain ‘The Top 24 Amateur Cooks in the Country’ traces an ambivalent locus between ‘top’ and ‘amateur’” (Seale 34). *MasterChef*’s discourse is one of transformation from amateur (or ordinary) to professional (extraordinary), however, as much as *MasterChef* claims to be propelling this makeover, it actually delays it. Frances Bonner points out that in reality television competitions, “ordinary people are seen as needing instructing again and again and the expertise which is passed on each week, supposedly diminishing the distance between amateur and professional, evaporates by the beginning of the subsequent show” (133). *MasterChef* must suspend its contestants in a static state of ordinariness to mimic the also static state of ordinariness which the “average” consumer embodies by sitting on their couch, still as a cat, watching other people cook.

The already complex balancing act of keeping contestants forever on the cusp of professionalisation “real” and “relatable” is further complicated by the accumulated signification of the Asian body in contrast to the anonymity and ubiquity of the white body. George Yancy mourns that “only whites have that wonderful capacity to live anonymously, thoughtlessly, to be ordinary qua human, to go unmarked and unnamed – in essence, to be white” (4). Mario Montecucollo’s, like any other white body, is an ordinary body, a human body, a real body. His body is not inscribed by race but a blank canvas allowing white Australia to paint their own faces onto his face. This is why the white body is almost all we see on screen; the invisibility of whiteness allows the white body to be visible, replicated again and again in public without question (“Declarations” n.p.; Lipsitz 1). The white body is a fresh new piece of A4 paper, its racial identity is, as Sara Ahmed writes, “invisible, as the unseen or the unmarked ... non-colour, the absent presence or hidden referent, against which all other colours are measured as forms of deviance” (“Declarations” n.p.). In addition to this, Montecucollo’s body is seen as a “bloke from Enmore’s” working-class body and “ordinary people (what used to be called

the ‘working classes’) have been taken in themselves as signs of the real...” (Biressi and Nunn 4). Montecuolo is not just himself, he is every man, everywhere. Where the open book of Montecuolo’s white body is immediately interpreted as the simple, honest, working-class, Australian, male body of a “bloke from Enmore,” Poernomo’s cheating, “fake” body is a dog-eared and graffitied text, overwritten with racist inscription. How can the stone-cold Asian body, by turns described as fearsome Yellow Peril threat and competitive, deceptive model minority automaton, ever be truly “ordinary,” “real” and “human”? By nature this body is untrustworthy (hard to believe), will stop at nothing to win (a cheat) and completely uncanny in its imitation of humanness (fleshless, bloodless, emotionless).

White fear of Asian middle-class bodies (like Poernomo’s) “taking over” Western countries is the backbone of Yellow Peril discourse in its current iteration (Ono and Pham 25). Yellow Perilism typically emphasises the economic power of Asian countries and the desire of individual immigrants to “steal our jobs” (Santa Ana 21). David Morley and Kevin Robins write about how in America circa 1990s, Japanese purchases of American franchises and business were seen as “stealing” and “buying into America’s soul” (Morley and Robins 149–150). Yen Le Espiritu cites the famous 1982 case of Vincent Chin, in which Chin was stalked and beaten to death by Ronald Ebens and his stepson Michael Nitz while out celebrating with friends ahead of his wedding day. Whilst Chin was not Japanese, his death was linked to the white American, anti-Japanese sentiment at the time, fuelled by the idea that Japanese purchases of the American automobile industry had led to white employees being made redundant in Detroit. Nitz had recently been laid off from his job at Chrysler and Ebens was heard by one witness saying, “it’s because of motherfuckers like you that we’re out of work” (Ono and Pham 39; *Asian-American Panethnicity* 142).

When I’m eighteen, my parents move us out of our “bad” suburb into one of the “good” ones. The “bad” suburb has men who wolf-whistle at me in my school uniform and try and get me into cars with them. The “good” suburb has a skinny, depleted looking white woman who rushes up to me, pushing her face close to mine and says: “I’m gonna fucken rob you one day.” When I’m in my twenties, I move out of my parent’s house and into the inner-city. I walk home from university in the pouring rain. A white woman waits at the pedestrian crossing with me. When I go to press the button at the crossing, I notice that she is staring at me. I wonder if she wants to make some kind of remark about our shared experience of being drenched and smile at her. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

she screams, “stop fucking looking at me.” I tell her I’m not looking at her. “Don’t come an inch to me,” she says. The green man lights up. We cross the road together, then I notice that she has slowed down behind me and has her keys between her knuckles. I go home and call my husband. I tell him it’s been a bad month for racism, this is the third time a stranger has accosted me in public in three weeks. He tells me that for whites (like himself) fear of China’s increasingly controlling government is being conflated with fear of Chinese people.

Ghassan Hage writes that fear of Asian “take over” or social mobility stems from the belief that “[t]he ‘Asian’ middle and upper classes make being an upper-class Australian no longer a strictly white affair. By the same token, there can no longer be a privileged essential link between being white and the national dreams of social mobility” (*White Nation* 213). For Hage, the white Australian working class is jarred when an Asian middle and upper class becomes visible because it means that there is no longer an “essential link” between whiteness and the upper class. Where Asian and other non-white races occupy only the lower rungs of society, a working-class white person is able to imagine that while they are not themselves in a position of social power, they might aspire to becoming the people in this position. The presence of non-white, upwardly mobile people becomes an awful eyesore. I know this because my own body is one of these awful eyesores.

When I was a bit younger, I was offered a scholarship funded by one of the many charities which the British royal family raises money and turns up to concerts and dinners in aid of. It was a scheme in which British art galleries would pluck citizens from Commonwealth countries, put them in a residency with British artists for six weeks, then exhibit their work the following year. I spent six weeks at a writing residency in an old mansion in country Scotland. Six weeks of dinners eaten quickly and plates left for the locked door of my deep blue bedroom every night. I don’t know how it happened but barely a week into the residency I found myself made sport of by another artist at almost every mealtime. She made these huge slashes of paint on big canvasses all day and drank herself into defensiveness all night. Her cheeks were red, her hair coming undone when she addressed me, and I was forced to look up from my plate. The other artists watched on silently. On so many of these nights, I watched her round eyes as she accused me of being “scary” and “intimidating” and wondered out loud what I would think of her work. She was really very nervous for me to see it. I told her I’d like it because I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

At one lunchtime, over the big creamy soups and sour salads on the table, she asked me what I thought of the autodidact and I said I didn't know what an autodidact was. She told me it was someone who was self-taught and asked me what I thought of people like that given my long years spent at university. She said she believed she was a punk, embodied the spirit of "punk". I said lamely that "it was good to be an autodidact" and I knew exactly who she had told herself I was. That she had all the real heart, the passion, the rebel spirit, the raw nerve and that I was a terrifying, over-educated fake. I was never the iceberg she accused me of being. I cried into the sheets of my four-poster bed as quietly as I could some nights because I was the exact opposite: a weak person with a mouth full of moments like these.

In a way, when I look at photos of the red shell made from mousse, covering a chocolate coulis with ganache and cocoa butter surrounded by raspberry sorbet, strawberries, mint and chocolate "soil," I get what all the fuss was about. Poernomo's transgression was his creative rebellion, his difference from the other *MasterChef* contestants among whom he was quickly dubbed the "Dessert King". His food was the opposite of representing his past, his "heritage" (the thing which Yeow was made by the judges to do); it was instead about representing the cutting-edge of contemporary patisserie. The name of his offensive dish, "Forbidden Fruit," was a barefaced boast. It offered us a picture of the untouched natural world the moment before it was touched and irreversibly changed. The audience watching was invited to imagine not just touching the fruit, but demolishing, eating and digesting, boastfully told, through the invoking of the old story, that they would be changed forever by this experience. Poernomo claimed to have the key to the garden. His boast was too big.

3.5 Forbidden Fruit

The producers of *MasterChef* attempt to recuperate Poernomo's unreal body into the realm of the real by intercutting his audition for *MasterChef* with an emotive backstory. In a sense, this backstory is part of the audition; where the cooking part of the audition is designed to impress the *MasterChef* judges, the backstory is Reynold's auditioning of his "realness" for the Australian public's approval. In the first scene of the audition, Reynold introduces himself, inflecting the end of each phrase in that Australian upward accent of uncertainty, "my name's Reynold, I'm a twenty-year-old student, from New South Wales." In quick flash cuts, we watch as he separates egg whites from yolks, stirs sago and cuts pineapple slices. His brother reminds him to check his oven and his mother

shouts, “a bit more, a bit more!” as he grates lemon rind into a bowl. Moving from the hot rush of the kitchen, a new scene appears with Reynold directly addressing the camera, a family photograph and, later, a softly glowing shot of Reynold sitting outside a commercial kitchen on a milk crate, looking wistfully inside then looking down at his feet in despair.

I was born in Indonesia in Suran Baya and my family moved to Australia when I was five years old. It was quite a struggle for us, mum had to find new job working long hours, uh, at various restaurants. Mum’s made big sacrifices for me and the family but now my mum owns a business called Artplate which is like a wholesale pastry business. She’s my biggest inspiration. I told my family that I wanna be a chef over and over again but always the same answer saying that ‘no, it’s too hard.’

In a new scene, Reynold mother, Ike Malada is in her chef’s uniform, addressing the camera and saying, “I don’t want Reynold to be a chef because long hour working in the kitchen and the family.” It is a jarring moment in the montage. It makes me wonder what kind of conversation the *MasterChef* executives went through with Ike Malada when they asked her if she could appear on camera in an apron, to forbid her son from pursuing his dreams like a good Asian mum would. It also makes me wonder why Ike Malada would yell excitedly at Reynold to add more lemon rind to his dish while he cooks for the judges if she truly disapproved of his choice of profession.

We cut to a new scene of Reynold closing the doors of a small delivery van and then driving the vehicle. Reynold’s voiceover says: “I’d love to work in Mum’s kitchen but she only lets me be the delivery driver and the kitchen hand.” A new scene appears where Reynold is writing into a notebook and stirring a simmering saucepan:

... so the only place that I could cook is at home where I can practice and experiment. Although my family discouraged me, I really want to prove to them that I can be in the industry as well. Getting into *MasterChef* will mean the world to me.

Poernomo’s filial outsider immigrant narrative, which incorporates the trope of an Asian parent forbidding their offspring from following their dreams, now slips strangely. Poernomo says “I really want to prove to them that I can be in the industry as well,” which suggests that he needs to prove his abilities to a family of seasoned chefs. However, Ike’s

reason for discouraging Poernomo from working in the food industry is primarily the long hours. The narrative is unstable but what I think it is trying to convey is that Reynold is not the test-taking, pen-pushing Asian automaton his family wants to force him into being. No, in fact, his auditioning for *MasterChef* is a vast rebellion against all of this. The twenty-year-old university student in the final year of his degree(!), is tired of the charade, he will no longer please his parents, stay in school, get a good STEM job and follow the conservative pathway to procreating a model Asian family of his own. He will drop out, pursue his own dreams and rebel against all of this. You might think he is an industry insider because of his culinary relatives but, actually, he is an immigrant outsider, pushing through filial forbidding in order to take on the world.

To be perceived as an amateur is particularly important for Asian cooking contestants given the fearsomeness of the Asian body which will stop at nothing to win. *They are scared of me, they are scared of what I will do to them*, I think to myself. Their hatred is nothing more than a safety concern (Yancy 2). *Fear, fear, fear*. It comes towards your body, it “projects us from the present into a future” (Ahmed, *The Politics of Emotion* 65). Sara Ahmed writes that “fear works to contain some bodies such that they take up less space” (*Politics of Emotion* 69). Fear worries over the body of the young Asian man cooking well, then shrinks it (*Politics of Emotion* 69). This is why Asians are commonly cast in televised cooking competitions. This role satisfies stereotypes of the Asian subject as a “perpetually striving, newcomer, never the veteran head honcho” (“Blood Sport of Cooking” 245).

The use of this same immigrant outsider narrative attempted to recuperate Poernomo’s “derealised” Asian body from the realm of the unreal (Yellow Peril, model minority) to the “real” (amateur, ordinary, outsider). But when the proficiency of his forbidden fruit desert moved his body from the realm of the “ordinary” to the “extraordinary” the immigrant outsider narrative was forgotten (or perhaps it was never believed in the first place). In its place, the old narratives of Asian deceit, threat and competitiveness reasserted themselves and, while Poernomo had not broken the rules of the competition by having a mother who runs a pastry business and a brother who judges *MasterChef Indonesia* or by making a beautiful desert, he broke the image of the amateur, immigrant outsider which was thrust upon his Asian body.

3.6 *Acting Small*

Yeow's capacity to cook the authentic food of her heritage constitutes a performance of unthreatening, fun-sized, amateur selfhood for her audience. This authentic sense of self is designed to align Yeow with the amateur cook ostensibly watching her from the comfort of their couch, and distance her from the professional chef. In episode seven of season two of her television series *Poh & Co*, we listen in as Yeow ostensibly addresses "chefs out there" as her antithesis, saying as she makes a crème patissiere in the microwave, "Yes, I am going to use the microwave, shock-horror. Shut up all you chefs out there." Eavesdropped-upon conversations are the most honest conversations of all, this is why audiences typically judge "hidden camera" reality television as more "real" than other forms of reality television (Hills 65). Yeow's "real" remark reinscribes her image as that of the amateur chef, an act which must be repeated over and over again, given the scale of her success and the fact that she is not an amateur but a professional television presenter, cookbook writer and café owner.

Yeow's amateur status extends well beyond her training period on *MasterChef*. Despite the fact that the role of presenter on a cooking show typically takes on a pedagogical aspect, Yeow eschews this role for the studied performance of the apprentice in her first television show, *Poh's Kitchen: Poh Spreads her Wings* (2010). In this show, rather than addressing the audience and teaching them to cook her recipes, Yeow is shown enthusiastically learning how to cook from professional chefs (Seale 34). This apprenticeship is clearly racialised and feminised, the chefs who appear on her show, with the exception of Ragini Dey, are older, white, male professionals: Emmanuel Mollois, Neil Perry, Ian Parmenter and David Thompson. The accompanying cookbook, also named *Poh's Kitchen*, includes not just recipes from Yeow but profiles of and recipes from the various mentors and professional chefs who appear on screen with her. In these profiles, she pens small tributes to these chefs, explaining the unique way in which each one has passed on their expertise.

Yeow is not just an amateur cook, but, in her view, an unexceptional one. The introduction to *Poh's Kitchen* begins with an exhortation to the reader that they need not fear cooking and the rest of the introduction is a long list of the various cooking disasters she has encountered, from dishing up "soggy stir-fries, overcooked steak with three veg and powdered mushroom soup poured over the top as the piece de resistance" (Yeow 8). In this introduction, Yeow again reinforces her link with the reader by assuring them that

they need not be “afraid of failure” (*Poh’s Kitchen* 8) given her own failures. Assuaging fear, is, of course the whole point of Yeow’s protracted time in the realm of the amateur cook. Yeow represents herself as an amateur because this narrows her persona from the threatening expanse of the extraordinary to the humility of the recognisable and the real. And after what happened to Poernomo, it’s easy to see why. The longer Yeow is able to detain herself in the realm of the amateur, the less likely her Asian body will move (as Poernomo’s did) from the framework of the human, the individual, the self, to the framework of the threat, the body cooking too well, taking over screens, telling us what to do and above all, becoming unreal. Fear makes us smaller, more ordinary, less intimidating. And when I watch Yeow, this brilliant entrepreneur and presenter cooking up a storm, trying not to be too good, I think, how exhausting this whole thing is, making yourself small enough to fit into the framework of the human.

It’s grade five or six. A girl in my class becomes aware of me. She spends lots of time asking our teacher why I am allowed to apply Blistex when she isn’t allowed to wear lip gloss. She asks me questions about myself that are really about herself. One of those questions was “How many pages did you do?” (we had to count the pages we read each night and put them in a reading logbook). When she hears the answer, she breaks down crying. The teacher comes over and hears her out. “How can I ever? When she’s saying she reads like two hundred pages?” The teacher takes me outside: “Look, you’re either going to have to learn to get along with others or not,” she tells me. It was advice. She was giving me advice about things I didn’t know existed yet.

In her analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong describes the moment in which Maxine tries to make herself “cute and small” when, as a girl she is made to ask a druggist for some candy. The white druggist, mistaking the Chinese family for beggars, begins giving free candy to the children all year round. Maxine, however, is stung by the routine condescension of whites to her family and refuses to eat the candy. Later, when Maxine attempts to use “the opposite strategy” in negotiating with her white employers, open-fire confrontation and contestation, she is ignored and cast aside. Wong uses this incident to describe the way in which “the act of making oneself” small is a performative act adopted by Asian immigrants in order to “inflate the sense of power and liberality in those who have control over one’s life” (S. Wong 46). Wong’s analysis highlights the way in which the performance of smallness is a key coping strategy for Asian female bodies in attaining what is required and avoiding the routine humiliation associated with inhabiting a female Asian body in a white, male-

dominated society. The performance of smallness is one which anticipates racist condescension and diminishment and shrinks the self in order to avoid being ignored, viewed as a threat or “put in one’s place” by those in power. David Li describes this kind of “masking” as a survival tactic used by early Chinese immigrants to America. Li writes that

the image of the meek and mild Chinaman was manufactured by immigrants as a survival mechanism to be activated or shelved at will while masking began as a deliberate tactic, the total repression by a white racist society drove the façade into the bone of individual personality. (24)

Li, like Wong, points out that this kind of performance is both positively and negatively rewarded by white racist society. As in Wong’s example, Maxine is positively rewarded with candy for making herself “cute and small” and in Li’s example, early Chinese immigrants are negatively rewarded by avoiding a certain level of conflict with a “white racist society”. The deep acting Asian immigrants perform to placate white people requires them to firstly restrain themselves from criticising racism and, secondly, to make themselves appear amenable and unthreatening, hence the performances of meekness, cuteness, amateurishness, ordinariness and smallness.

There has been little research done on the racialisation of emotional work, nor has there been much research on the ways in which emotions are used to manage racism and the self-making of racial identities. Rick Flowers and Elaine Swan have shown how migrants working as tour guides in western Sydney perform the difficult emotional labour of not only refraining from criticising racist behaviour (such as expressions of fear when walking through multicultural suburbs) but also caring for and reassuring their white customers through their safety concerns (35). In her study, “Not Out to Start a Revolution” (2012), Amy Wilkins describes the idea of “moderate blackness,” a persona which black college men in the United States perform in order to distance themselves from the stereotype of the “angry black man” and participate successfully in college life (35). Wilkins brings to light the “extraordinary emotional restraint” (35) which these men must exercise, itemising the difficult tactics of moderate blackness such as denying racism and assuaging feelings of anger at racism. This kind of emotional labouring to preserve race relations in a racist society takes a significant toll on immigrants and non-white people. As Arlie Hochschild writes in her treatise on emotional labour, emotional labour requires the “suppress[ion] of feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance

that produces the proper state of mind in others” (7). Such deep acting does not merely require the costuming of the self in another character, but, as Hoschild writes, asks that we “draw on a source of self that we honour as deep and integral to our individuality” (7) or as Li writes, it asks that we drive “the façade into the bone of individual personality” (24). In other words, it’s the offering of something precious and deeply personal, something it hurts to give over to another. In other words, it hurts my pride.

3.7 An Absence of Signs

There’s a spot in the middle of the city above Melbourne Central station called Asian Beer Café, which, like almost every other bar, advertises \$4 pizzas and cheap beer at all the right times. If you’ve gone through university in Melbourne’s centre you’ve probably been there and if you’re still in university then you’re probably sitting there now. Flanked by huge Buddhas, dimly lit by hanging lanterns and red lights, a room with signage called the “harem’s quarters” and a picture of a girl slipping off her kimono under falling Japanese maple leaves. Posters of Shanghainese pin-up girls, a wall designed around the lit-up signs of Tokyo, more lanterns, photos of lanterns, lots of thin pieces of fabric just hanging there. A manga-style cat girl on her knees, holding a slice of pizza and advertising, yep, \$4 pizzas. Printed on the wall of the urinal, pornographic manga of one girl bending over while unrobing, a naked, sad Asian girl crouched over, holding huge breasts and another girl with a heavy-duty chain around her neck grasping both her breasts which are spilling out of her too-small bra.

The body. The sad girl naked, wearing a heavy chain for a necklace, unknowingly printed on the wall of Asian Beer Café’s urinal. Her docility reminds me of all the “Asian” restaurants I have frequented with white food adventurers. These are docile bodies, designed to be discovered, to provide food which will sustain the sophisticated stomachs of the people who stumble down the dark alley or up the sticky staircase. This is what I think of when I am in these places. Running a restaurant is a job for people running away from the old country. My friend, Rex, his parents have run restaurants all his life. Rex doesn’t like it because it means he eats out every night by himself. His mum used to eat dinner with him back when the restaurant only sold *hu tieu mi*, *bun bo hue* and *com tam* in Footscray. He misses that. But then they had money problems and so. So the new shop in St Albans, its menu, double the size, and now there are three soups, all of which take eight hours to cook. His parents have a long hard life, they can’t get home until late. And Rex cruises around in his car hoping one of us will be free to have dinner with him

somewhere nearby. It's hard work to run a restaurant and it's something me and them and us don't know anything about. The *gweilo* won't pay much for Vietnamese food because it isn't French food.

But. I was stranded at West Footscray train station and Rex picked me up in a nice, new, soft-top BMW. The window was open and he had just run out of phone credit, he had wasted it on some game on his phone. Rex's dad wanted to add pho to the menu because everyone wants pho. Rex is proud of his parents. The *gweilo* want to feel good about themselves, the *gweilo* want to feel clever and true and real and all the while his parents are the ones turning a profit on all of this.

Uma Narayan has her misgivings about critiques of food colonialism. While acknowledging the compelling nature of Lisa Heldke's and Sneja Gunew's critiques, as well as the difficult conditions of many restaurant staff and owners, Uma Narayan points out that by centring whiteness, such critiques strip ethnic restaurateurs, chefs and food workers of their agency (187). Narayan writes that "the creation of such interest [in ethnic food] also involves the agency of shrewd ethnic immigrants helping to create, and making a living out of, the 'Western' desire for culinary novelty" (180). In Hage's 1997 survey of ethnic restaurants in Cabramatta, he confirms that the undiscovered aesthetic of ethnic restaurants is designed by owners to attract Anglo customers (by making them feel as if these restaurants are not attempting to attract them). Hage writes that in contrast to the narrative of food adventurer as pursuer of unsuspecting otherness, these restaurant owners not only "actively seek a non-Vietnamese clientele" but "have an excellent grasp of their expectations ("At Home" 144). For example, one restaurant owner commented that "many of the restaurant owners know that the absence of signs in English is a good way to attract Anglo customers" ("At Home" 144).

3.8 Mary and Martha

Yeow calls herself a home cook and a representative of home cooks (*Same* v). She calls herself a self-giving amateur, a feeder certified by the South-East Asian matrilineal line before her. She is a feminine, Asian force of caregiving which nourishes the white consumer, eating up the images of her food from their couch. But while we may nurse fantasies of being cooked for, of enjoying a bit of "mother's milk" around the dining table, home cooking is simply not so benign an act. There are complex "power-plays that structure familial eating" (Probyn 38), a sometimes-forgotten face of home-cooking which has not been written about enough. The home itself is not some cosy, idealised

space but rather is a site of tyranny designed for “scrutiny and control” (Douglas 287). And, as John Berger argues, the word “home” refers both to the domestic, that private site of familial power struggles, but it also means that public stadium of global power struggles, the nation (55). The home is not what you think it is and because of that the home cook is not who you think she is.

In the old story, Mary sits at Jesus’s feet while Martha prepares a meal for him and his disciples. Martha would have been a good cook, I think, meticulous and brisk, sensitive and no-nonsense. She would have had good hands and firm arms. Her love was rushed, she opened her home and made sense of the things she had and didn’t have, then began on the fire and the knife, the grain and the oil. In sisterly self-righteousness, she ticked off her younger sister, the selfish dreamer, no great help in general but worse still when sitting on the floor with her hands in her lap.

Of course, I’ve always been an irresponsible Mary, eating steaming food while frozen in reverent fear of a clever woman commanding a kitchen, cleaning a wound, stretching a dollar, cutting a deal, not needing help from anyone. I was made to be formed in her image, my comings and goings, my thoughts and my feelings a promise made to the soft power of nods and head-tilts, her likes and dislikes. The myths she spun about herself, competitive and compelling; she gave birth on Panadol, she worked three jobs at once, she was, she is, the most generous person in the world.

“Love can be controlling,” I said to my mum over hot, weak tea at my kitchen table. She nodded and we said together that her eldest sister was a Martha, always pushing her out of the kitchen, speaking in the dialect she thought mum couldn’t understand. Big Sister’s familial sacrifices were sacred and her authority over her younger sisters final. Later, my mum, she cried about something old and hard and tried to convince me that I was crying too.

I visit my mum’s sister, Big Auntie with my husband a month later in Butterworth, Penang, and I’m too weak to tell her we’ve already had lunch. She makes us eat more and more and I covertly push my excess food to my husband. He spends the next few days vomiting, making hollow sounds. I refuse to let him blame her; we decide it was something else. “Where’s the jam your mum said she’d make me?” my auntie asks me. I say nothing. I haven’t been given any jam. “I think she forgot about it,” my auntie says. Her eyes sharp as a curved blade, soft as water.

Martha the cook’s active domination of Mary, the consumer, is a matrilineal power struggle passed down from one mouth to another. The old paintings of Jesus in Mary and

Martha's house don't cut the mustard for me: Joachim Beuckelaer, Vincenzo Campi and Adriaen van Utrecht paint dramatic still lifes of artichokes, ducks, peacocks, slabs of marbled red meat, rolls, fish, raccoons and big cabbages but they obscure Martha's complaint and fade Mary out. Vermeer's single loaf of bread in a basket and quiet morning light is too civilised. The pair need to be painted with the panache of Delacroix's *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, dark scenery that falls away in comparison with the profound power struggle that occurs in the cramped home kitchen.

When I first saw Yeow on the TV, I felt embarrassed. Why was this obviously clever entrepreneur making herself seem small and finite and stupid? Why did this formidable media and food professional want to make herself seem just like some little housewife who had stumbled, blinking at the bright lights, onto television? Had I waited so long to see myself on television, only to see this? Was it just the unswallowable truth that the dazzling Asian body, boasting of what it could cook, like Poernomo's, would be detected, disciplined and made unreal but the small Asian body pretending to be nothing but food springing naturally from the heart would be allowed back inside that glowing glass box?

Then I remembered the old story of Mary and Martha, my mum and myself, my mum and her sister, Rex's parents and the restaurant. The feminine act of feeding, the ethnic body's act of nourishing, are both made too toothless. The mother is always selfless. The ethnic body is always victimised, caught in the hopeless trap of enriching the other. It is true that, as I wrote earlier, white bodies are often greedily caught up in the taking in of ethnic food, but it doesn't necessarily follow that the ethnic cook is selfless, giving, as innocent as the cosmo-multicultural eater imagines them to be.

In episode seven, season two of *Poh & Co*, Yeow is given the key to her new stall at the Adelaide Central Markets. She expresses her excitement, speaking about how "being allowed to open a stall at the Adelaide Central Market is a bit of a dream". The moment she has her kitchen set up, she whips up her unfussy milky mess desserts as gifts for the other stallholders, confiding to the camera that she's

all too well aware that many of these traders have been here for generations. They are the market. Yeah, yeah, I'm feeling tentative about that ... but um so that's why I'm bringing my little bribe gifts [laughs]. Like me! Like me! (*Poh & Co*)

When I first saw this episode, I marvelled at how a successful food presenter – who would surely only offer publicity and greater foot traffic to a marketplace by opening her

own stall – would feel she had been “*allowed* to open a stall” (my italics). I wondered why she cowered behind her desserts, tentatively offering them to each of the original stallholders, all of whom were white. *All of whom were white*. That was when I realised that maybe she was right, that maybe if she hadn’t made herself so well-liked, offered a sweetener to *gweilo* stomachs, she would never have had the authority to tell them how to prepare, cook and eat in the first place.

Yeow prepares a meal for her white audience, the dinner table groans, its legs buckle under the weight of her South-East Asian fare. Yeow is a “certified feeder,” not a chef. Chefs *cook*. Yeow *feeds*. Chefs plate up for hats. Yeow dishes up for those who are passive enough to need the administering of a regular “feed”: babies, pets, farm animals, food adventurers. The word “feeder” faces the object of feeding and forces itself upon them. Yeow doesn’t just have a seat at the table, she presides over the table. I watch, overawed, as this South-East Asian immigrant girl feeds the white subject and forces them to swallow her whole.

3.9 It’s Too Real

Judith Butler writes that “certain lives are not considered lives at all”. She asserts that minoritised lives are “derealised” lives, existing outside of the framework of the human. One of the ways that these lives are presented as unreal is their lack of personal detail: “names and faces, personal histories, family, favo[u]rite hobbies, slogans by which they live” (*Precarious Life* 32). Working backwards from her idea that derealisation is characterised by impersonality, I have considered Asian-Australian television personalities in the competitive and instructional cooking show genres. These cooking shows have provided space in which Asian-Australian television chefs strive towards “personality” and away from derealised impersonality through becoming recognisable household “names and faces” with “histories, family, favourite hobbies, slogans by which they live” (*Precarious Life* 32) all through the preparation of food. Thinking through Poh Ling Yeow’s fascinating performances of realness through amateurishness and the public discussions of Reynold Poernomo’s illegitimacy as a MasterChef contestant, I have considered the cost of realising the Asian body. Just as the MasterChef judges pronounced Poernomo’s dishes as “almost too good to eat,” the Australian viewing public debated if he was almost too good to believe, to be considered a “real contestant”. On the other hand, Yeow’s constant professions of amateurishness, whilst containing her within the limited framework of “realness” which is accessible to the Asian-Australian television

personality, betray a fear of being pronounced “too good to be real”. The question I have asked myself is whether or not I can swallow the limitations of realness for the Asian-Australian body. The answer is that I am sick with hunger but I’m afraid that if I eat something that feels a bit off, I’ll throw it back up, emptier than before I began.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOVER-OTHER

THE FANTASY OF INTERRACIAL LOVE

We are eating pizza and it is her shout. My sister-in-law and I are talking about *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). She says she doesn't "really get the whole representation thing". It hurts me though it shouldn't. I am pointlessly possessive about other Asian people's feelings about being Asian. I try to recover myself, "Maybe it's because you grew up in Singapore. You actually did see Asian people on every billboard, TV channel and movie. I saw nothing." "Nah," she says as if I had offered her a gelati flavour she didn't like.

When I was fourteen or something and getting undressed and dressed for a youth choir performance, a girl my age said that she swore she wasn't lesbian but that I was seriously hot, that I looked like Lucy Liu. This isn't true at all, of course. I look nothing like Lucy Liu, and her sensibility has nothing to do with mine. When I got a little older, a girl who looked like Jean Seberg (after seeing *Breathless* in one undergraduate film class, most of us were trying to look like her) told me I was Joan Chen. I forgot the name and never looked her up. A few years later, a girl I was sharing a PhD workspace with told me she had thought of me when watching Chen in the original *Twin Peaks* but hadn't wanted to text me about it in case it seemed racist. I told her that I liked being compared to Joan Chen. I never watched the show but I liked the sad, still look in her eyes.

I don't know why I need to see myself in a self that is not mine. A Hollywood actress being paid to play at being a normal person. And me, a normal person paying for a Cheap Tuesday ticket to play at identifying with a Hollywood actress. It sounds like a hoax only an idiot would fall for. Is this "the whole representation thing?"

4.1 The Painfully Symbolic Body

Ella Shohat writes about the asymmetrical power dynamics of representation, describing the non-white body as

allegorical ... within hegemonic discourse every subaltern performer/role is seen as synecdochally summing up a vast but putatively homogenous community. Representations of dominant groups, on the other hand, are seen not as allegorical

but as “naturally” diverse, examples of the ungeneralizable variety of life itself. Socially empowered groups need not be unduly concerned about “distortions and stereotypes,” since even occasionally negative images form part of a wide spectrum of representations. (183)

The individual subaltern body is always symbolic of something so much heavier than itself, the many (Memmi 129). For me, this “tyranny of appearance” (Tan 67) is the most difficult and invisible aspect of inhabiting a painfully symbolic body. My impossibly clever, skinny big brother tells me that he was in a queue at the fishmonger when a Chinese person pushed in front of the people waiting there to be served. “So?” I ask, dangerously. “It’s not a good look,” he says. I throw small, smooth stones of sound at him then regret it because they move us further apart. My mum tells me that the *ang moh* will tolerate you if you are perfect but if you are nervous or make mistakes or are just plain lazy, *they will have it in for you*. She tells me about an Indian colleague who is young and new and shaky who they surround with gossip and complaints to HR. *They will have it in for you*. My husband talks with his mum about starting a community garden with some of our friends and their parents. His mum asks if it is possible that they are gardeners, saying that my friend Caleb’s parents are always travelling overseas. She expresses sympathy for Caleb, whose parents are never around. *Do they take care of gardens?* She asks.

Do we take care of gardens? Do I enjoy the company of others? Do I offer to help wash up? Do I make the appropriate greetings when I see my in-laws? Do I have many friends? Am I needy? I turn this way and I turn that way. I am so afraid to speak. What if I ruin the face of an entire continent when I say the wrong thing? I am painfully symbolic. I have spent my entire life trying to self-fashion my way out of the old symbols in small ways and in big ways. And I know so many others who have done the same. My year nine maths teacher called up my parents, to tell them he thought I was deliberately doing badly. My best friend announces to everyone she meets that she hates rice. These small stupid things were, maybe, true. But the announcements we make: *I’m not who you think I am, I’m a real, live human being, warm to touch and clothed in flesh* are also a denouncement: *I’m not like them*. Yet, no matter how many times I denounce myself I am still them. Stuart Hall writes that this is the way the stereotype works, it has it both ways and so you are

trapped by the binary structure of the stereotype, which is split between two extreme opposites – and are obliged to shuttle endlessly between them, sometimes being represented as *both of them at the same time*. (263)

This is me. I took *their* claim that I couldn't speak English, couldn't be artistic, so seriously that I needed to study for a PhD to certify my overqualified-ness, to finally speak. But I forgot that they would laugh when I was always busy studying, when I was just an Asian nerd, smart, sure, but friendless and also smart in an automated, swotty, swat-it-off sort of way.

They. You know, when I was twelve or thirteen, my mum told me all about the difficult relationships people could have with their in-laws. I imagined myself going over to my boyfriend's house for the first time, bearing a purple box of Cadbury Roses. I'd say: *You respect me; I'll respect you*. I can't imagine myself issuing an ultimatum anymore. You know, when I was twenty-one, I was so much more chastened by the world. I went over to my boyfriend's parents' house for the first time wearing a long dress, bringing a cake in a tin. I thought they would love me, because who wouldn't love a good girl like me? My boyfriend, impressed with himself, said to his family that I had no tats, drank no alcohol, no swearing even. I said suddenly that I didn't want them to just think I was some nerd. And only I knew what I meant by that. The problem was that they met me before I met them. They met me in the political campaigns, in the TV set, in the "textureless math grinds" (Golden 201) (as Marilee Jones, the Dean of Admissions at MIT put it) taking their select-entry tests, in the "all-look-sort-of-the-same" kids walking along Barkly St in Footscray, in the five-hundred-year-old discourses that had preceded my birth.

They. I've thought about this one before. What it means for me to be represented as "them" and now to represent myself being represented by "them". Kevin Brophy writes that "the writer ... is a spy ... the one who might at any time give away secrets, say what should not be said, betray himself and those closest to him" (223). But I don't want to be a spy, I don't want to be a person who has to lie to come up closer. Someone said to me, "What's worse, being racist or writing about how someone was racist?" But the problem with that kind of self-righteousness, the brand management, the talking yourself into being right kind of thing is that while I might win in the so-called Oppression Olympics, I lose in real life. I lose them.

4.2 808s and Heartbreaks

The painful sense of a subaltern body being an allegory is for Ella Shohat what makes Hollywood representation of non-white bodies tense, emotionally charged, queasily high-stakes (182). Shohat charts the racial politics of casting beginning with the “intense resentment” amongst non-white communities given the long and varied history of blackface, redface, brownface and yellowface, and the rarity of this occurring in reverse (189). Shohat explains the logic of erasure:

The casting of a non-member of the “minority” group is a triple insult, implying (a) you are unworthy of self-representation; (b) no one from your community is capable of representing you; and (c) we, the producers of the film, care little about your offended sensibilities, for we have the power and there is nothing you can do about it. (189–90)

Apart from this history of whitewashing characters, there is also the erasure of non-white roles/performers stemming from the “racist idea that a film, to be economically viable, must use a ‘universal’ (i.e. white) star” (Shohat 190). When the non-white body is visible, it is oftentimes shrunk to fit stereotypes which neatly symbolise the sum total of continents in a few humiliating words, in a bad outfit, in a broken voice, in the hurt face of the girl sitting in the back row watching herself materialise.

August 2018 saw the release of three films centred around Asian protagonists and starring Asian actors: indie-thriller *Searching* (2018), the Netflix-released teen film *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* (2018) and the Hollywood rom-com *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). In the run-up to the release of these films, the Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment (CAPE) coined the term #AsianAugust as a rallying point for Asian diversity in film. CAPE encouraged the Asian diasporic community to watch these films and use the hashtag to make their support visible online. The films released in #AsianAugust, particularly *Crazy Rich Asians*, have, as their promotional premise, the promise that they will represent the girl in the back row with the hurt face.

When asked questions about representation, the cast of *Crazy Rich Asians* typically responded by recounting the intense affective reactions of Asian diasporic fans to the film. In an interview for the live interview series, *BUILD*, Constance Wu described the importance of representation by describing how in advance screenings of *Crazy Rich Asians* “people were crying ... people were crying just because they had never felt seen”

(BUILD). A YouTube video produced for *PopSugar* entitled “The Crazy Rich Asians Cast gets Emotional While Reading Inspirational Fans Tweets about Representation” explores representation from a similar vantage point. In this video, Awkwafina, Gemma Chan and Ken Jeong read and respond to tweets from fans about their experience of being represented by the film. Awkwafina reads out a tweet from twitter user, @Skim_Milk that says, “Representation matters. So excited to see people who look like me finally claim a seat at the table and join the party.” Awkwafina’s face fills the screen as she locks eyes with the camera and says in a voice overcome by emotion: “You know what ... come through girl, come through. Ask for me I’ll-I’ll never forget you” (*PopSugar*). In this way, the question of what representation does is answered by the idea that *Crazy Rich Asians* has formed what Lauren Berlant calls an “intimate public” of Asian diasporic participants, primarily in the digital sphere. Lauren Berlant defines an intimate public as a community of consumers who “already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience” (vii). The key shared experience of this Asian diasporic intimate public is that Hollywood’s historical sidelining, demeaning and erasure of Asian bodies has excluded Asian communities from seeing themselves. The idea being that Hollywood films form an intimate public centred around the aesthetic of whiteness; its narratives, belonging, history and “embodied experience of living in the world.” Thus, discourses of invisibility are contrasted with the way the *CRA* cast members make Asian diasporic fans feel acutely visible.

This is the promise of a secret hello. Whole other peoples who had also hated themselves and had successfully turned that pain inside out, who knew the shorthand without having to be schooled in it. A promise so vast I’m afraid to take its word for it.

I hear that *Crazy Rich Asians* is coming out. I find the movie title and the hysteria around its release embarrassing. “What about Sane Poor Asians?” I ask drily over clumpy pasta when my friend Beth mentions her excitement about watching the film. My husband is ecstatic and tells me every evening that he thinks tonight is the night we will watch it. I feel the inevitability of having to acknowledge the film’s existence, but I put it off the way I would washing the dishes or throwing out the trash.

I watch *Crazy Rich Asians* on a Thursday night at Airport West Village. I hold back from crying anytime it is difficult to do so. I don’t cry when Rachel Chu folds her mahjong game with her mother-in-law and says, “It will be because of me. A poor, raised-by-a-single-mother, low class, immigrant nobody.” It means too much to me. Later I think how predictable and carnivorous of me, someone not poor, really, not raised-by-a-single-

mother, to make this about myself. But how much less lonely I feel when I watch someone else look into the eyes of their mother-in-law and describe themselves as a low-class immigrant nobody. I walk around for the next few days with my head in a private daze, upset at everything.

One of my friends tells me that her dad saw *Crazy Rich Asians* and told her slack-jawed: “It really is true you know, they really are that rich.” My cousin says the film is *sai*, shit, but somehow a word more evocative of shit than shit. “They are not even that rich, OK.” The hollow swagger of the nouveau riche. She is a black beret and a tweed skirt, pretty in a way that makes people ask if she has had plastic surgery. “I was just born with it, OK,” she says. My open-hearted husband tries to convince his parents to watch *Crazy Rich Asians* by telling them it is an “Asian version of *Pride and Prejudice*.” “Really? Wouldn’t you say *Romeo and Juliet*?” I ask. Then add meanly, “If you were looking for a tenuous connection.” I don’t want to talk about it. I tell them it was “alright”. We line up to watch *Johnny English Strikes Again* (2018). I try to make myself laugh to satisfy them. But I feel more alone than ever, watching all the small rivalries which white people nurse amongst themselves to exclude us from existing. America versus England. Technology versus Tradition. Old versus Young. I’m nowhere there. We, all four of us, walk past a poster for *Crazy Rich Asians*. They point it out, but their eyes slide over it. Why would you care to see something about other people when everything you can see everywhere is about you? I am- I don’t know what I am. Maybe my sister-in-law was right. Representation isn’t everything, not when reception is something.

I start to think that two out of the three films released as part of #AsianAugust are rom-coms, representations of the quest for love and the happy ending because misrepresentation and erasure are really about the sad ending that occurs off screen: being unloved, being told we are unworthy to stand before love, being perceived as incapable of loving. Whilst the rhetoric around representation is deeply affective, calling up tears, elation and recognition, it is not described as a quest for love but rather a revolution. “This isn’t a movie, it’s a movement” says Jon Chu, the director of *Crazy Rich Asians* (C. Lee). A war film, not a love story.

I agree that representation is a movement but I think about the war wounds of misrepresentation as strangely similar to those of a broken heart. In this way, representation is not just a war movie but also a love song. I recognise that this is not the go-to rhetoric for representation but I think that it is because the need for love is not the go-to rhetoric of our cultural moment. Of course, no one wants to be a “woman who loves

too much”. Needy, co-dependent, desperate, naïve, weak, keen-o, creeper, stalker, slut, attention-seeker, drama queen and nymph are insults we sling around like blood to describe those amongst us who- who what? Who, in an age of empowerment, admit the absence at the heart of desire, who define themselves by their lack. This cultural speechlessness and naked shame before love, this proud pivoting towards questions of power, is described by bell hooks in *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2002):

We are indeed living in an age when women and men are more likely to long for power than they are to long for love. We can all speak of our longing for power. Our longing for love must be kept secret. To give voice to such a longing is to be counted among the weak, the soft. (72–73)

Even books about love begin with moments of inarticulateness before love, a hesitation at the threshold. In her introduction to *A Natural History of Love* (1994), Diane Ackerman writes that:

Love is the most important thing in our lives, a passion for which we would fight or die, and yet we’re reluctant to linger over its name. Without a supple vocabulary, we can’t even talk or think about it directly. On the other hand, we have many sharp verbs for the ways in which human beings can hurt one another, dozens of verbs for the subtle gradations of hate. (xix)

In the introduction to *Love: A History* (2012), Simon May writes about the way discussions of love flood popular culture from movies to pop songs to dating apps and yet are also being something of a “no-go zone” (xi). The overblown and the great unknown.

In hooks’ view, female anxiety around being loved is difficult to dispel given the long history of the unworthiness of femaleness. She asks: “How can any girl sustain the belief that she is loved, truly loved, when all around her she sees that femaleness is despised? Unable to change the fact of femaleness, she strives to make herself over, to become someone worthy of love” (*Communion* xv). This is how it is with me. So much of this thesis asks the question: how can the yellow girl’s body sustain the belief that it is loved when all around me I see that yellow girl-ness is despised, invisible, hypervisible, unwanted? This thesis thinks through the ways in which, unable to change the fact of myself, I strive to make myself over, to become someone worthy of love. But I don’t like to put it that way. A black person who wants to be loved by the white supremacist society

that hates him is an Uncle Tom, the Asian person who does the same is an Uncle Tong. And me, I'm an Auntie Tong, an Asian girl who marries a white person, who literally demands love from a white man. It is embarrassing to admit to feeling rejected and dehumanised and picked over by white supremacist society and need, very badly, to be loved from somewhere within that same structure. It is better to be angry, to clap back, to grasp for power than to admit a slippery need for love.

The call for representation is a need for love, the need to see someone who looks like me on screen, doubting their worthiness before love, chasing down love and in the last scene being offered love. Representation is, as Anne Anlin Cheng writes (about the slogan "Black is Beautiful"), "an affirmation that speaks a world of hurt" ("Anxious Pedigree" n.p.).

What does it mean to know love. The first date was better than a song or a movie or book. It was opening the front door and looking at each other. Knowing that you wouldn't laugh at my shoes. A horrible dinner in a restaurant selling gentrified grease. A few words whispered in the dark. It was so good I almost wanted to call it off. The second date, even better. A good dinner in a faraway suburb. A reading, you ran out to the car and brought my notes in for me when I forgot them, and everyone smiled at you when you ran back in. Just the other day, the best date of all: wrapping and laughing over the bad Christmas presents we bought. Swimming in the blue and running in the heat. Whinging about the cut on my mouth I got after we played a competitive game of "slaps," that kids' game where you slap at each other's hands and hope for the best. Yelling, *Hurry up!* From the kitchen to the bedroom. Frying dumplings, wondering if the mix tastes defrosted. Yelling, *Boil the kettle for me!* From the shower to the kitchen. A shorthand for speech, shorn of *please* or *thank-you* or *Is that ok?* Coaxing you out the door. Back-seat driving. Carrying big salads and chocolate ripple cake on our laps, hair still wet.

In her 2014 "In conversation" at the New York Public Library with Zadie Smith, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie riffs on the idea that romantic love enables a knowledge of the racial Other which is painfully rare in American society:

I don't think it's *the* solution but I've noticed that romantic love, *real* romantic love, makes a difference in the way people understand what it means ... it became very interesting to me how, how lacking in the knowledge of the Other... it's very hard for white people in general to get what it means to be black in America

... and the few instances where I talk to white people who really get race it's because they've loved a black person and deeply loved a black person. (37.44)

The possibilities of this kind of love are an amplification of the possibilities of love just as it is. Alain Badiou writes that loving is “an existential project: to construct a world from a decentred point of view other than that of my mere impulse to survive or re-affirm my own identity” (25). He asks: “What kind of world does one see when one experiences it from the point of view of two and not one? What is the world like when it is experienced, developed and lived from the point of view of difference and not identity?” (22). How much more pertinent this idea of the decentering of the self and self's point of view when it is a decentering of one's race and racial privilege? How much more important the idea of developing and living from “the point of view of difference” when that difference is marked by skin?

4.3 The Fantasy of Being Recognised

When, at ten or eleven, I read *Harry Potter and the Goblet Fire* (2000), I was surprised to find a shiny-haired love triangle between Harry Potter, Cho Chang and Cedric Diggory. My only reservation was her name. It sounded so much like the festive “ching chong” chant that had stalked me through my school years and “Cho,” is, of course, a surname not a first name. A year or two later I read, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2002) and found this pretty girl with an ugly name who may as well have been me, kissing Harry Potter. The first thought I had after I read this scene was that there was going to be a movie made out of this book and that this movie would require a Chinese-looking, English-speaking actress to play Cho Chang. I tried very hard to find casting calls for Cho Chang online.

When Katie Leung was revealed to be Cho Chang in the new movie, Daniel Radcliffe described her as “very pretty and cool,” adding, “[s]he is awesome, I can't wait for the kissing scenes.” His fans had a less positive response to her. A number of “I Hate Katie” websites sprung up online in response to her casting, focusing on her appearance and her race. Fans questioned if Katie could speak English and described her as a “beast” amongst other, more violent slurs.

Cho Chang fades out of the story for a couple of books. When asked what happened to Cho Chang in an interview, J. K. Rowling saying that she marries a muggle (a non-magical person). Cho Chang disappears out of Harry's world and into the world bereft of

magic, our world. This feels particularly apt to me. The idea of her belonging with Harry is, like the magic of these children's novels, reckless, exciting but, of course, a bedtime story and nothing more.

I watch *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) at home on my computer and I think, I've never seen a dreamy Asian girl with an open face wearing dungarees and stripes on the TV before. And then even better, she's wearing a soft flannelette, high-waisted shorts, long socks and cruel boots as she walks down the school corridor. Rita Felski writes that

recognition is not repetition; it denotes not just the previously known, but the becoming known. Something that may have been sensed in a vague, diffuse, or semi-conscious way now takes on a distinct shape, is amplified, heightened, or made newly visible. In a mobile interplay of exteriority and interiority, something that exists outside of me inspires a revised or altered sense of who I am. (*Uses of Literature* 25)

When I see the film's female lead, Lara Jean, walking on screen, something that was not only "vague or diffuse" but was actually erased and pushed away becomes visible for the first time. I see her. She sees me. I am becoming and becoming known. Lara Jean's identity within the film is of the invisible girl in school but she takes up most of the audience's screen time. The epiphany which marks the turning point in Lara Jean's character is about precisely this idea of imagined invisibility. Towards the end of *To All the Boys*, Lara Jean muses: "I always thought no one was paying attention to what I was doing, that the only drama in my life was in my head, but it turns out that I wasn't as invisible as I thought." Like Lara Jean, by the end of the film, I am meant to come out feeling more visible than ever before.

Lara Jean accidentally walks backwards into her ex-best friend, Gen, who salutes her sarcastically: "Cute boots. Thank-you so much for your service." Lara Jean's voice wobbles on a tightrope. Gen slinks away with a sarcastic "bye-eye" but her handsome boyfriend Peter sticks around. Before he says goodbye to Lara Jean, he spares a moment to look at the outfit Gen has disparaged, his eyes sliding from her open-book face to her mean boots. When Peter looks at Lara Jean with rushed desire, he tells her with his eyes that she is cute, funny, loved. This look of admiration is supposed to graffiti right over the look of scorn with which Gen sizes up Lara Jean. Not only is Lara Jean visible but she is painted over with the possibility of being loved. And this is the dead dumb, simple

thing: if it is possible for her to be smart, loved, pretty, then it is also possible for me to be all these things. Recognition is two-fold, it is both

a moment of personal illumination and heightened self-understanding; recognition in politics involves a demand for public acceptance and validation. The former is directed toward the self, the latter toward others. (*Uses of Literature* 30)

The recognition I experience when I watch *To All the Boys* is personal because it is political. It is through the “public acceptance and validation” which the popular distribution of *To All the Boys* signifies that I feel a “personal illumination.” I glow like a mirror with a torch in its face.

“We are so happy to finally meet you, Lara Jean,” Peter’s mother flashes her company smile and holds her hands up as if she has been hoping for this since forever, “So, Peter tells me that you have two sisters.”

“Yes, I have an older sister who’s just left for college and I have a younger sister who’s Owen’s age.”

“Aww. Well your mum must love having girls. And me, I’m stuck with these two heathens.”

“Mum,” Peter says, with bloodlust in his voice. “I told you that Lara Jean’s mum passed away when she was little.”

“Oh right,” she whispers like death and closes her eyes in shame. “I am ... so sorry Lara Jean.”

“Actually, she, she did love having girls,” Lara Jean smile is benevolent as a saviour, “although, Kitty is still a heathen.”

Peter’s mum’s tense wrinkles slacken with relief. Peter shoots Lara Jean a grateful look.

I am heartbroken when I watch this scene. This, this family dinner scene, not the kiss scenes, is the most unknowable fantasy of interracial relationship. Where are the underhand remarks? Where is the invisible tension? Where is the open fear and bare-handed disbelief? Imagine being apologised to and the being so rich with forgiveness because you are not busy fighting for you own humanness. Where is the implication that the girl who sat in the chair before me and the girl who sits in it after me is the real girl?

Hello. Have you ever been me? Have you ever had dinner with people who looked around the restaurant with the white in their eyes showing? Have you ever had to make a

stupid joke to cover over the moment when your white mother-in-law makes a judgement call about the two Asian men scrolling their phones while eating? Have you ever felt like it was somehow your fault that the food was coming out at different times? And so you say, “please just eat first, don’t wait for me, I really don’t mind.” And then your mother-in-law straightens her back and says: “But *I* do mind, Jess. In *my* family we wait for each other and eat together as a *family*. That’s what *we* always did.” And I know what it means: It means my family isn’t a family we’re a, we’re a-

This is where Lara Jean and me break up. I can hear her lip trembling on the end of the phone and I harden my heart. I hang up on her and tell her never to speak to me again. Felski cautions us about the dangers of overly positive representations of minoritised peoples erasing, shrinking and flattening (*Uses of Literature* 47–8) but this is not what makes *To All the Boys* a difficult fantasy for me to swallow. It is the fantastical representation of Lara Jean’s experiences as an Asian girl, particularly as an Asian girl in an interracial relationship. Race is not an issue in this relationship or this film. In *To All the Boys*, Lara Jean might enjoy drinking Yakult and have a Korean mother (conveniently dead) and inhabit an Asian body but she remains otherwise unmarked by her culture and completely unscathed by racism. This is truly a fantasy of interracial utopia. “Studies in Australia generally have revealed a stubbornly persistent discomfort with inter-ethnic intimacy, contingent on the respective ethnic groups involved” (Klocker and Staynes 2037) and the aversion to interracial relationships is “a pernicious form of bigotry that is extremely difficult to destroy” even amongst racial groups who have “learned to work, play and attend school together” (Harris and Toplin 708). We know that the

acceptance of marriage requires one of the broadest forms of tolerance. It takes the issue beyond questions about social intercourse at the workplace, the bar, the schoolhouse, or the playground. A sanction for inter-group marriage involves acceptance of the “other” both in day-to-day life within the home and acceptance of the children produced from such unions. This form of tolerance comes slowly or not at all in many communities around the world. (Harris and Toplin 708)

When as an interracial couple, me and my husband are symbolic of: “a highly charged emotional issue ... because of their perceived role in undermining cherished individual, family, ethnic and national identities” (Klocker and Staynes 2036). That’s us.

I watched Lara Jean and I thought, *imagine*. And then it happened. In the shining white wake of being called a not-family, a person from a not-family, I controlled my

emotions with my mind. I said to myself: *It's just food, you can't be too sensitive*. I made another joke about how perhaps they had run out of noodles and were running out to buy some more. We laughed. I said something. They said something. I said something. And then, "I'm sorry for snapping before, Jess." Her eyes were pink. I felt so sorry for her. I rushed my response. But then I felt something else: it was an apology that somewhere acknowledged my not-humanness. But how were we ever going to rectify it? Tell me how.

When I was in high school, I remember I had dreams about the white boys in my classes. I liked their tightly curled hair, like steel wool, their cow-eyes, their multi-grain skin. I watched as Max with the blackbird eyes dressed up as Elvis on the opening night of the school play. Polished wood, he skidded on his knees towards me, sitting at the back of the theatre, then fell clean off the stage. He blushed anytime anyone asked him about it. Liking white boys came with its complications. On Yahoo Answers I typed: *I think my crush doesn't like me cos I'm Asian. What should I do?*

Sixteen or seventeen, I start an ongoing list of Asian women and white men:

- Woody Allen and Soon-Yi Previn
- Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan
- Rupert Murdoch and Wendi Deng Murdoch
- Hugh Grant and Tinglan Hong

Young and dumb, I hold onto these interracial couples like talismans. A year or two older, I start reading about the actual love stories. Allen's love story includes photos of him at a police station. Zuckerberg is supposed to be evil or something. Murdoch, ditto. Grant, he allegedly impregnated Tinglan Hong at the same time as two other women and when he was asked about his baby with Hong by Ellen DeGeneres on her talk show, he joined in laughing at her name. *Jing Xi*, they said making it sound like two samurai swords clashing. If the collective age gaps of these couples was a person, he would be ninety-two years old.

Film theorist Murray Smith writes that the neat label "identification" is split into two non-fraternal twin affects, the first of these affects, "alignment," allows us to coolly observe and gain some understanding of particular characters (83). The second, "allegiance," binds us to these characters, it makes our "I" their "I," thereby dragging

these fictional people into our own world, transposing the fictional world over our own (84). Tasha Oren asserts that Smith's model gives us a shape to describe the

Hollywood logic that has delegated Asian-Americans to the role of often-sympathetic peripherals ... general moral alignment with the long-suffering Asian-Americans is maintained, while allegiance is strictly reserved for the white male through whom the audience experiences the narratives. To put it bluntly, we are urged to understand the Asian-American (surely, one cannot fault the white filmmakers in either case for refusing to acknowledge historical wrongs) but to *feel* white. ("Secret Asian Man" 355)

Implicit in Oren's critique is the idea that should a complex Asian character take centre stage in a film, as Lara Jean does, our allegiance (not just our alignment) will shift towards her. I longed for this kind of film as a teenager, I thought it would solve everything. They would love and understand the pretty Asian girl; I would be loved and understood.

Of course, we cannot just stare close-up at what happens in a film, we have to pull focus to watch what happens around a film to truly understand it. The online buzz surrounding *To All the Boys' Summer* release circles around the off-screen performances of romantic intimacy between actors Lana Condor (Lara Jean Song) and Noah Centineo (Peter Kavinsky). There are YouTube videos of Centineo trying "pick-up lines" on Condor (Netflix), photographs of the pair sleeping in each other's arms on set, an Instagram story in which Centineo describes Condor as "the love of my life" and interviews in which Condor describes the lengths Centineo has gone for her (she relates a story about texting Centineo to say she has had a bad day and him running to her apartment, cleaning it for her and wrapping her in blankets) (Fuentes). In response to this, multiple articles have sprung up entitled "Are Lana Condor and Noah Centineo dating in real life?" (M. Bonner; Harding) and fans post desperate comments on these videos and posts saying they "ship" (support the potential romantic relationship between) Condor and Centineo. Pivoting the focus of the film from its lead, Lara Jean and making her the object of this white man's attentions, allows female, heterosexual fans to recognise themselves in Condor.

This is what I wanted, this kind of recognition, but it feels different to what I expected. It doesn't feel like recognition which makes them see that I'm real, I'm visible, I'm here too. It's a form of recognition that complicates my assumption that white empathy with a yellow body is an unequivocal good. It's a form of recognition that makes

me see that seeing yourself in someone can be a way of making them invisible, because what they recognise most in Lara Jean is her proximity to this handsome, white man. Felski points out that recognition can be an act of greed:

To recognize is not just to trivialize but also to colonize; it is a sign of narcissistic self-duplication, a scandalous solipsism, an imperious expansion of a subjectivity that seeks to appropriate otherness by turning everything into a version of itself.
(*Uses of Literature* 27)

Yes, I see this kind of greedy self-recognition with Condor/Lara Jean which erases her in the headlines: “Noah Centineo Continues To Be America’s Boyfriend In Thirst Trap Photo Essay” (Amatulli), the proliferation of Peter Kavinsky merch (e.g. underwear that says “property of Peter Kavinsky,” and the widespread idea that Centineo is “the internet’s boyfriend” which has commentators predicting that Centineo will become the next Zac Efron (Kaufman). I see this in interviews written by straight, white, female journalists who ask Noah Centineo to put his hand in their back-pocket as he does to Lara Jean, who describe how lovely he looks without his shirt on (and he rarely seems to wear a shirt to his interviews), who go on “dates” with him to Coney Island in order to interview him. And I realise something else: it’s not just that most of the press around this film is about female fans lusty for Noah Centineo/Peter Kavinsky and forgetting Lana Condor/Lara Jean. It is that these female fans, journalists, whoever, are actually attempting to inhabit Lara Jean’s spot, her body, her selfhood as if it means nothing. They recognise themselves in her, a girl loved by a pretty, charming white boy and in doing so, obliterate her. It doesn’t mean anything to them that she is the only one of her kind, a cool, Asian girl, loved and loving, thinking thoughts big enough for a movie screen. Their *allegiance* to her is a way of actually dispensing with her and putting their own bodies in her place.

The fantasy of interracial love dreamt up by PR-management, writers and all the other people who make and sell movies to our faint souls, doesn’t leap off the page or out of the screen. The reception of the film, which occurs in my world, the real world, has shown me that while in the romantic, comforting narrative of *To All the Boys*, Lara Jean might receive everything her heart desires and more, this is the real world. In my world, Noah Centineo remains the jock, the white male actor whose rise has been astronomical, and Lana Condor is still the nerd, the easily obliterated Asian girl on the periphery. The

fantasy is both the highest and the lowest mode of thought. The fantasy is a compulsive salesman, a boyfriend who talks big but never keeps his word.

The romance plot in fiction is a much-contended dreamland. Standard size-eight arguments against the romantic fantasy: a realm of “infantile fairy tales” (Regis 5), satisfying the reader’s “craving to be totally loved or unconditionally admired” (*Uses of Literature* 62), guiding women into an attachment to domesticity akin to Stockholm Syndrome. The also standard size-eight arguments *for* the romantic plot: Heike Missler writes that “escapism is inherently critical, because it is in part a way of expressing unfulfilled needs” (160). Escapism and the fantasy inherent within the romance genre act, as Janice Radway writes, as a form of compensation for its readers (95), while the need for this compensation is in and of itself a reproach to the real world. She writes, “[r]omance imagines peace, security and ease precisely because there is dissension, insecurity and difficulty” (15).

Assumptions that the interracial romantic fantasy is good, important, even nourishing: in their article on interracial relationships, Natasha Klocker and Elyse Staynes tally up the number of happy interracial couples in Australian films against the number of filmic couples marked by domestic abuse, short-term, dysfunctional or tragic plotlines. They write that it is encouraging that many of the storylines they survey “do not explicitly focus on problems associated with interethnic intimacy” (2040). The fantasy of multicultural reconciliation as “encouraging.” Assumptions that the interracial romantic fantasy is bad, harmful, insulting: Gina Marchetti writes that the “happy ending” for an interracial couple who are able to “transcend social taboos of miscegenation provide a weaker indictment of racism, since their union, at the conclusion of the film confirms that American society is the tolerant melting pot it claims to be” (125–6). For Marchetti, a filmic representation of the tragic interracial couple acts as a rebuke to the society which harasses and separates the couple (125-6).

My embarrassing, crippling desire for verisimilitude: Ella Shohat writes that postcolonial critiques of racial representation in film are often “premised on an exclusive allegiance to an esthetic of verisimilitude” (178). Postcolonial scholars point out stereotypes or “inaccurate” representations of racial groups and make their corrections of these constructions of “the real.” Debates about the representation of racial groups often break down as different spectators from particular racial groups disagree on their particular version of the real (Shohat 178). Bell hooks addresses critiques of this kind of essentialist thinking by white progressive scholars by pointing out that critiques of

essentialism are always directed at non-white ethnicities and do not question the way essentialism informs representations of whiteness (*Eating the Other* 373). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that the white male intellectual's postmodern turn away from "the real" and from the possibility of truth conveniently occurred at the moment in which women and minority groups began to challenge his supremacy (121). I agree with this, it is too easy to begin questioning the existence of the subject, of the truth, when the female, non-white subject begins raising her voice at you. Shohat respond to this by defending the right of postcolonial writers to debate realism and accuracy when it comes to the representations of their own:

These debates about realism and accuracy are not trivial, not just a symptom of the "veristic idiocy," as a certain postructuralism would have it ... No deconstructionist fervour should induce us to surrender the right to find certain films sociologically false or ideologically pernicious ... That films are only representations does not prevent them from having real effects in the world; racist films can mobilize for the Ku Klux Klan, or prepare the ground for retrograde social policy. Recognizing the inevitability and the inescapability of representation does not mean, as Stuart Hall has put it, that "nothing is at stake". (178)

It's not "just a movie," "just my experience/opinion/point of view/emotional truth," not when the stakes are this high.

Lana Condor, in an interview for *The Cut*, says, "With *To All the Boys*, it's not an Asian rom-com. We tried to tell the coming-of-age story of a sixteen-year-old girl who just happens to be Asian" (Davis). But there is no "just happens to be Asian," as if this is a story about a girl who just happens to have red hair, a small dog or a vegan diet. The film is supposed to be about a sixteen-year-old Asian girl who learns to step outside of the fantasy world in her own head and begins acting on her desires. The problem is that the fantasy post-race world of *To All the Boys* is a much more otherworldly fantasy than the bodice-rippers Lara Jean dreams of. The genre conventions of the romance novels Lara Jean is obsessed with: the romance begins by describing the "initial state of society" (Regis 30) which "always oppresses the heroine and hero" (Regis 31), this corrupt society oftentimes forms external barriers which divide the couple, the couple's union at the end of the plot signals the reformation of this society (Regis 33). Yes, I recognise this place and time. A genre positively tailored towards describing the problems of a racist society

and the many ways that it burdens and gets between the interracial couple. A genre wasted on the many easy victories of *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*.

4.4 *Hypervisible Asian Woman*

A white man, an Asian man and an Asian girl all walk onto a page. It's an old joke and we know how it pans out. The white man is Harry Potter, a moral hero so upright that his biggest flaw is having a "saving-people thing" (Rowling 646). The Asian man is invisible. And the Asian girl is Cho Chang, described at the start of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* as "very pretty with long, shiny black hair" (170) and later "very pretty even when her eyes were red and puffy" (403). "Dare we say it? Ornament becomes – is – flesh for Asian-American female personhood," as Anne Anlin Cheng writes ("Ornamentalism" 432). The main events of her life are: dating the Hogwarts Triwizard Champion, Cedric Diggory (white), dating Harry Potter (white), being asked on a date by the vapid Quidditch team captain, Roger Davies (white). As Laura Kang writes, representations of Asian women have "focused not so much on certain distinguishing details of speech or personality but on their being positioned in an interracial relationship with the white male protagonist" (71). Chang's small sections of dialogue include saying, "Harry's leader" (of their defensive magic learning group) (347) and then weeping under the mistletoe while telling Harry, "You're a r-really good teacher, you know" (403). Elaine Kim writes that "[A]lmost every exotic Asian woman character is the devoted sexual slave of a virile white man" (108) but in this book, Cho Chang does not just subordinate herself to please him, she really is rubbish at fighting evil. They kiss. "[T]he Asian woman is popularly thought to be warmly sensual, imbued with an innate understanding of how to please her man and how to serve him" (Kim 108). But she's a bit too soft for him really, a hero who needs a heroine by his side; the red-headed girl he dates and eventually marries is plucky and quick-witted and brave. Cho Chang is sensual and expendable.

The spectre of the hypersexual Asian woman appears in an metatextual moment of *To All the Boys*. When Lara Jean finally acts upon her feelings for Peter, she takes the literal plunge into a hot tub and makes out with him while Peter's ex-girlfriend, Gen, films the encounter and circulates it on Instagram. The clip, being filmed from afar, implies that the couple has had sex in the hot tub. Lara Jean returns to school after the Christmas break, a screen grab from the video is stuck to her locker and the words "It's always the ones you never expect!!" are written in violent black marker on her locker. A crowd of giggling students surrounds the poster. When Lara Jean confronts Gen in the

female toilets about the video, Gen denies creating the video but says she is glad because, “finally, everyone is going to see who you really are ... you are not as innocent as you pretend to be because you kissed the boy that I liked.” Gen’s offensive tactics: filming Lara Jean, uploading the video to Instagram, taping a screenshot from the video to her locker are, for Gen, necessary acts of exposure. Collect evidence, make evidence available to the public. Thus, the language of unveiling: “the ones you never expect!”, “who you really are,” and “not as innocent as you pretend to be.” Lara Jean’s defensive tactics: have Peter announce loudly to everyone that “nothing happened,” have the video taken down from Instagram under child pornography legislation. A similar process to Gen’s: collect evidence, make evidence available to the public, remove false or tampered-with evidence.

Lara Jean is represented as a tame teenager’s version of a dragon lady in a video (she had sex! In a hot tub!). The resolution which Lara Jean’s sister comes up with is to censor this representation of her because the most accurate representation of her is of a baby girl lotus blossom. *To All the Boys* hones in on Lara Jean’s purity with three assertions of Lara Jean’s virginity in the three minutes after Lara Jean sees the tape and screams. She says, “I know you’re only being nice to me because I accidentally made a sex tape” to her older sister and, in the same conversation, “I can’t believe I made a sex tape when I hadn’t even had sex!” After her older sister has the video taken down, she muses to herself, “I couldn’t believe that I had inadvertently dabbled in porn before I even lost my virginity.” Celine Shimizu writes that because Asian women are born into a world where representation of them as hypersexual commodities precede them (*Hypersexuality of Race* 12), Asian-American feminist approaches to these representations are oftentimes “unconsciously caught up in an agenda of moralism and propriety” (*Hypersexuality of Race* 18):

The repudiation of sexuality in stereotype critique as fuelled by moral panic, or the irrational fear regarding how sexual issues challenge the basic moral fibre of societies, is apparent in the binary between the lotus blossom and the dragon lady that exists as the predominant framework in assessing Asian/Asian-American women in Western Cinema. Such a limited framework of bad versus good applied to a more ambivalent process of representation often leads to the sight of sex as simply resulting from systemic racism that does not capture the dynamic and ever complicated specificity of history. (*Hypersexuality of Race* 18)

I see this in the way *To All the Boys* filmmakers replace the “bad dragon lady” stereotypes which bully Lara Jean with the “good lotus blossom” stereotypes which vindicate her. This sexual moralising is not part of the novel by Jenny Han from which the film is adapted. In the book, Peter kisses Lara Jean and she kisses him back, passionately. In the film, they are playing spin the bottle and the bottle points to Peter and Lara Jean. Lara Jean looks at Gen apprehensively and says, “I can spin it again,” but Peter insists. In the film, Josh, Lara Jean’s sister’s ex-boyfriend, keeps trying to make a move on Lara Jean who is always running inside and slamming the door behind him. In the book, Josh kisses Lara Jean under the Christmas tree and she kisses him back and regrets it. In Han’s novel, Lara Jean’s sexuality is not suppressed, rather the way different white male love interests lay claim to her body and her formation as a character through these experiences is complicated. In the film, all of these tensions, racial, sexual, teenaged, are dispensed with through many explicit reiterations of Lara Jean’s virginity. Soothing away the spectre of the hypersexual Asian woman by reiterating her status as a lotus blossom is a mythological solution to the complexities of interracial dating and the way that racial representations implicate the way we marry, date, kiss, have sex with, the lover-other.

4.5 Invisible Asian Man

The Asian man is. The Asian man isn’t in this book/film/news story. He is a spectral presence in *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*. Lara Jean, Peter and Kitty watch *Sixteen Candles* (1984) on the couch together. Long Duk Dong opens the door to the jock, Jake Ryan, and then slams it, screaming hysterically. Peter stuffs some popcorn into his mouth and says:

“I’m sorry but isn’t this character, Long Dong Duk, [sic] like, kind of racist?”

“Not kind of, extremely racist.”

“So why do you like this movie?”

Before Lara Jean can answer, her younger sister Kitty says: “Why are you even asking that question? He-llo. Jake Ryan.”

“I’m way better looking than that guy.”

The spectre of the invisible Asian man is called up through *Sixteen Candles* and Peter Kavinsky, the sensitive, male jock, stands up for him: “Isn’t this character, Long Dong Duk, like, kinda, a little racist?” When Kitty responds to his question with “Hell-lo Jake Ryan,” she, the family’s comedic id, responds to the problem of seeing the castrated Asian male as insignificant because it allows the sexual appeal of the white male to take

center stage. Peter says, “I am way more handsome than that guy,” lightly indicating that he and *To All the Boys* are the modern, moral upgrade of this early teen film. In teen films these days, the white male love interest is not only more good-looking but more good-hearted, he defends rather than participates in the emasculation of the Asian nerd boy. Lisa Lowe describes the way these kinds of tensionless multicultural narratives trade in the realm of the fantasy, allowing us to forget the problems associated with racial inequality:

The narratives that suppress tension and opposition suggest that we have already achieved multiculturalism, that we know what it is, and that it is defined simply by the coexistence and juxtaposition of greater numbers of diverse groups; these narratives allow us to ignore the profound and urgent gaps, the inequalities and conflicts, among racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups. (96)

The idea of *To All the Boys* as an upgrade of *Sixteen Candles* soothes away the spectre of the emasculated Asian man, describing the problem as an olden-day curiosity, solved by the white male goodness of this new kind of hero.

Sixteen Candles was the first of John Hughes’ highly influential teen films. The inception of the teen film genre – centered on its delicate and intriguing female lead – began with the decentering of the yellow body, especially the yellow male body. In *Sixteen Candles*, cool, boyish Samantha (Molly Ringwald) with the delicate features and long skirts flounces around the house, angry at everyone for forgetting her. Her face frozen in a violent frown, her eyes always on the roll, her only smiles obviously fakes. Hoping to be left alone to bask in her delicious misery, she lies down to sulk in her brother’s bed. A gong sounds and from above, a face hangs upside down to stare at her. Long Duk Dong (Gedde Watanabe) says: “What’s happening, hot stuff?” Long Duk Dong starts off as model minority curiosity, an exchange student being exploited by his host (Samantha’s) family: washing dishes and mowing lawns, tasting quiche. Throughout the movie he transforms into a hardened party boy, resting his head on the tall athletic girl’s breasts, crashing his host family’s car, lying wasted on the grass in front of the family home. Celine Shimizu interprets this as a kind of interesting flouting of model minority stereotypes, “a raucous celebration that earns him a place of rapport with the lead, to participate in a male homosociality” (*Straitjacket Sexualities* 118). I weigh up Shimizu’s idea, she might be right, it might even be an act of revenge upon the host family who exploited him.

But, then again, I fear this might be too optimistic a reading. I remember another movie, a homemade one made by a boy in my year eight class named Daniel. The video is of Eddie, the Asian boy in our class, small, deep-voiced, dark from visiting the solarium to cure his eczema. In it, Eddie's face was pasted on top of a tanned, body-builder's body, standing on an island. Flanking Eddie were two blonde bikini girls. Recorded on top of the image was the sound of Daniel saying in imitation of Eddie's low voice, "Hey chicky-babes." We all laughed at that when we saw it. Eddie smirked. When I remember this video, I think, Long Duk Dong's sexual cavorting is not symbolic of the sexual liberation from stereotypical asexuality of the yellow man's body on screen. It is a joke about the abject impossibility of Long Duk Dong having sexual desires (*Hey chicky babe*) made clear by the punchline of his body burning bright with lust.

Does anyone else remember the small pop cultural moment in 2013 when Lorde's boyfriend turned out to be Asian? I remember him appearing on Lorde's Instagram and the rapper, Tyler, The Creator, tweeting a tabloid photo of Ella Yelich-O'Connor and James Lowe at the beach with the caption "Hhahahahahah." A host of mostly teenage Twitter-users added their own commentary, describing Lowe as: "captain of the chess club," "mao zedong," "psy gone wrong," "a math nerd," "Chinese/Asian/Korean, some type of shit" and most simply, as "ugly." Not that it matters, but Lowe wasn't actually a "nerd" or even a STEM guy, he was a fashion photographer who dressed the part: thick-framed glasses, smooth olive rain-jackets and wool blazers. He was a successful person working in a creative industry, his cultural capital should have made him seem a little more desirable but the potency of the yellow boy's body as signifier overruled these considerations. I know one could argue that the cultural potency of racist teenagers on Twitter is low, except that when you are a teenager on Twitter, this is your community. It isn't just teenagers that share this sentiment about Asian men. In Christian Rudder's *Dataclysm* (2014), OkCupid statistics show the now much-quoted idea that Asian men and black women are rated the lowest by users on the site's five-star rating scale (102). In the words of Gabi, a girl in my year eight class, who spoke loudly over the whirring of sewing machines as we ruined the overlocking on our drawstring bags: "I'm not racist to Asians, they just don't turn me on."

In Tony Tulathimutte's debut novel, *Private Citizens* (2017), Asian-American coder Will studies photographs of himself as a teenager with clinical self-hatred:

Vacation snapshots washing out to umber and pastel, school portraits and yearbooks that chronicled his travesties of hair gel, board shorts, black nail polish, lime-green contacts, obvious bids to distract from his chrysalis of acne, oversize webcomic T-shirts draping from chubby boy tits ... A visual primer of internalized racism and its hysterical overcorrection, the lifetime of imbecilic swerving across the center line because he wouldn't participate in the toxic alpha-male rat race that he was anyway excluded from but didn't want to be pigeonholed as another Asian castrato either. Anyone who saw these pictures could make a thousand racist assumptions and be dead right: he really had been a short repressed inarticulate lecherous unfuckable number whiz with strict parents (53).

If there's one thing that many OkCupid users, teenage commentators on Lorde's love-life, and Will from *Private Citizens* have in common, it's their admission that the Asian male is undesirable, gross, "unfuckable." These adjectives are all important because of the strong affective reaction they seem to stem from. Back to James Lowe: amidst the name-calling and explicit racist slurs, there was a more murky sentiment that continued cropping up again and again in tweets and re-tweets: "Lorde and her boyfriend make me really uncomfortable." This announcement is for me, the most interesting one: What is it about Lowe that made teenagers around the world so "uncomfortable"? Lorde and her boyfriend made these teenagers uncomfortable because while the eunuch, asexual, invisible end of the Asian male sexuality binary has been the way the twenty-first century pendulum has swung; the lecherous rapist, the yellow man with a pistol was the first thought of the early twentieth century. Dime novels and pulp magazines, sensational movies and comic stripes drew images of "feral, rat-faced Chinese [men]" as they "lusted after virginal white women" (Hoppenstand 174). It doesn't take a Freudian. The image of the yellow man standing over the ravaged body of the white woman was, of course, the image of white society, polluted, raped, threatened by the Yellow Peril (Hoppenstand 174). As Eugene Wong writes:

In romantic potential Asian males are essentially character eunuchs. In sexual potential they are depicted as primarily character rapists. In either capacity, Asian males are by the institutional racism of the film industry destined to acknowledge the sexual superiority of the white male and the untouchability of the white female. Asian females, in turn, are provided no alternative on the matter of sex.

If the industry calls for interracial sexuality, then that sexuality will occur between a white male and an Asian female. Unlike the racist image of the threatening Asian rapist, white males are generally provided the necessary romantic conditions and masculine attributes with which to attract the Asian females' passion. (27)

If masculine identity is imperial identity then it matters who is fucking who. If the white hero fucks the Asian flower, then he saves her from an entire continent of people. If the Asian man lusts after the white woman then he is a rat, trying to scurry his way into world domination. He is the East raping the West. It's all so "uncomfortable" – this threat of pollution through miscegenation – that it would be best to relegate the yellow man to the realm of the "unfuckable."

4.6 It's Not About You

When I was in primary school, I remember I had dreams about the Asian boys in my classes. I liked their shiny, soft hair and translucent skin. I watched as a boy, whose name I don't remember anymore, thin frame, mushroom cut swerving, played down-ball on the bitumen. We never spoke. On the grade five/six trip to Canberra, I had more luck. I had a boyfriend, his name was Miguel, he was a year older than me, he had nice pale skin and echidna hair. We were too embarrassed to speak to each other most of the time and on one of the rare occasions when he did say something, he was chastising me for wearing the same clothes every day. But I remember he offered to buy me an expensive wooden echidna from the souvenir shop. I said he shouldn't. He stuffed the money he had flaunted back into his wallet. And I was so disappointed he hadn't known what the right thing to do was.

In high school, we talked about our crush's faces because that was more thrilling than ever talking to their faces. At choir practice, my friends were Rhianna and Courtney. Rhianna had raw skin, wanted to play the harp, liked chainmail armour. Courtney had blonde highlights, boasted about having met and been liked by Daniel Radcliffe, had a boyfriend who starred in *Blue Water High*. There was a boy in the choir who was just my type, with the shiny hair and thin face, in a way he was Daniel Radcliffe. He had a vulnerable, orphaned look. I liked him. I said I did.

"Can I ask you a question, Jess?" Rhianna asked.

School had made me realise that people asked if they could ask something, creating never-ever-ending, opening and closing, matryoshka dolls of questions. At home, things were straight like arrows. Mum said something, Dad said something, Ah Ma scolded us, my brother tried to get me to stop following him around all the time. My mum told me to stop disturbing my brother. I revenged myself on him by telling her he was playing computer games. Mum yelled at my brother. There were no questions.

“Why are all the boys you like Asian?”

The questions were statements sung soft.

“They’re not,” I said.

This is about Asian men and Asian women. But it isn’t about us at all, it’s never been about us. As Espiritu writes, “both the asexuality of Asian men and the sexuality of Asian women define the white man’s virility and superiority” (*Men and Women* 94). And more broadly our bodies mean something about the body politics we represent; the desexualisation of the Asian male body, alongside the oversexualisation of the Asian female body, creates a narrative of white male domination over “over a feminized submissive Asia” (*Men and Women* Espiritu 96). This is what I see on the page, on screen.

Seeing is believing and we (Asian men/women/everyone else) believe it. Espiritu writes that at an Asian-American Women dinner discussion hosted at an American college, Asian-American women described Asian men as “passive, weak, boring, traditional, abusive, domineering, ugly, greasy, short” (*Men and Women* 96). As Hall has shown us, stereotypes work that way, it seems unfair to be accused simultaneously of being traditional and domineering and yet passive and weak, but there we are. She writes that these racist constructions mean who we love is chosen for us: “intermarriage patterns are high, with Asian-American women intermarrying at a much higher rate than Asian-American men” (96). Asian men lash out; in an article written for *The Cut*, author Celeste Ng writes about the abuse and harassment she receives in her inbox because her husband is white and her son is multiracial. This harassment includes death threats and death wishes, ominous predictions about Ng’s young son’s future and other such comments. Ng writes that the reddit group, *r/aznidentity*, frequently alerts its members to prominent Asian women who are dating or married to white men and then this online community proceeds to flood these women’s inboxes with attacks for being “race traitors.” While this forum does deal with issues of Asian activism, it also features many threads discussing Asian women who Asian men feel have sold them out predominantly by dating white men. Comments on these forums include:

the self-hating Asian women who do it, do it to signal their sexual availability to white men, in a grab at white privilege by proxy; we've known this for a while already

I get it, why do Asian women feel the need to visibly shit on asian men like that?

Some Asian females use feminism to further bury Asian men and ironically try to win kudos from white men ... Using feminism

severe mental colonization is what it is. [sic]

Ng's article is balanced and generous. She remains supportive of Asian men broadly and sympathetic to their representation as weak, nerdy and asexual in American culture, but she also makes a point of denouncing the harassment. I find it impossible to disagree with her. Of course, an Asian author with a multiracial family is a misplaced receptacle for the rage of Asian men against their cultural emasculation in the West. But there is a question that these kinds of articles never answer for me.

In describing black male pain, bell hooks pain uses Elaine Scarry's idea of the inexpressibility of physical pain. In *The Body in Pain* Scarry writes that pain not only resists language but "actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). The unshareable and incommunicable nature of pain leads to a kind of inarticulateness before pain. This inexpressibility describes black male pain. Hooks writes: "Black males are unable to fully articulate and acknowledge the pain in their lives. They do not have a public discourse or audience within racist society that enables them to give their pain a hearing" ("Eating the Other" 376). Hooks uses the example of rap music as a way of showing that though young black men might have a public voice, "it does not mean that they have a vehicle that will enable them to articulate that pain" ("Eating the Other" 376). She attributes the rejection of the confinement of the black body to the feminised domestic space to the sexism and misogyny that runs through rap ("Eating the Other" 377). Adjacent to hooks, I argue that Asian male pain is also in some ways inexpressible and therefore unshareable. It leaves Asian males unable to fully articulate and acknowledge the racial pain of being coded as both abjectly lecherous yet inhumanely asexual, feared for being threatening and yet dismissed as too meek, cold and romantically desperate.

When I was a teenager I went on a date with an Asian guy I was interested in. I lived in a predominantly white, lower socioeconomic suburb and went to a public school

in a mostly white, middle-class suburb so the only Asian guys I knew were the ones my mum knew through our community. The fact that she always wanted me to date them made me not want to date them, of course. We had been chatting back and forth on MSN for months, in the way of long-drawn-out, shy-budding high-school love affairs and then he finally asked me out. We were sitting in a park when he put his arm around me. I sat through it briefly then I asked if we could go home in a petulant voice. His hurt was palpable, but he was a gentleman about it. When I explained the disastrous date to my friends (all white), one of them said wisely: "It's just that he's an Asian guy and you're an Asian girl and you don't want to be an Asian couple do you?" She was right, even if she couldn't have understood. We had gone into a cool little bakery and felt the wait staff's eyes glaze over us when he paid. I didn't want that for a month, a year, the rest of my life, however long it might go on for. But over the next few months, I strung along the boy, hanging out with him sometimes, hoping he would pay for my meal but other times, getting rides home, standing straight-backed away from him. By the end of those months, I could tell that he hated me. I hear he's going well these days.

Here's the thing. If the small-minded, half-crazed people on Reddit came after me, I'd tell them that, absurdly, their assumptions about me were right. I'd say: I did hate myself, I did hate being Asian. I was over being asked if I could read. Asking for a concession card form and having the admin staff tell me they were my "language forms". I wanted the protection and privilege. I wanted to be a real, live human being. I was right and I was wrong in my assumptions about how my life dating a white man would pan out. On one of our first dates with the boyfriend that became the husband, the white couple sitting next to us in the restaurant leaned over and told my boyfriend about how cute they thought I was. They congratulated him. The waitstaff laughed off any trouble we caused them with our orders. When he bought me a new dress in the kind of expensive shop I had always felt too small to enter, he got us a discount. I wore the dress, olive with a matching belt, to his grandmother's birthday party, she called him up to tell him how much she liked my figure and my lips. It was like stepping into a parallel universe of general goodwill. Except.

Except it was like stepping into a parallel universe, a whiteness enclave. *They don't like it when one of their own kind marry out*, mum told me, and she brushed the skin on her wrist. Absurdly, on one of our first dates, an acquaintance of my future husband's saw us and took a photo of us sitting together, snapchatting it to all of his followers with a mocking tone in his caption. "So you are the chosen one, the lucky one," a fifty-year old

man, a family friend, said when he met me. “Like the Chinese dating gameshow, *Are You the One*,” he laughed. A girl, a friend of the family, described as open-hearted and generous, lifted my jumper to monitor the flesh on my stomach with competitive hands, “You don’t have an inch of fat on you,” “You are so disciplined and intimidating,” another girl told me. “Is she a tense person?” My mother-in-law asked the day after the wedding. My husband had to change jobs because his boss started telling him how hot and thin I was in their meetings and then switched and couldn’t stop telling him how much she hated me. *Cold and too smart*. I spent so long trying to be objective, to see it from the outside, how had I switched over from being a girl sitting in my room reading, to a girl standing silently before those tense mouthfuls of hatred, desire, I don’t know what. I considered the question of what it was, but I couldn’t find an answer that stuck long enough besides this: the unknowable Asiatic, the Asian nerd or automaton, the manipulative dragon lady, the Yellow Peril threatening to take over, the fear of miscegenation, the girl unsure if she is right about anything.

4.7 *And yet*

And yet here it is. I draw myself closer, I search for. When I first loved you, I loved how flushed your cheeks got in rooms filled with people and your yellow crocodile eyes. *Blessed are the pure in heart*, I thought, when I looked at you. You looked at me and said you liked my jacket. How you held your knees and laughed every time my grandma threatened to punch you on the mouth and my whole family tense because we knew she had it in her.

Sometimes couples that have been together and raised three, nice, clean kids together, tell us not to ever have a TV in our bedroom (they haven’t heard of Netflix or laptops, I suppose). They tell us never to let our hypothetical children sleep in our bedroom unless they are sick. They tell us to have a discretionary budget apiece (what is this cold, sick custom from your people? Who will I be if I don’t have the opportunity to bicker and blame when it comes to your financial skidding over thin ice?). They say love is hard work. They say love isn’t a feeling it is a verb. They say there is no such thing as the One. They tell us.

A noun. Love just as it is. A sluggard playing computer games all day instead of working, a girl giggling pinkly at the bus stop, a person buying groceries slowly turning over a lemon and checking for bruises, a flasher blooming under the gaze of a thousand

overripe eyes, a baby boy speaking to you with tears, an unimportant person sitting in the second row from the back, a kid writing bad poetry, stomach pressed on the floor.

A verb. Love is unpaid, amateur labour. An unprofessional, always available, amateur. An Uber-driver (drop me off at the swimming pool and step on it), masseuse (not too hard), counsellor [no text here only tears], teacher (you repeat yourself too much here), pastor (you told me the soul was like unripe fruit, it doesn't strive or accumulate degree, it aches and bursts open), cook (except that unlike a real cook I need you to tell me how clever I am all the time), therapy dog [pat, pat, pat, roll over], singer (backup vocals), dancer (you don't always need to dance in 7/11), carer (sorry, but I need you, again and again, until your bad diet kills you and then how will I ever manage without you?), dishwasher (only my big, fat brain was feeling self-important and I forgot about it again).

It's me, a little girl with firm petal-lips on her birthday because she's grown up feeling that smiling leaves you naked. I blow out candles for you. It's you, a little boy who thinks he is a shoo-in for the Adelaide Crows and feels that by some prolonged act of magical thinking you will be celebrating your birthday in the green circle of the MCG. You blow out candles for me.

BRIDGING STATEMENT

But the Girl is a reworking of the Bildungsroman genre which I call *un-Bildung*. The reworking of the Bildungsroman genre by a woman writer of colour is a formal choice that has been much discussed by scholars such as Lisa Lowe, Samina Najmi and Pin-Chia Feng. My intervention in this genre, which has been “overwhelmingly androcentric and Eurocentric” (Najmi 210), is crucial because, as Lisa Lowe writes, the male European subject which the Bildungsroman is formed around is also a character who the reader closely identifies with. Lowe writes:

The novel of formation has a special status among the works selected for a canon, for it elicits the reader’s identification with the bildung narrative of ethical formation, itself a narrative of the individual’s relinquishing of particularity and difference through identification with an idealized “national form of subjectivity.” (98)

Thus, to write my selfhood and identity, pushed to the side so often, is an act of self-aggrandising. It is to stake my claim as a non-male and non-white writer and person, in a genre which subsumes the reader into my identity. It is to say: *So often, I have identified with you, Jane Eyre, Holden Caulfield, Anna Karenina, but now you will identify with me.* The Bildungsroman I write does not follow the same trajectories as the traditional novel of formation because, as Pin Chia-Feng points out, women of colour do not simply sever themselves from their past (7). The Bildungsroman of the woman of colour is more likely structured around ideas of “communal identity, defined by ethnic background, by a community of women, and by working-class concerns; use of the ‘talk story’ as a vehicle of bildungs; and the theme of art as a means of arrival at self-awareness” (Najmi 214). In writing to insert people like myself into a canon which has been predicated on the exclusion of people like me, I am ceding to what Zadie Smith called, when describing her Victorian-style novel *On Beauty* (2005), called a “childish impulse” (“Dancing with Dreams” n.p.). Smith sees her writing of *On Beauty*, which imitates the tropes of the Victorian character novel, as born of a childish desire to see people like her in the books she grew up reading.

Recognition is, as Charles Taylor writes, more than “a courtesy,” it is “a vital human need” and its opposite, misrecognition “can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims

with a crippling self-hatred” (26). Growing up as an Asian immigrant, like so many others, there was both a scarcity of recognition in the books I read as a child, the television shows I watched. In its place was only misrecognition, I saw a face approximating mine as the non-speaking punchline, the object of desire, the incoherent speaker. Thus, the creative component exists as a way of creatively enacting the critical ideas I am grappling with, it is a way of practically answering the yearning of people who look like me for stories in which they might recognise themselves.

In the first chapter of this essay, I quoted Linda Martin Alcoff and Satya Mohanty’s argument that

the legitimacy of some subjective experiences, we argue, is based on the objective location of people in society; in many crucial instances, “experiences” are not unfathomable inner phenomena but rather disguised explanations of social relations, and they can be evaluated as such. (4–5)

In the writing of a work of fiction about the subjective experiences of Asian-Australian girls, my fiction will both align with and diverge from Alcoff and Mohanty’s contention. My fiction will interpret the lives and experiences of Asian-Australian girls as a way of unearthing and illuminating the “disguised explanations of social relations” or the buried identity politics of bearing Otherness in Australia. However, given the free play, the dexterity of fiction as a way of thinking about the human, I also hope, perhaps contradictorily so, that my fiction will be a way of bearing witness to the opacity or “unfathomable inner phenomena” of subjectivities and selves. Reprising Barbara Christian, literature is “a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is” (77). I want my novel to both be a way for readers of Asian-Australian descent to gain clarity on what they have felt or known but I also want it to do the opposite: to sense the fundamental unknowability of other selves, of our own selves. For me, this is the most honest and helpful way to offer recognition to Asian-Australian women, to offer fiction as a place of both clarity and ambivalence. Thus my novel is both in delicate tension and strongly aligned with the critical work.

Of course, my novel is not alone in attempting to write Asian diasporic girlhood in the West. I have as my contemporary antecedents, reference points and strong influences: Jenny Zhang’s *Sour Heart* (2017), Weike Wang’s *Chemistry* (2018), Rowan Hisayo Buchanan’s *Harmless Like You* (2017) and Alice Pung’s *Laurinda* (2014).

PLOT SUMMARY OF NOVEL

But the Girl is the story of a second-generation immigrant girl named Girl. In the Bildungsroman, we watch Girl move from childhood to adolescence to young adulthood. We begin in her early childhood where we watch the strange, fiery and complex relationship between Girl and Ah Ma, her grandma and primary caretaker. Ah Ma is clearly unhappy. Girl senses that she is haunted by a past she left behind in Malaysia but does not know what shape this past took. We see Girl's tender relationship with her father (Baba), her tense but loving relationship with her mother (Ma) and her competitive but close relationship with her brother (Koh Koh). The child of her parents' old age, Girl grows up a child amongst adults and prematurely aware, yet not entirely comprehending, of the world of adults, a world of loss, betrayal and strange silences. Left to her own devices much of the time, Girl inhabits a lonely, imaginative world, one in which she sees herself as special. She imagines that she is destined for greatness, a naïve hope, which the outside world (school, strangers, adults that do not love her) shakes out of her system throughout her adolescence. Her young adult life becomes dominated by romantic relationships which make her feel safe but ultimately small, the opposite of greatness. She struggles with the class and racial differences between her and her romantic partners and the invisibility of this struggle makes it difficult for her to articulate her feelings. In the end it is ultimately the deaths of people who mean much to her, her uncle, her grandma's best friend Ni Na, her grand aunty and, finally, her grandma, that bring truth and coming-of-age amongst grief and pain.

For the purposes of this thesis, I submit the second half of *But the Girl*, beginning at the later stages of Girl's adolescence when her Uncle, Fat Ah Khu, dies and she travels to Malaysia for his funeral.

BUT THE GIRL

CHAPTERS SIXTEEN TO THIRTY-THREE OF *BUT THE GIRL*

PART TWO

Chapter Sixteen

Malaysia with the smell of hot green leaves. The sound of morning prayers at mosque and a Proton playing Ariana Grande out the windows. Plastic over the sun visors and a Liverpool jersey worn by the driver's seat.

This is Malaysia. The Chinese don't like the dirty Malays and the Malays don't like the wily Chinese. And the Chinese laugh at the stupid Indians and the Indians hate the stuck-up Chinese. And everyone hates the foreign workers from Thailand and the rude teng kok lang pushing their way through Georgetown tourist traps, and the maids from the Philippines are not anything, they are just there, sometimes being beaten, sometimes stealing petty cash from Sir and Madam's fat wallets, sometimes eating the remnants of the fish head after the family is done, sometimes greedily grabbing at the choicest steam boat meats first.

Small Ah Khu picked Ma and Girl up from the airport in an unfamiliar Mercedes Benz. The car was nice enough on the inside, sure, but Girl was surprised at how similar it was to a normal car. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting but it wasn't this. They drove past the cool of the underpass, crammed with parked motorbikes and men leaning back as if to fall asleep. A yellow hotel. Grey blocks of flats with wet towels and shirts on the balcony. In red and white light-up font: Ideal Ceo. An Indian girl wearing her fake adidas jacket on backwards, speeding brutally on her motorbike. Tesco, HomePro, Pizza Hut. Foil panelling, banana trees. Patchwork tin roofs, blue, red and grey.

"Wah. New car-ah?" Ma asked, touching the cold leather of the seats.

"Company car," he said.

"Big boss liaw! Have lui already!"

"No, no. Everyone's wanting me for money now I drive this car. The police are always pulling me over, looking for *kopi* money. I want to tell them, *ei, this polo is fake.*"

"Who else needs money from you? The sisters?"

"Everyone."

"Chin chai them, lah."

“No, I think my hock is running out,” Small Ah Khu’s face grew old, “all my friends are telling me to watch out.”

“Why?”

“Ah Fat was third out of us brothers to die.”

“So?”

“I’m the last one alive. And I’m number four.”

“Oh,” Ma laughs, “four. Si.”

“Hey-ah you. Don’t laugh. If I die, then who will take care of the sisters? I am overseeing all their affairs now he is gone. You are a krist-tean, you laugh.”

“That’s why I always say you should become a Christian.”

“How can I become a krist-tean? His left hand doesn’t know what his right hand does. My left hand knows what my right hand, right feet, right brain does. Krist-teans don’t understand business. And then what will happen to the workers and their families, you know I employ over one-hundred-odd workers now? Actually, the most krist-tean thing for me to do is not be a krist-tean.”

First, they bought breakfast at a kopi tiam on Jalan Gottlieb. Small Ah Khu was saying to Girl with a sharp-curved lip that he had an Ali Baba business partner but he tried not to hire those Malays because look at those Malays. He pointed to them out the back of the shop.

“Look, look. It is Ramadan and you know you can see the Malay police eating breakfast out the back of the tiam.”

“How they not get caught?” Girl said, adjusting her English.

“The police are their friends,” he said, flicking his eyes towards the owners sitting under the electric fan. “Their fifty to sixty-ringgit friends.”

“Sounds unfair.”

Small Ah Khu shook his head, “No Girl, you can’t say unfair. Unfair is Australian talk, unfair this and unfair that, gomen didn’t do this and did do that.”

He told her it was good, the secretly unsecret ways that the gomen tried to hold back the Chinese: the university quotas, the Ali Baba businesses, the NEP, the everything.

“The problem is that we Chinese are cleverer than anyone else. You are too young you don’t remember May 13. Har? 1969. I was six, seven years old but I remember like yesterday. Chinese shot in the street, Chinese with parang slashes and stab wounds, Chinese shot in their own backyards and houses, burning and looting the Chinese businesses and houses. Gomen say that Chinese provoked them. How can? Can you

provoke until six hundred, seven hundred killed in one night? Out of control, even the army cannot control. Har Girl, har? So you don't ever dare say unfair ever again."

Fat Fat Ah Khu's old flat. Grey and black stains dripped down the faded green, blue and yellow cement complex. Clothes were drying on most of the balconies and the outdoor units of air cons blew hot air and the black smell of oil onto the street. Inside, daily copies of *The Star* piled up all over the room. Some of the papers had been used as mats to absorb loose moisture and dirt in the kitchen, the bathroom and on the balcony. Small Ah Khu pushed the papers aside to create a pathway to the bedroom.

"He was such a clean man," Ma said, her eyes thickening.

"Hm," Small Ah Khu said.

On his bedside table was a photograph of Girl and her younger cousin she had always tried to best, Ying. In the photograph, she was fat and dimpled with plaits coming undone. They said Ying was so pretty as a child, it was impossible to discipline her and she became a rude brat. Girl wasn't as pretty and grew up well-behaved and self-righteous. She saw it all in the ordinary face looking obediently into the camera lens.

"Ying has been very upset," Ah Khu said. "She's crying every night. Won't come down for dinner. Doesn't want to go to school."

"Mmm," said Ma. "Maybe we can give this photo. We'll give this to her-ah, Girl?"

"Actually, Fat asked me to give some of his things to Girl a few days before this happened."

"Oh, what's that?"

"He kept it aside, in this set of drawers."

Small Ah Khu pulled out a rusted camphor tin and an old cigar box.

"Nar," he said, giving them to Girl.

Fat-Fat Ah Khu gone. Ma and Girl couldn't get anywhere because he wasn't there to take them everywhere in his old Proton with the rag-cloth mats covering the seats. Where had they gone to? Girl wished she had them. Girl and Ma stayed in Big Ah Ee's house every

day, fighting each other to expend the energy they accumulated from doing nothing all day, eating small sambal fish.

In her room, while Ma was showering, Girl looked at the yellow and green camphor tin. She opened it and it was filled with hundreds of school badges. Then there was a red leather book full of old coins and an old cigar box full of defunct foreign currency. Ying had always been special, Fat Fat Ah Khu had driven her to tutoring and ballet classes, bought her cold drinks and food in greasy paper packets tied with coloured string, spoiled her when she was sad, saved her when she was fighting with her parents. But it was Girl that he had given the boxes to and no one knew why.

“Girl, Ah Girl. Lai. Pear? I’ll peel for you,” Big Ah Ee called her into the sitting room.

Girl went to the sitting room and lay face down on the pandan green cement floor.

“Move your feet,” she said, swatting them with her hand.

“Girl, jum,” Second Ah Ee said.

Girl moved her feet away from under the faux-mahogany altar. There were rambutans arranged in little pyramids and chwee kueh with pleated edges, topped with pickled radish, pink sticks of incense. Girl looked up at the fat gods. They were silent.

Big Ah Ee was peeling pears vigorously, watching stocks fall on TV1. Her face was thin and serious as a greyhound on the track. Second Ah Ee, a squashy face like a plastic bag, slouched in her small wooden chair cracking open kuaci with her two front teeth. The red dye was rubbing onto her fingers. Big Ah Ee twisted her neck around the back of Girl’s head and inspected the limp ponytail sprouting from it.

“She has no hair, not like Ying,” she said.

“Ying has so much hair,” Second Ah Ee said.

“And she’s getting fat, too. Australian food,” Big Ah Ee said.

“But then, Ying is not thin either,” Second Ah Ee said.

“Are you hungry? If you are hungry I’ll peel two,” Big Ah Ee said.

“I think she’s not hungry. Saw she ate a lot of the fish at lunch. One eh-sai, Girl, ha? One ho-ah?” Second Ah Ee said.

“Satu,” Girl said.

“I said she’d take one. She ate so much fish.”

Girl pulled open the drawers of the altar. Ying’s exercise books, half-filled with Chinese characters in rectangles, an Etch-A-Sketch and a clothbound photo album rattled

around inside. She pulled out the exercise books and put them back. She didn't understand any of it. She took out the photo album instead.

"Ah Girl, what are you doing?"

"Look only."

"Bring it to me."

Big Ah Ee opened the photo book and laughed. "That's Ah Ee when she was young."

The page she opened up to had five or six of the same photograph in different sizes. They were studio photographs in grey and white. The photographer had softened the image around Ah Ee's cheeks and long hair. She was in profile, looking up and smiling. It was taken before Ah Ee was an Ah Ee.

"That wasn't my hair. That was fake hair."

"Girl, was Big Ah Ee pretty or not?"

"Pretty."

Second Ah Ee pursed her lips and jutted her head forward to show she was impressed.

Big Ah Ee laughed. "Here your pear."

When Girl was young, she had always been so afraid of Big Ah Ee. She was always watching them with her good eye as they prowled around the longhouse in games of hide and seek, left unwashed metal mugs in the sink, drank water without boiling it, nicked Darling Fruity Flavoured Jellies out of the big teddy-bear shaped container in the sundry shop. In the photograph she wasn't scary. Ma told Girl a long time ago that Big Ah Ee never married because when their mother was about to die she had told Big Ah Ee to take care of the family. By which she meant her family. Girl looked at the photo for a long time.

"She likes it so much," said Second Ah Ee.

"Do you like it? If you like it, Ah Ee will give you one."

"Okay."

"Mai jeow jeow. Keep it nicely," said Big Ah Ee.

Girl lay back down on the cool, smooth cement and dripped pear juice all over her chin and shirt. Ah Ma and Ah Kong watch her from their illustrations. They were both painted onto blue backgrounds and separated by the altar. Girl knew Ah Kong in his last years. Sitting in his rattan chair, coughing and calling her from a long way away to hit his back for him. Girl didn't know Ah Ma. She died young.

“How did Ah Ma die?” Girl asked.

“Ah Ma. It was a very hot day. She was selling ang khu she had made and put aside in the fridge. The Indian banged on the door of the sundry shop, then banged on the door of the longhouse. Ah Ma came out of the house in her kabaya. She said what. He said he wanted to buy ang khu. Ah Ma said how many. He said six. She said fifteen ringgit. He said oh. She said wait. She took it out of the fridge, cut and wrapped it nicely. Indians always like sweets. She came outside with the package. The Indian had run. She ran out to find him. Gone. Pein lang. She ran back home. She quickly tried to unstick the ang khu flesh from the paper. The heat had melted the ang khu already. It ripped the flesh right off. She swore. She had lost fifteen ringgit. She was so angry with the Indian that her head was pounding. She was so angry with the Indian that she couldn’t move a muscle. She fell, was laid up and we carried her into the upstairs bedroom with the big fan. She died a few weeks later.”

“Ah Ma could get so angry,” Second Ah Ee added.

“She got so angry it killed her. Mmmm,” said Big Ah Ee.

Later that night, lying on a mattress on the floor, Girl asked Ma if it was true that being angry could kill you.

“No,” she said. “Ma had a stroke.”

“Oh.”

“Theyall never believe me when I tell them though. I’m always like the younger sister to them. What I say is just Nah!” Ma said, backhand slapping the air.

The next morning there was a commotion in the kitchen. Ma was holding the hand of a fat Thai woman Girl had never seen. The woman was weeping. She looked like a statue of a woman weeping.

“What will I do now? Where will I go? I know he always turned to you for advice. Now, what can you advise me?”

Big Ah Ee and Second Ah Ee were cooking and washing dishes, their faces shiny as a blur. Finally, the Thai woman released Ma’s hands, picked up her plausible Marc Jacobs handbag and ran out of the house. Girl ran to the window as she got into the car.

“Ma, it’s Fat Fat Ah Khu’s car! It’s his car!” Girl yelled after it.

The car disappeared round the corner, blowing up Kampung Bengali dust after it. Girl ran outside but there was nothing. Just the black smell of the Indian neighbours burning their rubbish, the rubbery sound of a military drill somewhere in the distance.

“Sek-ah-see!” Big Ah Ee was yelling so loud, Girl was afraid the glass would break.

“Ani kwan eh lang gah uh-ah?” Second Ah Ee said. How could such people exist?

“She wanted to tek your sim, tek wah lang-eh lui.” Big Ah Ee said to Ma through tight, thin lips. “You see, you see-ah? She wanted to steal your heart and take our money.”

“Kah Small Ah Khu,” Second Ah Ee said.

Ma was silent as they called Small Ah Khu and silent as they waited for him to come over. He was Big Boss now and could come and go from work as he liked. But that didn’t mean he liked to do it. Girl wondered how long they would wait for him to come. While they waited, Big Ah Ee served the bone broth with winter melon and red date to them. The usually sweet soup had a strange bitter taste to it. Girl couldn’t figure out where it was coming from, unless it was from her own lips. Small Ah Khu pulled up as they were finishing up with the dishes. He lay down on the couch and began opening up kuachi and popping them into his mouth.

“What did she want?” Small Ah Khu asked.

“What do you think? Money. The car. Maybe the flat.”

“You see?” Small Ah Khu was gripping his hands together and rattling them.

“I see,” Ma said.

“You know when they got married last year, he wanted to put his assets under her name, but I stopped him, I told him to keep them under Big Ah Ee’s name and his. You know, he wasn’t happy when he died. And did you see that place? It stank. That means. That means. She totally stopped caring for him, that means. And he started eating all the bad food again.”

“I know.”

“She won’t get a cent from us, she has no legal right. I don’t care if she takes us to court or what.”

“She has no rights.”

“So, you agree then? We just men chap her.”

“No.”

“Har? What?”

“She was his wife. Whatever we might feel, she was his wife.”

“So? She didn’t act like his wife! You know I really feel she married him for the flat.”

“I know but you have to do right by her. Give her half everything, car, bank savings.”

“Why?”

“Because, when you’re old, and you’re lying there, you don’t want to see her face on your deathbed.”

“If I see her face anywhere near me, I’ll pah it. Ah. I have to go back now.”

Small Ah Khu drove away, his car made a screech that seemed to come from inside him.

Two tents had been set up in front of the longhouse filled with blue plastic chairs. The furniture in the lounge was cleared away so the pandan green cement was visible. The casket sat in the centre of the room with the mahogany altar. There was a photo of Fat Fat Ah Khu and joss sticks, mooncakes in piles, Sugus, oranges, blue carnations. Outside the tent stood a joss-paper double-story house: pink brick, gold tassels, complicated tiling, tissue paper carnations. A large blue Mercedes Benz was parked out the front with gold trim and a driver sitting in the front seat. A credit card, a two-dimensional smart phone. Million dollar notes embossed with the words BANK OF HELL. Cardboard boxes holding folded paper suits with shirts and tie and a gold tie-pin, a gold lighter, a gold Rolex to match the pin.

“Why did you buy all this?” Ma asked, shaking her head.

“Hell is a corrupt place,” Small Ah Khu told her. “The monks told me it’s hard to know how much money he needs to live the same life he did here.”

“Do you believe?”

Small Ah Khu smiled his non-communicative smile.

“Even if you don’t believe you must believe. If I don’t do this now and next year my business topples then I’ll feel so bad. If I do this now, I know I’m safe from bad hock.”

“Even death is a business opportunity for the Chinese,” Ma said.

“And death is a recession-proof industry,” said Small Ah Khu.

One of the priests cut their eyes at Ma. She cut her eyes right back.

“Don’t pick a fight-ah,” Small Ah Khu said. “He has enough to think about without you looking at him. You see him sweating all over Malaysia like an ang moh kow?”

They sat in front of the altar. The priests were singing their dirge, drinking the grief the family felt. One of the priests’, his voice broke and he began sobbing loudly mid-song. He couldn’t go on. He covered his face and cried. The professional mourners in the third and fourth rows were wailing loudly. They threw themselves into the aisles, beating the dry dirt with their fists so that brown clouds of dust covered their faces. Big Aunt and Second Aunt began crying. His widow wept loudly and proudly in her white polo shirt. Small Ah Khu looked affected. Ying somewhere behind was weeping silently. Girl wanted to sit with her and say something to her. They were no longer childhood enemies, stuck indefinitely in rehearsals in which they were compared and compared to each other, anymore. There were no more dirty tricks like when Ying had rubbed her full head of lice on Girl’s so she wouldn’t have to be confined from the family by herself. Or when Girl persuaded Ying to order a big dessert to make her fat. But with the truce of adulthood, the intimacy of childhood could not quite be recovered. Girl, who wouldn’t have hesitated to reach out her hand and pull Ying’s hair out of her head some years ago, now was afraid to put an arm around her shoulder. So, she sat in her seat and Ying sat in hers, both treading water in their own private pools of lonesomeness.

They all walked over to the open field opposite the house. The priest who was crying had cleaned himself up. He began by tossing the paper house into a bonfire, his arms stiff with fear. When Girl looked at the tiny red cracks in his eyes, she thought: a funeral can’t be repeated and his every step is fraught with taboo. The house burned up quick, its charred outline briefly visible in the flames before it burns away. The other priests picked up the money and the possessions.

“A good car for you,” Big Ah Ee said at the priest’s prompting.

“A house for you,” Second Ah Ee said.

After the funeral, a feast laid out by the caterers. Suckling pig with red rusted skin, pink and round mee koo, chicken, tea, wine, apples, oranges and golden-green bunches of bananas like ripening crowns. Rice in bowls. Huge flower displays bursting from their vases, white carnations with sprays of white baby’s breath. There was another altar laid out with Fat Fat Ah Khu’s favourite foods: black coffee, durian, Woodward’s Gripe Water, Malacca-style rice balls.

Chapter Seventeen

After the funeral, they were supposed to find geckos or mice or little creatures, symbols of the soul scurrying around. But there were none. After the funeral, some of the older cousins, Chuan, Pei, Ting arrived. Theyall took Fat Fat Ah Khu's IC and wrote the numbers on a piece of paper. Theyall won a share of the National Lottery. They said it was him. But then theyall fought over who should be given the biggest share. Chuan said it should be him because he was housing their mother and unmarried sister with his family. Pei said it was her idea in the first place, there wouldn't be any argument about who got what if it weren't for her. Finally, they decided to invest the whole sum in a Barrel 2 U scheme, but the government shut it down before they could begin receiving dividends. A whole week after the funeral, Ying came downstairs. Her face was dry and she told them she had had a dream:

“Fat Fat Ah Khu was there. He was on the second floor of this house. He told us we aren't allowed to cry or be sad anymore. We should be happy-happy and eat well and forget the bitter taste.”

Small Ah Khu drove them to the airport. In the car, he told Ma that he had written a cheque for Fat Fat Ah Khu's wife for half the savings. He did not want the man from Ying's dream to be sad. Ma gripped his hand over the steering wheel.

PART THREE

Chapter Eighteen

The teacher was tall and broad. He wasn't big like a Mack truck or a slab of meat. He was big like a personality. He wore a suit and it didn't make him look anonymous. He wore a suit in the kind of high school where the teachers' clothes (jeans, nice sneakers, Billabong shirts) were less formal than the students' uniforms. The teacher was everyone's favourite; they said his name like a broken rosary. Sometimes they called him "sir" and he really liked that. When he came into the room, his voice was deeper than the darkest night and they really liked that. Most of their teachers were kind older women with frazzled hair, and where was the fun in that? They wanted something like something from the movies. And they got it.

The first time they set eyes on him he walked into the room, placed his hat on the table, sighed hugely and began writing on the board. He wrote from the prescribed text for the term, *Things Fall Apart*, and asked them what they thought of it. Students began telling him they liked this or that part, wanting to please him. He said yes, yes, yes. Girl could tell by the contour of his lips that this was the wrong answer. She put her hand up and told him she hadn't liked it at all. This was untrue, of course. But she sensed that it was true to him.

"Yes. There is really nothing worth reading after 1823 is there?" he said.

He pointed at her and his finger went right through her.

"Well done. What do you think of this quote?"

She told him what she thought he thought about it.

"Exactly."

The class, it continued like this. The teacher would speak to Girl about the books on the list as if the other students didn't exist. At the end of the class, he picked up *Things Fall Apart* with its shiny cover, its stats of how many translations made and how many copies sold internationally emblazoned above the title.

"And this is what I think of the texts they've set for Year Eleven this year," he said. He opened the window and ripped the book into four pieces. What was left of the book fell from some height into the bushes below.

The class was laughing and some of the boys ran to the window to look down at it.

"Get back to your seats, you idiots!" he yelled, his voice cracking like a whip.

It was the loudest voice Girl had ever heard. Like a herd of cattle, the boys ran, panting, back to their seats. The bell rang. Still in their seats, the class looked up at him with a holy fear.

“Go, go. Get out.” he said, with a bitter taste on his tongue.

They went, their hearts were racing with them.

Girl walked out of the class alone into the grey sidewalk day. The lockers at their school were stacked three high and Girl had a bottom-tier locker, having exchanged her prime position of top locker for twenty dollars earlier that year. A top locker was easiest to get to, of course, but a bottom locker had benefits. For example, you were less likely to receive the present of a used pad, rolled up and stuck on your locker by an enemy, they simply wouldn’t be bothered bending down to do the deed. You were more prone to having things dropped on your head as they rolled out of other lockers and you had to dodge the flurry of heavy wooden locker doors opening at your eye level, but on the other hand, you were unlikely to incur the wrath of another girl if you opened your door at the wrong time or let your binder book fall on her head.

Now, Girl crawled towards her locker under a mush of other students doing the same as her and tried to extract her lunch from her bag. She could make a large pear last for the full hour if she ate it slowly enough. Eating so little had so many benefits: economic savviness, convenience and, most importantly, a beautiful sense of focus, like putting on a pair of glasses and watching things that looked so far away and difficult to get to come close and clear. You remembered you were alive when you didn’t eat much, you had the pain in your stomach to tell you about your body being there. She watched the other students rattling change around in their pockets to buy greasy canteen food and chomping at stacks of sandwiches and popping open packets of chips. They were like cattle at the trough. One day, Girl felt sure, she would clear her path towards the world of the beautiful, famished, intelligentsia, those who knew that food was the true opium of the people.

“I think the only person I want is my English teacher,” Girl heard Olive saying.

“His voice makes my period skip,” Jasmine said.

“I bet he and his wife get up to some kinky shit,” Elly said.

Elly always spoke last, Girl thought. So as to work out what the public mood was and adjust her own mood accordingly.

“Is he married?”

“Don’t know but. He actually makes English a good subject. That’s all I know.”

“Hurry up girls, I need to lock the doors.” Ms McCracken was a young teacher. She liked Girl. She was always saying she should not fold and become an accountant or a dentist and become a writer or an artist instead. She would say, *Don’t worry what your parents will think of you. It’s your life not theirs.* The thing was, Girl had never told Ms McCracken what her parents had thought at all. At parent–teacher interviews she looked at Baba and said, “She doesn’t have to be good at maths, you know, there are other pathways.” But Baba hadn’t said anything about maths, he hadn’t said anything at all. She also considered herself more enlightened than the other teachers and took them on excursions to Victoria Street to eat Pho noodles, that kind of thing. She wasn’t pretty but her young-womanness seemed to permeate the classroom in strange and unexpected ways. Lots of times one of her bra straps were showing and they weren’t just the nude or white or black bras their mums bought them. They were always moss green with black lace or ballet pink with white trim or something like that. Once, she told one of the boys to do up the buttons of his shirt, saying having three buttons undone made him look like a porn star. Pornstar Patrick, she called him and they laughed. Then there was the time when on muck-up day, the day we all got to wear costumes rather than school uniforms to school, she wore the school dress as a joke and did her hair up into a high ponytail, straightened into split ends. She was strange but it felt as if she was strange only because she so badly wanted to be normal.

“Jasmine has a crush on Mr Bishop.”

“So does Olive,” Jasmine fired back.

“I see that,” Ms McCracken said. “The fatherly authority thing.”

“Did you know he got a perfect VCE score?” Elly asked.

“And that his cousin is in the IRA?” Olive added.

“Is that what he told you,” Ms McCracken asked.

“No, we just heard,” Jasmine said.

“He didn’t get a perfect score.”

“Did he tell you that?” Olive asked.

“No. We’ve never discussed it, obviously.”

“Then how would you know?”

“I just do.”

“Are you jealous, miss?”

One of the peculiarities of their school was that they called male teachers “sir” and female teachers “miss,” as if the two were equivalent terms.

“No, of course not.”

She was getting out of her depth. Girl thought, not for the first time, about how the idea of thirty or so adults being shut up all day with five hundred students was a kind of degradation. How were they supposed to remember how to be adults when their only reference point came from children?

“He looks like Robert Downey Jr.”

“No, Jon Hamm.”

“Both too alcoholic. How about James McAvoy.”

“More like Ted Hughes,” Girl said.

They all turned and looked at her as if they hadn’t realised she could speak.

“Ted Hughes, the poet,” she said, wondering why when she spoke, her “turn” went on for so long. They were still staring at her. Why didn’t they speak back?

“I know who Ted Hughes is,” Ms McCracken said.

“Who the fuck is that?” Jasmine said, more bored than malicious.

“Ted Huge?” Elly giggled.

“Anyway, he’s pretty obsessed with you.”

“No he’s not.” Girl said, as a hot pink halo fell on her face.

It was true that he didn’t look like any of these contemporary celebrities with their shiny skin, tightened on smiles like unopened jam jar lids. Girl felt a pang. He looked like Ted Hughes but where Hughes looked like he had been cut from a large piece of stone, her teacher looked more like he had been shaped from pink clay and fired unglazed.

Chapter Nineteen

There were not many couples in Class 12AK. Despite the endless musings of older folk on puppy love and first kisses and hormones, Girl found that most of her peers did nothing about love or to love. There was only Olive who wielded her new boyfriend Mac like a weapon, who saw that having this human-sized, tangible proof of her importance, attractiveness, her everything, was both a defensive and offensive stance. Jasmine and Elly would tell her how good he looked when he grew out his stuttering facial hair. This was somehow proof of how beautiful Olive herself was; his looks became an approximate measure of her own. It was a defence against the possibility of her unworthiness. But her connections to him, to 'the Big Mac' or 'Maccas,' as his friends called him, meant her networks of collective cruelty were much expanded. She could use these friends, Alec and Jude, to trample over others with the trusting amble of cows. Olive's love of her romance with Mac was plain for everyone to see, what with the constant selfies repeated in different filters, the shoulder rubbing and the sticky pink kisses. But Girl sometimes thought of Olive as indifferent to Mac in a way, especially when her love for him was compared to her hatred of Girl. It was eerie, the way her smile turned hazily towards her boyfriend while her eyes slid with a strange clarity across the schoolyard towards the Girl. There was also Alec and Clarissa. Clarissa, small and brittle, always stomping away from a fight and Alec smiling to himself and letting her go. They had their brief moments of peace when they would come into class holding hands and Clarissa would be restored to herself, but even then, the glint in Alec's eyes was visible.

There was a beach party organised by Clarissa for Alec's eighteenth birthday. So big that even Girl was invited. This was the thing about the year of the eighteenth that Girl had noticed. People wanted so much to prove they were popular, loved and admired that Girl was all of a sudden becoming less unpopular, more loved and admired in the fragile economy of party attendance numbers.

The partygoers were scattered across the beach in little groups. Some of them were at the kiosk ordering ice-creams, others were playing volleyball or cricket, some were digging into the sand, so they could lie in the cool, dark, tomb-like holes. Girl sat by herself in the shallow waters of the sea, enjoying the pull of the current. She was surprised when she saw Alec moving towards her. He sat down with her in the soft wet sand. Immediately he began to tell her that Clarissa, being so small, could never take very much of him inside her. He measured a few centimetres with two fingers and lamented this.

Then he slid his hand underneath Girl's bathing suit. The bathing suit was purple with orange and brown flowers sprayed over it and cut-outs over her ribs. She had saved and scrimped for it and had wondered if Ma would let her buy it and, after buying it, wondered if Ma would let her wear it out. It was the best thing she owned. It made her feel far away from everything and everyone else. His warm hand slipped neatly through the cut-outs and rested around her waist. It seemed almost chaste to the Girl until he whispered to her, "Everyone here wants to fuck you, they're just too scared to try."

Girl said nothing, flattered and then afraid of this new feeling.

"Yes," he said. "No really, your body, it's got all the right places. Can I ask you something?"

Girl nodded because nodding rather than speaking seemed less complicit.

"Can I touch your breasts?"

Girl shook her head.

"You know what I want to do when I see your ass in your bathers?"

Girl said nothing.

"I want to spank it. You've got a great ass."

Girl looked around waiting for some kind of retribution for sitting here with him but no one had noticed, his hand was invisible under the water. Then she realised that in her fear of being found out, she wanted very badly to be found out. She wanted someone to see him for who he was. Still, Girl couldn't stop the pleasure of being seen by Alec, his eyes on her were so real it felt as if she deserved to have them.

"What about Clarissa?" Girl said.

Alec shrugged as if her question wasn't worth responding to. He smiled and stood up and shook the water off himself. Girl felt as if her waist was cold and exposed where his hand had been but she didn't follow him. She lay back into the soft, wet sand and sank into it. She closed her eyes and saw water taking her somewhere else, far, far away from this big ugly island floating at the bottom of the map.

It was getting dark and it was hard to see in the damp, muddy change rooms. Girl changed back into her clothes, ran out to where the others were waiting and began sorting through her bag, looking for a lip gloss. In the mess of it all, her hand slipped and the whole contents of the bag, unopened pads, used tissues, her wet, crumpled bathers, her Myki card and her phone fell out. Alec appeared and knelt down to where she was slowly putting everything back. He reached his hand out as if to steady her or help her find

something but then he dropped his arm and laughed. It wasn't a laugh that she could share with him.

"Just before I was looking at your breasts and now you're here, picking shit up!" He couldn't stop laughing even as he stood up.

Girl looked up at him and went to say something but he was already running towards the others walking home together. Alec was never what he seemed, there was too often a far-off look in his eyes. The moment he was with one girl, he was thinking of the next one.

A light flashed on the sand like a UFO. Girl looked up again, it was Jude, one of Mac's friends. This was stranger than an alien sighting on earth. He was holding his phone out with the torch function on.

"Are you looking for something?" he asked.

"Yes," said Girl.

"What?"

Girl looked at him, it wasn't a strong light but she could make out lots and lots of hair wasted on a face like a British bulldog. *Blessed are the pure in heart* was what that big, ugly nose and black, pretty eyes meant.

"Everything," Girl threw her hands up.

"I'm really good at finding stuff, I'll help you."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"You don't *look* like you're good at finding stuff," she said.

"I *am* good," he said, and it sounded like a bargain.

It turned out that he wasn't any good at helping Girl find her things, but he held his phone up for her, illuminating her eyeline like a spotlight. By the time they were done the others had drifted off. They were all alone. He carried her bag for her like someone from a book, all the way to the station.

Chapter Twenty

They handed in their essays on *Things Fall Apart*. Mr Bishop sat there with a red pen and a stack of essays torn from exercise books. He called Girl over with his finger and brought a chair over to his desk for her. They sat there opposite each other, and he found her essay and began reading it. He wrote so hard on the paper that his pen punctured the thin lined paper she had written it on. Girl looked around for Jude, but he was never in class. He was always playing hockey against some school or another, first it was states and now it was nationals. Jude wanted to be a professional hockey player, took great pride in having his leg taped up, longed to have a “sports injury,” knew all the heights and weights of the players in the league. No one had told him it was no use, that he was simply too short.

When Mr Bishop looked up and saw the rest of the class mutinying, he turned the open colour of a blood orange.

“Alec, I am going to rip your head off and shit in your throat!” he said.

Alec who had flicked Pat’s pencil-case off the table so that when Pat bent down to retrieve it he could joyfully thrust into him, sat down in his seat and flattened out his lips into a straight line. The other boys who had been laughing with their hands over their faces sunk into silence.

“Do you want me to do it?” he asked him.

“No.”

All the colour in Alec’s eyes went quiet. And Girl couldn’t tell if this was good or bad or nothing.

“Then sit in silence and do your work.”

“I don’t have any work to do. You didn’t give us anything,” Alec said, small-voiced.

“Then sit there and look at the wall,” he said, slowly, giving the “t” in sit and the “k” in look its own staccato sound.

Mr Bishop turned back to Girl and it was as if all of his anger had just been a mask. His face transformed into a sloppy, smiling thing. Girl felt strange.

“Let’s continue then, now that that’s been dealt with,” he said to her in the silence.

It took him the rest of the class to mark up her five-page essay and when he was done it was covered in arrows, crossings-out and annotations. Girl felt grateful that he had spent so much time improving her. The bell rang and the rest of the class filed out silently, it seemed that even the sound of the other students packing up had been drained from the room. Girl got up and began to leave when he said:

“Stay back. I want to talk to you.”

“Oh,” Girl sat back down.

He stood up and began walking around the room as he spoke, the essay was in his hand.

“This was absolutely brilliant,” he said, pointing to the essay.

“Oh,” said Girl trying not to show how much it pleased her to hear that.

“It was just ...” he exhaled, “really, really good. Have you ever thought about becoming a writer?”

“No, not really.”

“You should.”

“Thanks. Thanks so much.”

“Has anyone ever said that to you?”

They had. Ms McCracken had and some teachers before her and even the school librarian had, too.

“No, no one’s ever said that to me,” Girl said.

It was a hot day which meant a day of creeping around the house with the blinds drawn and the lights on. The air shone with heat so that it shimmered in the distance as if swooning under the pressure of the sun. The heat took everything it wanted, human strength, the lettuces blooming greenly, the hard peaches in the fruit bowl which aged a thousand years in a day. Girl lay in bed picking up book after book and then laying each one down, her inability to commit to any life but her own symptomatic of her time with Jude. Why would she yank her body out of this sweet life, when this was the greatest story she had ever read or told to herself. By the time Jude walked through the door of her bedroom, she was surrounded by a circle of books splayed open.

“Look at all these books. You’re so smart.”

Girl was relieved. She had felt her wits running away from her. She couldn’t focus properly anymore. Jude’s words restored her to herself.

“I’m not really. I can’t concentrate on anything.”

“Is it because of me?” Jude said his face childish with excitement.

“No.”

He began picking up the books and closing them with his usual reverence for order.
“The spines are going to get wrinkly if you strain them like this.”

“You’re making me lose my page.”

“You’re making me lose my mind. You’re so pretty, every day. I love how you don’t wear any make-up.”

“What guys mean when they say that is that they want girls with either: a) such good make-up they don’t realise it’s there or b) such good genetics they don’t need make-up, in which case that’s very unfair. Make-up is the great equalizer.”

“Which type of girl are you?”

“Neither.”

“You always look good.”

“Anyway, it’s so hot in here. Should we go to a shopping centre?”

“Why don’t you just turn on the air con?”

“My parents don’t turn on the air con. We just go to a shopping centre and use the free air con.”

“Why not?”

“Scarred from immigration.”

“So?”

“Spending money physically hurts them, it kills them, because it reminds them of the time when they didn’t have. Money feels like this thing that’s not real; you can’t trust it.”

“Can I take you on a date to Safeway?”

They walked together, Girl leading the way to Gladstone Park Plaza. At the Safeway, they pulled out a trolley and began. The light was bright as heaven. On the left were baked rolls plain or with olives and on the right were trolleys. And on the right were tomatoes at only two dollars a kilo, the kind with the vines still attached to them as if they had never left the farm for the factory for the truck for the shop but were still there hanging from the vine and you could go up to it and pluck fruit off. Behind the tomatoes were white peaches, faces grazed with romance, and a fridge that stored cherries and boxes of cut melon and sandwiches. Jude rushed to the peaches and Girl picked one up. Its velveteen skin was lovely and this was the bit Girl had always loved, the white skin coming open to reveal a seed covered in red blood. They put some in the trolley. He didn’t know how to choose them, he chose all the ones that were brightest, and Girl showed him how to feel the ones that were not yet ripe and the ones that were just so that you bought

a continuum of peaches that would ripen progressively, each one ripening on just the right day for you to eat them. Then there were grapes which always felt luxurious and greedy to Girl, like they belonged to Greek gods lounging in an old painting. And vegetables, savoy cabbages wrinkly in the beautiful way of an old man in a suit, purple cabbages like whale-boned layers of satin, ears of corn in their protective shell, big pumpkins, silent in their grey armour, you would never guess that the sunset was inside them, zucchini in green tie-dyed sleeves, brushed potatoes that were like unwashed, rude children. After this it was cold cuts, smoked salmon made shiny as a patent leather bag in its skin-tight wrapping, thin pieces of marbled prosciutto, salami in floral circles and dips, untanned hummus and austere tzatziki, unbelievably pink beetroot dip and gravelly pesto. Now roast chicken, where you had to open up the bags to check if the meat was tender and tearable as a coupon, fish on ice, just lying there without any eyes or fins or sign of having been alive, seafood mixes overburdened with mussels, smooth olives exfoliated by salt and oil, fat circles of cheese with talcum powder skin and so much more. But it was only after the eggs snug as babies in their boxes, the milk that felt childish to Girl, to take the food of calves, that they found what they were looking for, or more precisely, where Girl had led Jude. If you went slowly and looked closely there were specials everywhere.

“Look, we’re here,” Girl said with the brittle modesty of someone who has just been presented with an Olympic medal.

“What?”

“Can’t you see?”

“Yoghurt? Frozen peas? Cheese? Frozen hash browns?”

She snorted, “No, look down here.”

“Bacon for thirty cents. And what’s more, expiring three days from now. And middle bacon, none of the fat. Good bacon,” Girl said patiently.

“Wow.”

“And a quiche, one of those fancy brands that only use proper ingredients, with spinach and parmesan. Two dollars. A ninety-five percent off discount.”

“And coconut yoghurt for only seventeen cents a box.”

“You’ve got the hang of it.”

He began piling the specials into the trolley.

“Wait, no, no, no.”

“What?”

“If we just buy all of them we’ll waste them. We’ll a) lose money and b) waste food and c) take away the chance for someone else to have this experience.”

“But it’s so cheap!”

“But it won’t be cheap if you buy everything.”

“You are so smart. And funny. Who else does this stuff?”

It was a test, she wanted to show him her strangeness and he had shown her his genuine pleasure in watching her be. He wasn’t ashamed or cut off or closed to the possibility that a date could look like this; a girl could be like this. They selected the bacon and a carton of eggs with a reverence for what they felt. Jude began pushing their trolley to the self-serve queue when Girl gently nudged him towards the old checkout counters, choosing a boy with uncut hair, slowly figuring out the cash register.

“The line’s so long. Self-serve’s better,” Jude said.

“I know but look.”

Girl gestured with her chin to an old Italian woman in black paying for a fifty pack of Home Brand icy-poles in green, orange, white and pink. And behind her, a mother and her two children, they had swiped yesterday’s pastries: cream puffs, eclairs and fruit buns with a four-litre bottle of milk. And on the counter beside them, a woman who stacked almost forty tins of Annalisa beans and crushed tomatoes with a self-satisfied vehemence onto the conveyor belt. Behind him, a man with onions, tacos, cheese and mincemeat. A woman pushed in front of them, she was holding packets of powdered mashed potatoes in her hands. They made room for her. She looked back at them defiantly as if hoping they might challenge her.

“What?”

“I don’t know. I like looking at other people’s groceries.”

“Do you do any interpretation?” Jude asked, smiling.

“Sometimes. Sometimes it’s enough to just look.”

“The nonna at the front is a traditionalist,” Jude smirked fondly. “My grandma is more the store-bought pikelets with ice-cream and chocolate sauce type. Unlimited.”

“Her love is unlimited.”

“Exactly. What about the beans?”

“Annalisa is the best brand and I think there’s a special.”

The team leader (Girl supposed that was her title and what a silly made up word it sounded like) advanced towards the conveyor belt boy. She had thick-set limbs which spoke of stability and certainty, rushed past and handed the checkout boy a hair-tie.

“You right?” He looked at the hair-tie as if it was alive. He leant back from it, recoiled.

“You don’t have to wear it, but you have to at least have your hair out of your face.”

He put the hair-tie in his pocket and kept working. He began scanning the old woman’s powdered mash, her skin so skimpy you could see her skull right through it. What had she known or seen to have that face?

“The mashed potatoes were on special they were only one dollar fifty,” the old woman said.

“If there is specials it comes up when I scan,” the checkout boy said but his voice wasn’t so sure.

“No, it was definitely one dollar fifty, otherwise I wouldn’t have bought it.”

“It sez five dollars.”

“Ken you go and check it for me?”

“Which aisle?”

“Oh, that one over there?” She gestured wildly at aisle three but the full sweep of her hand might also have included aisle four, five or six.

Jude started covering his mouth as if to squash his laugh back into his windpipe. Girl tried to smile but red was pouring into her cheeks.

The boy bolted into aisle three. After some time he came back.

“I couldn’t find them.”

“Oh, it’ll be aisle five then,” she said.

He ran back to aisle five.

“Liam, what’s going on here?” The team leader was back again.

“I can’t find the powdered potatoes,” he answered.

“The mashed potatoes were on special, but they weren’t coming up,” the woman told the team leader.

“Give me a sec,” she said.

She marched to aisle seven, knelt down at a shelf and then was marching back.

“That was the powdered onions that the special was on.”

“Oh, oh, alright. Well I won’t have these then,” the old woman said.

“Okay, I’ll delete that then,” his hands hovered over the cash register uncertainly. He jammed at the buttons until it worked.

The old lady pulled out a card that she had some trouble scanning and after that she part-paid on a voucher, keying in the ID of the voucher with her glasses wobbling over her nose-bridge. After the voucher was used up, she paid the balance in cash.

Jude turned his back to laugh. Girl turned away from him with a face like glass.

“Hi, how are you,” Liam said.

“Good,” she said.

“Did you check your eggs?” he asked.

“Yep, meticulously,” Jude said, handing over a ten-dollar note.

“Alright, that’s ten dollars, so your change’ll be ...” Liam trailed off hopefully.

“Two dollars eighty,” Jude said.

“Thanks. Sorry. Thanks,” the checkout boy said.

As they walked away Jude let loose all the laughter he’d been holding down. But Girl was as smooth and expressionless as the eggs in their bags.

“What’s wrong?” Jude asked.

“Nothing.”

“I thought you liked watching people. Did you notice that lady with the potatoes on special, sorry the onions on special?”

“No.”

“What? Are you having a laugh?”

“No, you’ve done enough laughing for both of us.”

“Come on, what’s wrong? I’ll leave you alone forever if you just tell me what’s wrong.”

“She was the same as me. Another specials-obsessed person. Are you laughing at me, too?”

“No. You’re different, of course you are.”

“Why?”

“You just are.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course, you don’t.”

“You’re mine.”

His crocodile eyes were gold in the strong light of the shopping centre. There wasn’t a pop song to prepare you for this kind of feeling. Pop songs dealt with the debris love left behind but what about the shiny new feeling that found you out? Who could write

about that? It was wanting and being wanted. A symmetry that had never seemed possible to Girl.

“I love how you wreck books by leaving them open. I love how you sniff out specials. I love how upset you get.”

“Thanks,” she said.

“I’m serious, I find it so cool that you like, know who you are, you’re not trying to impress anyone with anything. You’re so different to other girls.”

Girl found her self-image growing into his image of her. She held it in her heart like a locket. In private, she disagreed with him, she knew she was always trying to impress everyone, she just wasn’t as good at it as he was.

School was easier with Jude there. After Elly and Olive and Alec, it was a relief to Girl that Jude was exactly what he seemed. He stood at the front of the tuck-shop every lunchtime, splitting a ten-dollar note with his sisters so they could buy their lunch together. He played soccer with the boys but was too short to make any impressive marks or score any tense goals. Everyone liked him, even Girl (who was a snob really, sceptical of what everyone else liked) and then by some impossible possibility, he liked her.

He drew people around them with his arm around her as if to mark her out as special. These groups of people the Girl had never spoken to before sat on the lawn and laughed at Jude’s jokes. He would force everyone to agree that she was perfect. Elly was amongst them and so were Alec and Clarissa, they would compliment her on this or that and tell her she was lucky. Olive watched Girl with a humiliated look on her face as if she had broken her heart. Girl almost felt sorry for her, supposing that now that Girl was illuminated by the circle of Jude’s love, she saw her differently, as all the others did, admired her even and regretted making an enemy of her. He put his arm around Girl and she felt that no one could hurt her, this was both a romantic feeling and a logical conclusion to draw: who could touch her now that she was touched by one of the most powerfully lovable people she knew?

Chapter Twenty-One

Jude was flushed with punch-drunk talk about his eighteenth.

"It will be our first big event together," he told Girl. "There are so many people I want to see your face."

"Why?" Girl asked.

"Because you're amazing, gorgeous, smart, funny, everything." Jude was a lister of adjectives and they always seemed to be luminous with sincerity. Girl, used to the exacting economy of the female compliment exchange, felt touched by the way Jude could lavish her with words and mean them. This didn't mean he didn't expect her to reciprocate, though. The next day he came up to her as she was walking through the school gates and circled her in his arms. They walked like that for a bit, her facing forward and he with his arms circled around her walking backwards, laughing. Then a fog covered the sunny expression of his face.

"Yesterday, when I was saying how excited I am for you to meet everyone in my life at the party you didn't say you were excited for me to meet everyone in yours."

"Oh," these were moments when Girl was nettled by a secret score-settling side to his personality. It was really a part of his aggressively positive thinking; he couldn't understand that life would not always give him what he wanted from it.

"You aren't, are you?" It was a lover's bluff. He pushed her in the direction he didn't want her to go in to force her to swerve in the direction he did want her to go in.

"No, I didn't say that."

"Then why can't you say it?"

Girl said nothing. She wasn't sure why she didn't just say the words he wanted to hear like a heart-weather anchor reading off the teleprompter scrolling on his face. There was something degrading about it. Of course, this was pride, her Ma would tell her, sheer pride and stubbornness, but she couldn't help it. And yet, something small inside her rebelled; couldn't he understand that life was sometimes unfair? Untenable? Asymmetrical?

By the next day they had made it up. He put his arms around her and she defrosted. "Of course, I think all those things about you," she said.

"Really?" His tulip eyes were budding and blooming and budding again.

He crushed her face in his chest and kept her there until she had forgotten what she was going to say next and what she had said last.

The eighteenth birthday party was like an award ceremony in which you were decorated for doing nothing but being alive. There were gold balloons with photographs attached to their strings. There were little kids asking their mothers to untie the balloons so they could ventriloquise a voice that didn't belong to them. There were so many people wearing different floral dresses. There was Turkish bread sliced up with dips and cherry tomatoes and capsicum. There was fried eggplant and zucchini, soft and hard cheese. Girl went over to the soft cheese and painted the creamy taste on her tongue. Jude came up behind her and gave her a kiss.

"You look so good. So good," he repeated it like a prayer.

"Thanks," Girl said, but there was something unclear in his gaze.

"There are so many people who want to meet you."

An older man, with a nose shaped like a lightbulb reached for her hand.

"It's you. You are The One," he said in the voice of an Old Testament prophet.

"Yes," Girl said, not knowing what to say.

"Do you watch it?"

"What?"

"*If You Are The One*. The Chinese dating show."

"Oh," Girl laughed and then regretted that she had laughed.

"You're the One. You know he's had a lot of girls after him, and you're the lucky one he chose."

"Thanks."

Jude beamed. "How are you? Still playing guitar?" he asked the lightbulb-nosed man.

The lightbulb-nosed man couldn't stop speaking. Girl felt vaguely sorry for him as she often did for elderly ang moh who latched on to a conversation like this, rattling on as if afraid that the opportunity to be listened to would disappear at any minute. The elderly Chinese were the opposite, rather than worrying about becoming increasingly irrelevant, they grasped power as they aged their way towards the top of the family hierarchy. They sat in their designated chairs or walking frames, criticising younger family members for the way they filled a glass of water or folded an item of clothing,

gossiped about their daughters-in-law and spitting out food with too much or too little salt in it. Girl couldn't get used to the pointless eyes of these old ang moh.

The next person was a girl with hair like Maggi noodles in a loose linen dress with splashes of bright colour over it designed to signal the fun-loving nature of the wearer. She was with Jasmine who she seemed to know from some sort of sports club.

"Oh my God. I'm so excited to meet you. Oh wow, look at you," she reached out and pinched at Girl's stomach. "You haven't got a single inch of fat on you. Oh my gosh, I must look so fat to you, why do you think I wear these loose clothes?" She turned to Jasmine, "She's actually as gorgeous as what you said. Which is like. Oh wow. I just can't."

The Maggi-noodle haired girl began fanning herself as tears welled up in her eyes.

"I don't think you look fat," Girl said.

"Jude, why does your girlfriend have to be this hot? She's making the rest of us look bad."

"That's why I love her."

"I'm going to have to start getting to know you better now so that me and Olive can like, be bridesmaids at your wedding."

"Sounds great," said Girl.

"Jude would always tell me how into you he was and I just knew you would be this attractive because that's the kind of girl he goes for. We'd like meet up and we'd both just scroll through your Facebook photos and talk about what a slamming body you have. But then again, he's such a catch, how could he not get a girl like you?"

"That's not true," Jude said but his rebuke was half-hearted.

The Maggi-noodle haired girl laughed like it was the funniest thing she had ever heard. Girl felt the hot rush come upon her. She hated the way girls hate-complimented each other. Jude led her over to his parents who were crouched over a PowerPoint that led to the sound system. With the slowness of people with stiff limbs, they stood to greet her.

"Hi, Jasmine is it? How's nursing going?" The mother said, smiling.

Girl thought, how strange and yet how obvious that they had mistaken her for another girl, an interchangeable Chinese girl with other Chinese girls. A Chinese girl was not a girl. A girl was a girl was a girl. A Chinese girl wasn't a girl, wasn't a girl, wasn't a girl.

"No, no, this is my girlfriend," Jude said.

“Oh, sorry. How are you?” she said, her mouth crumpling.

“Good.”

“Hi,” his father put out his hand to shake.

Then hugged Jude like a tiny team huddle.

“Happy birthday to you,” they sang softly.

Girl reflected that it was strangely unromantic to love someone who was so well-loved. To feel that all the secret things you loved about a person were also the things that everyone else seemed to love about them. And Jude, she knew, was so well-fed that he felt that any love she showered upon him was his due. His kindness, his honest warmth started to feel less like a virtue and more like the natural consequence of having never known rejection or solitariness.

“I think it’s time for speeches soon, and we need to fix this,” His father said, his words buckling under the pressure of a loud screeching sound.

Jude lined up against the wall and Girl made herself inconspicuous somewhere not too close to the front. She listened to the speeches of first his father, then his mother, then his sisters. All of them more or less the same, rhyming couplets, acrostics and a great showtune to cap it off. Girl was endlessly jealous of the words, breath, thought, everything that were given over to the task of letting everyone know how great Jude was. She had never heard anything like it. She thought about how her parents criticised her in front of guests for her laziness, her rudeness in forgetting to greet them, her dreaminess. This was the way her parents and the parents of her friends boasted about their kids, they exhibited their sons’ and daughters’ ability to silently tolerate any kind of criticism or command from their parents. They showed them off as people who would be impervious to the blows of the world, who didn’t need to talk back or get angry no matter how badly they were provoked. She had heard some of the friends she grew up with, Wesley and also Sofia, complaining at times of their parents’ emotional barrenness (though Girl wondered if being consistently willing to ruin your own life for your child’s a sign of emotional barrenness) and she thought that this could be its antidote, a party in which for one night, you were told you were impossibly good and smart and clever and kind. Sure there were “embarrassing stories” but even these looked more like an embarrassment of riches to Girl, a trove of memories in which Jude stood at the centre, even his toddler tantrums and childlike entitlement christened as strength of personality and determination. But another part of her didn’t understand it. The ang moh are very nice with their lips but that’s all, Ma had always told her. People weren’t endlessly good and smart and clever and kind.

Unless Jude and everyone like him thought they had the monopoly on goodness and sweetness and charm? In which case that was almost worse. The rest of the night was a flurry of watching Jude rush past to find someone else he hadn't yet spoken to, he seemed simultaneously too busy to speak to any one person and all too ready to stop and have a long conversation with anyone that he crossed paths with. At the end of the night, Jude drove Girl home. He had one arm around her and the other guiding the steering wheel. He drove as if he had had his license for years not days.

"Can you put both hands on the wheel?"

"I love holding you."

"I love it, too but you know what I don't love? Early death."

"Did you have the cake?"

"Yeah."

"Did you like it?"

"Yeah."

"You didn't have much."

"Were you watching me?"

"I'm always looking out for you. You left almost the whole slice."

"You like that I'm thin don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Yep."

"So?"

"I'm just saying you can't have everything in life. Do you want a thin girlfriend or a girlfriend that eats cake? You can't have your cake and eat it, too."

"My parents are worried that you don't really participate in our family traditions."

"What traditions?"

"Opening the presents after everyone leaves, singing showtunes, dancing the night away, enjoying the catering. Eating the cake."

"So, doing whatever you want."

"What?"

"Just doing whatever feels good. That's not a tradition. It's greed."

"What, are you a communist? What should we do with our presents? Just give them all to the government to redistribute?"

"That's racist."

“You’re just using that word to derail the conversation into a place where you always get to win.”

“No, I’m not-”

“Yes, yes, yes you are. Anyway, why can’t you just participate?”

“But participation is for losers.”

“What?”

“That’s what you get when you come last isn’t it? A participation ribbon. Is that your culture?”

Jude pulled over suddenly and jumped out of the car, slamming the door. He was walking to nowhere, Girl supposed. He seemed so small as he was walking away that she felt some regret. The man in the car parked in front of them was looking from Girl to Jude. He had been pulling out of his park but now he pulled back in and stayed there. It occurred to her that he was worried about her and was watching to make sure she was safe. Jude was pacing up and down the street as if deranged. She knew she was safe, in fact, this was the thing she had always admired about him, that he wasn’t a yeller, nor did he say truly cutting things; when he was angry he took himself away to settle himself. She admired this but it also made her feel lonely sometimes, surely yelling, as unpleasant as it was, was a kind of intimacy, a letting-go of bad things together by expelling them into the air. But he wasn’t like this at all, he was a measurer, a counter of things, a person who liked rules and mastering himself, not succumbing to ugly feelings. She sat in the car by herself, safe from any kind of unpleasant remark but also alone. It struck her that if ten minutes in the car by herself was becoming a moderately hard sort of trick for her to pull off without feeling lonely, then the end of their relationship and its aftermath would be a difficult trick for her to pull off. She shouldn’t have gotten too used to the feeling of having her life witnessed by another, any trivial problem or mistake solved by the comfort of their gaze, any good thing made better by their sharing of it. She thought of the widows she knew, old women whose lives had been met and married by the lives of their husbands. One of them, she knew, didn’t feel confident to drive, having sat in the passenger seat all her life, her hands shook uncontrollably over the steering wheel. Others simply remarked that sometimes they turned to say something to the ever-present presence to their left and found themselves speaking to nothing. Girl knew she was nothing like these women, so much smaller and inexperienced, but she had begun to feel the emptiness of entering a room without Jude, mostly when they had clashing engagements. How tiresome it suddenly was, to have to construct every moment of small

talk with her own mouth, rather than listening passively to him cracking jokes and mediating between her and the rest of the world. As she began thinking about the merits of replacing Jude with a large dog of some sort, maybe a golden retriever because it was substantial enough to truly give her a hug and its eyes mournful enough for her to love it, Jude opened the door.

“Hi,” he said, jumping into the car. “I’m sorry for walking off like that.”

“I’m sorry for saying mean things,” Girl said, surprising herself.

“That’s ok. Well, it’s not. You have a bit of a temper, don’t you?”

Girl had felt it for so long, an invisible rage behind the curtain of her skin but he was the first person to know it. Was this good or bad?

“That guy in the car in front of us has been watching me, like he’s afraid I’m going to kill you.”

“Or like I’ll drive onto the pavement and run you over.”

They started laughing. Suddenly, the car in front of them pulled away. Jude raised his eyebrows and they fell into the old patterns of flare up and forget and laughing at the world outside of them together. It was as if the world outside the car was foolish and strange and not the one inside.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Girl and Jude were going to the Deb. Girl had never thought about the possibility of this but now it was going to be her wearing a white dress and Jude wearing a suit. Then the dress and the suit would get to walk down that staircase and get introduced to everyone that they already knew. She had already tried on so many expensive dresses which Jude told her he would pay for. “He,” being his parents, of course. She placed her new essay, this time on *Hamlet* on Mr Bishop’s desk as she bounced into class and sat down. Then she placed her phone under the table and began looking at the photos Jude had taken of her in the dresses. There was a sweetheart dress with ruched chiffon like a seashell, a dress with four thin spaghetti straps, another one with a sheer ghostly fabric over a slip dress. As usual, Mr Bishop sat at his desk and marked up essays but this time he didn’t call Girl up to the front. At the end of the class, he called her over.

“Stay,” he said.

Girl stayed in her seat. He began pacing.

“I read your essay. It was awful. Full of *sprezzatura*.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m disappointed that you’re going to the Deb.”

“Why?”

“It’s an archaic custom designed to sell women.”

“Oh.”

“Do you have a dress?”

“Yes.”

“Were you looking at photos of those dresses in class?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see them?” He was smiling a greasy smile.

“What?”

“Show me your phone.”

“No.”

“Give me your phone.”

“I don’t have any photos on it.”

He pulled it out of her hand, and she started crying.

“Stop crying!” He yelled while pacing around her. “You are *sprezzatura*. You’re losing your chance of becoming a writer. Your writing is slipping. You have no idea of the damage you are doing to yourself.”

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and gave it to her. He took her phone and started looking at the photos of her in her deb dress.

She kept crying into his handkerchief. When she had stopped, she gave it back to him.

“Keep it,” he said.

“No,” she said.

“Keep it,” he said.

“No.”

“I won’t have it back now,” he said. “Here’s your phone.”

She held the handkerchief like it was a shard of glass. Now she would have to carry it with her all day then find some way to hide it. He was making her carry him and hide him when he should have carried himself.

After class Girl went to the staff block. She was still crying openly. Ms McCracken found her and, hearing torn-up fragments of her story between silences in which Girl held down her tears, led her into a quiet corner of the staff room.

“Do you drink tea?” She asked.

Without waiting for a response, she made her a cup of peppermint tea with the bag still floating in it. The peppermint tea bag label was a bright green colour but the tea itself was a polluted swamp colour.

“Most teachers are totally different people in the classroom to who they are outside of it. John’s a lovely person, great with his kids, everything, outside of it. For some people the classroom’s all a bit of an act, it’s theatrical which means exaggerated.”

Girl wondered at first who Ms McCracken meant by John. And then she realised that he had a first name and this was it.

“Why did he do it?”

“He probably didn’t mean anything by it.”

“But why did he do it?”

“He’s probably intimidated by how clever you are.”

“But why would he be—”

“I don’t know,” she said, showing frustration for the first time. “We probably shouldn’t even be talking about this. Don’t make this into a bigger thing than it is.”

“But what if he—”

“I’ll speak to him but don’t try and do anything yourself. John’s a very vulnerable person. You have to be careful what you say to him. If anything ever happened, I’d hate for you to feel responsible for it.”

After school, Jude drove him and Girl to Highpoint Shopping Centre. It was *busy*, something they said to each other as if it had never been busy before. They drove round and round looking for a place to park.

“Jude. Mr Bishop.”

“What?”

“He—”

“He seemed ok when I had him for history. He seems like a nice enough guy. He’s just a bit, a bit blunt sometimes. Speaks his mind.”

“He doesn’t really do the curriculum.”

“No, the curriculum is him,” Jude smiled.

“I think he has a crush on me or something.”

“I’ve heard people say that, that he thinks you’re smart and all that. And you are, you’re so smart. That’s why I love you.”

“I think he—”

“Are you trying to make me jealous?”

“No.”

“Because whatever it is, I don’t want to hear it.”

“I think I feel sick,” Girl had read about this thing in books before. The heart sickness spreading to the stomach and infecting the rest of the body. But she had never felt it before. She felt a profound desire to throw up. But she tried to keep her mouth closed and tried to swallow.

“Poor girl,” Jude was Jude again.

A girl with a smile like a slice of cantaloupe and wearing easy clothing rode past. She was talking to the boy on the bicycle next to her who had sunglasses on like he was blind and a jacket flapping behind him like bat wings. They were happy. Girl felt happy for their happiness. Then she realized the Girl was Olive and the boy was Mac. It felt so strange for Girl to see this, this fresh melon smile and easy happiness. It was better even than the Instagram posts in which they were stars of a show they had produced, directed and scripted. There was nothing glossy or moody or dramatic about it. There was no pop soundtrack, no smoky yellow filter that made their skin sunnier, no Oscar-speech-like

caption. It was love just as it is. It made her feel empty as a stomach burning with gastritis to see how full and real they were. What was the point in trying to be good if the wicked were not blown away like chaff?

Girl wondered what it would mean to go to English class now. It turned out that it didn't mean anything at all. At the front of the classroom was a woman with silver and white hair fashioned into the lick at the top of a soft-serve. She began writing on the whiteboard as if she was always meant to be there.

"Where's Mr Bishop?" Olive asked, putting her hand up after the fact.

"He's sick."

"What's he got?" Olive followed up.

"He's on leave. He'll come back when he's better."

"Is it because someone complained?" Elly wondered aloud.

"I'm going to ignore that."

She continued writing on the board and acted as if she could not hear the dissent swelling behind her.

Olive turned to Girl and said with the quietest breath. "Do you know who complained?"

"No."

"Because I heard he's been having panic attacks since and can't come back to school."

"How do you know that?"

"Mac's parents are friends with Sir and his wife."

Mac's parents. This was what was so annoying about Olive. She wanted Girl to know she knew *Mac's parents*. As if her and Mac were old couple friends of theirs or something.

"Oh."

"He was a really good teacher. He actually made English interesting," Jasmine said.

"Well someone complained. And now it's all over. And so close to our end of year exams," Olive said.

"Yeah," Elly said.

Girl looked at the rest of the class. Their faces were written in a language she couldn't read. But she thought she saw mirrored there, what Olive had said. As if she was the translator for these people whose faces spoke a foreign tongue. Girl felt guilt. So many people thought of guilt as a weight, but Girl felt it as an empty glass bowl inside of her. She left school but the bowl was still inside her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Girl and Jude had had this plan fixed for the first weeks after exams were over. Instead of joining their friends down the coast, enjoying the thrills of drinking alcohol performatively and being able to say the police had found weed in their beach rental while investigating a noise complaint, or fighting over who was using the bathroom too often, they would jump on a plane and visit Malaysia. They would “jump” on a plane because people like Jude didn’t think of themselves as the saving, scrimping, agonising for days over the cost, comparing prices and watching them rise and fall like stocks, then finally buying a ticket with their eyes closed as they handed over the money for a plane ticket. They “jumped” on planes as if you simply walked out of your house one day and skipped onto an aircraft. They were flying to Malaysia because Girl could not wait to show Malaysia to Jude and Jude to Malaysia. Malaysia because they could stay with her relatives for a few nights free of charge. They flew budget at Girl’s insistence and didn’t pay for meals or seat allocation. They sat, hungry, at different parts of the plane. Girl was sat next to a man with a blue cap covering his pink bald head. He drank Pure Blonde after Pure Blonde with packets of wasabi peas. He kept tapping his card on the fold-out table as if wasting money was a magic trick of his. The flight attendants were managing him with neutral faces and handbook voices but when he asked for his fourth beer, before he had even finished his third, a second air hostess was called in to reinforce the point: they did not serve alcohol until the previous drink had been consumed. As she walked away, he said loudly that it was common sense, that he liked common sense, and why couldn’t she just bring out the next beer and by the time that had happened he would be done with his current one. The fluorescent smell flickered in the air. They returned and lied to him, telling him they were forty-five minutes away from landing so they couldn’t serve anymore. At times, he turned to the friend sitting on his other side and they talked about their business in Thailand. He wore his cap low like a kid with a too-small head and watched video after video. In Girl’s opinion, you flew budget to save money, not spend it but she could see that in his opinion you flew cheap so you could spend big. She opened the in-flight dining menu and calculated that he had spent thirty-eight dollars on wasabi peas and beer alone. Girl sat there, still as a cat but inside her the hot was rushing and rushing. As they walked through the airport to get some food for the layover, Girl told Jude about him.

“The plane always dries my eyes out so much,” Jude said.

“Did you even hear what I was telling you?”

“Yeah.”

“Why did you ignore me?”

“You can be such a snob sometimes,” Jude said.

“What?”

“What if he just likes eating wasabi peas and wearing hats?”

“Come on, you’re taking his side?”

“No, just the side of the normal people who can’t live up to your standards.”

“He was going to Thailand with his mate, what do you think it is Jude?”

“Business?”

“Yeah, the business of breasts and butts and hair.”

“Can’t he just be a nice guy who saved up to go on a trip with his mate in Thailand?”

“It’s easy to be naïve when it doesn’t affect you.”

“How, how does it affect you what he does?”

“Because people that look like you fuck people that look like me in countries like that. I don’t have the luxury to be naïve about that.”

“Why does it always have to be me versus you, us versus them for you?”

“You know what? Let’s just not speak. Because I don’t know if you’re capable of understanding how it feels to be me at the moment. Let’s just not speak.”

It was strange how natural it felt to yell at him, she who never raised her voice, never sweated even on the warmest days, never laughed when watching TV in front of her family, never let on about how she was feeling to anyone. She felt completely shameless, doing this in public with various tired travellers pointing stares in their direction. Jude mimed zipping his mouth up. They walked in silence. When Girl had led them to Tip Top, a stall selling fried fish balls on a stick and fried bee hoon and curry puffs with the fine, oceanic grain of good wood. Jude began pointing at the chicken curry puffs and miming the number three at Girl, then miming opening a wallet and paying up. He had a smirk on his face as he did it. Girl caved in on herself and laughed. He was red with self-pleasure. They ate together before catching their flight to Penang.

Their taxi driver was scolding them for waiting at the wrong location. In the car was the sound of American pop stars narrating the country’s desire for self-gratification. There was Taylor Swift’s hard-edged song of directionless lusting. Justin Bieber’s pure choral voice singing of supplication and a desiring body. Selena Gomez’s cry of straightforward longing. They drove through Penang with the clustered Pisang still green,

the banana leaf falling apart yellowly. Foil panelling. White paint washed off to show black and grey. The big green, the coconut trees with the fruit in the sky, the fields of plastic bags, the smell of rubbish burning, the green moss soft-napping in the gutter.

Girl considered stopping for McDonald's in a city with pyramids of nasi lemak in newspaper, pandan chiffon sitting on the table in a plastic box and everything else, too many things to name a cultural crime. But they were hungry and didn't know where they were. Still she collected this mistake and so many others like lollies to store in the pocket of her heart, ready for the time when she could put them all in her mouth at once to enjoy. They stopped at a McDonald's built in a refurbished colonial mansion. Like so many buildings from that era it was erected from huge blocks of feta cheese and pillars of brie watching the street from its big French windows. The French-fry-coloured "M" floated above an inscription that said *Birch House – 1908*. And in fat white font above the entrance, the *Pandu Lalu, 24 Jam McDonald's*. On the a la carte menu were the usuals as well as Nasi McD Ayam, Spicy Chicken McD Deluxe, Hot Teh Tarik and Bubur Ayam McD.

The next morning they woke up in their AirBnB, sniffing and cold from the aggressive blows of the air-conditioning, then hot and sweaty the moment they stepped out the door. They walked past rhododendrons delicate and papery pink, purple feathers growing out of tyres, a pink and yellow house near a green and yellow school, the waiting room of a clinic with the red words *we care for you* on the wall. The old army base overgrown with grass and flowering trees, the shooting range, now an abandoned driving course. The trees, hardly tropical at all. Everywhere were the colonial ruins. Girl thought, is this the way the past is rebelled against? By being forgotten, left to rot, the natural land taking back what had always belonged to it? Great white walls, red roofs broken down with huge trees and vines pushing through, growing in the middle of some great lord and lady's loungeroom, wooden shutters toothless, huge vines holding tight to the structure. The overgrown mansion turned into a popular carpark in Georgetown, *3 ringgit for a parking spot*, a painted sign read.

They sat down at a hawker stall manned by a young man in red board shorts and blue shirt and cap holding a huge metal spatula. His huge wok sat on a burner with two fourteen kilo gas cylinders. Next to him was his mum in three-quarter pants, rubber sandals, thick hair pulled back behind her, one big soap bucket, one water bucket, two more water buckets, a blue hose filing the buckets till they ran over, a grey water bucket filled with bean sprouts, she reached in, water spraying everywhere, stacks of pink plastic

plates, a rice bucket, a skeletal fan facing the street, blowing smoke away, soapy water flowing onto the street. They were speaking to each other in Hokkien.

Has he paid? Uncle has paid but not Aunty

In the corner

Are you so gong?

Don't you know how to count

Don't put chilli

I know now I know now

More bean sprouts

Not yet wait

Behind

Have these two ordered?

Girl went up to the stall and ordered in Hokkien and they spoke to her in scornful English. While they waited Girl watched the other stalls. She saw a plastic bag of iced chrysanthemum tea hanging on a pole, black with three grimy, plastic bags hanging down, a huge tub of noodles, a colander of prawns, a fan on stacked plastic stools, its base covered by a tied-up plastic bag. The sellers were authoritative, scornful, impatient, none of them suffered fools or tourists, the hot weather didn't make them languish, it made them fast and furious as they worked their way up to the cool of nightfall. A fan ceiling fraying with burnt grime, charred grime, packets of fish cakes, motorbikes stopping to collect food in plastic bags, hanging it on their bike handles, heads swollen with helmets, jackets on backwards, a-Ji-no-mo-to apron, metal stall propped up by bricks, clay pots of chilli sauce, rubbish bucket. There was a Muslim lady with an umbrella over her head, cracking eggs on the side of the stall with one quick hand, squeezing lemon into a bowl of chilli.

She looked back at Jude. He was less handsome in this weather. Sweat made his shirts transparent, his skin peeled, he sighed as if the heat were oppressive. And annoying with his desire to display insider knowledge at every turn. He embarrassed her in roti side stalls, asking for a roti or lemak, showboating his culture. That was when Girl realised that people like her *were* "culture" and people like Jude *had* "culture." Young women at stalls giggled and asked her if he was "in bossiness," men asked if he might come back tomorrow, whilst charging amounts of money that hurt her pride. He spoke loudly about how good things tasted, bought another, said please and thank you. Girl forgot the word for no sugar and every coffee came out tasting like soothing syrup. She was forgetting

words. She was saying the words she did remember wrong. She was an actress in a badly lit TV show, playing the part of a rich guys' wife. His belly soft and prosperous with oil and warmth.

They drove out to the Cameron Highlands in Hari Raya traffic. They saw the tea plantations, green ribbed slopes, the mountains the mountains the mountains, the telephone pole fat with ivy, the small Chinese girls taking selfies, the kakak following behind, the bus driver of an old bas sekolah down-cycled as a tourist shuttle, windows like spectacle-frames with the glass knocked out, kids screaming, adults holding onto rails as sharp turns on the tiny mountain path and almost collisions with other buses round blind corners and a motorcyclist stuck between the mountain and the brutal bus, and never slowing and a grace to the one hand rotating the big wheel, the second arm dangling out the window, the straw in the mouth, the white teeth at the white-teethed children's screaming, the grown men's tensed gums.

In the secret place of the women's bathroom, gold lamé outer burqa scarfs, yellow floral embroidery, diamante pollen, houndstooth, red floral, stripped off and hung over the paper towel dispenser, only the brown inner covering left on the head, creamy liquid foundation lathered onto cheekbones, lipstick reapplied, colour contacts cleaned out. Little karinga girl, gold in her ears and green glass jewel, complaining to mama about squatting to go to the toilet, petitioning grandma in English, mama translating her cries into Hindi. Boys crowded over Tupperware filled with orderly flowering chiffon cakes. In the queue, so many long tee-shirts reading: *what you see is what you get, get over it move on, get out, nobody cares, you can be whatever you want to be, e-commerce is destroying the craftsman's spirit, zero shots given, youth today, to a wise man every day is a new life.*

At the tea house, the scones were large sweating circles of dough with spaghetti-thin whipped cream and jam. Jude asked the staff what they thought and they said *very good sir*. And he bought one and bought a frothy matcha drink because the sign said *brand new must try: matcha*. Girl asked him why he quoted the sign; she wondered what it is like to have such optimism, to be so happy with bad food and so uncomplaining. To believe advertisements and staff recommendations, for fear and misery not to inform your guile, to not fear that everyone was trying to put one over you, to ask strangers to take

photos of you, to leave your backpack in the car, to think everything will be alright. To waste money and not count it out when receiving change. To feel no anger towards anyone. For all food to taste great.

As they walked around the mountains, Girl tested him by telling him there was a snake on the rock he was standing on and he ran and ran. She tested him in endless games: rock paper scissors, scrabble, chess, cards in their Airbnb. She won every time and he stood flushed with anger as he swept the tiles back into their box.

They drove to Butterworth to visit Girl's mother's family. They ate with them. They were fat with the satisfaction of good food, plates licked of their oil, dark burnt bits. Clear soups, spare ribs and lotus root and boiled peanut with rice and fried egg. Porridge with century egg and ginger and shredded chicken. Clear broth, porridges, bee hoon, plain rice, food that was good for managing the body, cooling it down, curing illness. The family asked them what they are here for and Girl wanted to say "you" but instead she said "nothing."

Back in Penang, they waited for a bus that never came. They took an Uber up to Shangri-La and walked into the open swimming pool area, they moved onto the beach which was dirty with cans and discarded coconut drinks. When they had dried off, they went into a tent on the beach offering massages for ninety ringgit apiece. In it, an old man, with skin like the shell of a walnut screwed his face into a smile. He was meeker than meek, calling Jude "Boss" and smiling like he had never known sadness. There was also his son, a young man with a square-jaw and wearing the kind of reflective sunglasses that cast a purple light over their lenses. He was thick-set; it was impossible for Girl to determine if he was either very fat or very muscular. It seemed that he was both. The old man began touching Jude's feet and the sight of him knelt over Jude's feet, big and dirty from the beach made Girl's stomach acid splash against its lining.

"You drink coffee, don't you?" he asked Jude.

"Yeah."

"Mmm. See how much your feet can tell me? And you go running?"

“Yeah.”

“And you’re a very deep thinker, you’re a smart man. You work too hard.”

“Yeah.”

The young man began touching Girl’s feet also.

“You drink coffee? I think too much caffeine-ah?”

“No.”

“You go jogging right?”

“No.”

“Hmm. Smart girl. Work very hard.”

He rushed through the routine, apparently unfazed by all his mistaken guesses. He began working on her knotted back with a force Girl had not expected but did not want to complain about. She did not want to seem like the kind of girl who could not withstand pain.

“You from overseas?”

“Butterworth,” Girl lied.

“Har? Lou Ae-ow hokkien awr?”

“Ae-yow.”

“Where are you staying?”

“Penang, my parents are from Kampung Bengali.”

“You work on the Island?”

“Yep.”

“Doing what?”

“Nothing for now.”

“Aiyah, rich man’s wife-ah? Your husband is rich. No don’t tell me. Let me guess. Business?”

“Yep.”

“I bet you like shopping.”

“Not really,” she said. She didn’t want to seem like that either. Like someone who couldn’t lift a finger, unless it was to try on a new ring.

“Wah? No? You don’t like shoes? Handbag?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like it that much.”

“You have a very special woman,” he told Jude, his eyebrows high above his sunglasses. “You should take her out for a nice dinner tonight.”

“I know,” Jude said.

“Penang girls, you know, I go out with a few of them. You go to the Pasar Malam you buy them fake bag. You ask them, do you want bag? They say ‘No thanks!’” he said, raising his voice to a sickly-sweet pitch. “You go to Queensbay, go into Prada, Louis Vuitton, Longchamp, you ask them, do you want bag? They say, ‘Thanks!’ Girls these days, they only want rich man.”

His hands were burning into her shoulder-blades, she could feel bruises blossoming.

“But it’s not easy to be rich you know. Tourists come here from US, Australia they try and bargain with me. They say, *eighty ringgit*? I am like, you are so rich with your car, your girl, your life, you want to bargain with me? My dad, he’ll tell them ‘okay.’ He’ll take their shit. But for me, I don’t take any shit. I tell my customers, you shit to me, I even more shit to you. You nice to me, I nice to you.”

His hands began digging so hard into Girl’s neck she felt like she might choke.

“But the rich man’s wife they come here. You know what? I party with them, I go to their hotel rooms with them; if I’m tired, I sleep on the floor and shower the next morning there. The rich man text me, he says, I trust you with my wife. I know you’re a good boy. You can go to dinner and drinks with my wife. I say, ‘okay! But she pays.’”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, you don’t believe me, just ask them. Ey, money is everything here, isn’t it. How about your boyfriend, you meet him here or where?”

“Here.”

“Oh, you like the ang moh kow.”

His hands were driving deeper and deeper into her spine, she was worried it might crack. She closed her eyes so he couldn’t see the pain in her face.

“Ah, money. My cousin, you know, my cousin, I used to work so hard and save up to buy him the best sports equipment when he was growing up. He always came to me to ask, which badminton racquet should I buy, which basketball should I get? And you know I was the one into sports in my family and I would take him to the mall and buy him the best brand, the best equipment. Now, he grows up, he has money, he forgot about the big cousin that bought him everything he wanted.”

Girl heard a strange sound from above her. She felt something wet and sticky fall on her head. She looked up. He was crying. Her masseur was crying. She turned her head to look at Jude, but he had his eyes closed, he was transported by pleasure.

“It’s okay,” she said, her voice muffled from lying on her front. “He’ll remember.”

With a great effort, it seemed, he sucked the tears back into his eye sockets.

“I know,” he whispered. “Listen, I’ll buy you a teh tarik after this, okay. Teh tarik and roti tissue. I know a place where they put the soccer on the big screen and everyone cheers.”

Girl said nothing.

“Come on-lah. You are a Butterworth girl and I am a Butterworth boy. I’m a good boy. They trust me, the rich men.”

When Girl said nothing he reached deep into her skin and pulled.

“Ba, I smell fish,” he said. “Why is there a fish smell?”

“No fish,” said his father.

“You ate fish porridge did you? Ba?”

“No, boy.”

“Then why does everything stink of fish?” He was almost screaming.

“Time’s up-ah,” the old man told Jude, slapping his back affectionately.

“Great, thanks,” Jude said.

“Done or not?” he asked his son.

“Done,” he said.

“Now, there will be bruises on your back and might be a bit pain when you shower,” he told Girl. “I told you already-ah. Don’t go crying to your husband, your boyfriend, whatever about me tomorrow, ok?”

They caught an Uber back to the Airbnb. While Jude was showering, Girl lay on the bed alone. She reached into her pocket for her phone and found a wrapper or sticker or something. When she examined it, she saw that it was a Sugus wrapper with an address written on it and a time. Midnight, it said. The time when the princess is stripped of her shoes and ballgown and horse-drawn carriage, when she goes back to being a nobody living in the land of nowhere. After Jude fell asleep, Girl lay awake thinking. There was something about the masseur that scared her and made her feel as if she had finally met her match. He had the hot rush of anger in him and there was no stopping it. At midnight, she crept out of bed and took an Uber in her night clothes. When her driver asked for the address, she handed him the Sugus wrapper. They pulled up outside a Pasar Malam. She

got out of the car, afraid all of a sudden. It was midnight and there was no way to find the masseur in the thick of the crowd. She had used up the last of her cash on the Uber there. She had no way to get home. Then she saw him. He was changed, wearing jeans and a polo shirt. Without his sunglasses he was handsome or handsome enough for real life anyway.

“You are such a special woman,” he looked at her like a crocodile coveting a bird.

He took her hand and led her to the bags.

“Pick one.”

She picked a green leather bag with a drawstring and tassel. She wasn’t sure what style it was imitating but she liked it.

“Good choice,” he said.

He handed the bag to the seller and the money. The price was a cartoonishly large sum, but he didn’t argue it down. There was something about this that seemed to excite him. He was wasting his money on her. They walked to the bah chang kueh stall and he bought them one each. They ate in silence and kept walking. When they got to the end of the stalls and were standing in front of hand-held fans flashing red and green and blue, he said, “Let’s go to the car.”

He drove them to the 24-hour mamak with the big TV screens. The wires were coming out from the back of the TVs like vines around an old building.

“Roti tissue,”

“No more,” the waiter said.

“Har?”

“No more.”

“How can?”

“No more.”

He sucked his teeth angrily.

“Okay, just tarik then. Two. Less sugar.”

To Girl he said, “The place is too full, the cook is lazy to make because he knows they are making enough income already. And I tell you he is watching soccer.”

They watched the soccer together. The crowd would yell in waves and groan. Girl couldn’t understand the game but she loved the frenzy of the crowd, the coolness of the night. They didn’t speak much. Where in the day, it felt as if he could not stop confiding to her, it seemed that his grievances had been given over to her. He had poured his worst self out to her and now there was nothing left but soccer, handbags, drinks, pleasure,

silence. And yet Girl began to feel disappointed. Of course, she wanted him. She had felt his body touching hers as they walked together and he was strong. But she felt the emptiness of their connection as they sat there. They really didn't have anything to say to each other. She wondered what it would be like to be in a wordless relationship. Wordless, silent sex, wordless moving around the house together. It sounded more like an ending than a beginning. She felt her phone vibrating in her pocket.

"Hi."

"Where are you?" Jude was already yelling. Before he even knew.

"I'm here."

"Why haven't you picked up your phone?"

"I didn't hear it."

"Oh my God. I was going to call the police, the Australian embassy, I don't know."

"I'll be back soon,"

"Where are you?"

Girl hung up and called an Uber. The masseur watched her silently, resigned.

"Going home?"

"Yes."

"Why so early?"

"I have to. The Uber's almost here."

She walked off to wait by the curb. Then she realised she didn't have any money. Humiliated, she walked back to the masseur who was drinking her unfinished teh tarik.

"I don't have any money."

"Big madam like you, no money? Where is all your Aussie cash?"

"What?"

"Butterworth, my balls," he laughed.

He threw a fistful of notes at her. Mostly they fell onto the muddy floor. She bent down, picked them up and ran and ran.

Jude went through phases. They still had three more days of their stay to go and he spent them alternating between yelling at her and sitting silently on the bed. On the third day he told her that they were no longer they. They were he and she and there wouldn't be anything after that. They didn't go out. They waited for the day when their flight home

was booked watching TV or scrolling on their phones in their Airbnb. She looked at Jude. He was more handsome in this weather. Dark features and thick hair, more like dead handsome actors than living ones with their waxed chests and girly eyelashes and silly stares. The pink on his cheeks made him look young. Sturdy and always carrying her things for her, making her feel light. Generous to everyone, never patronising, eyes always gentle as a cow's, a good person to cheat, stall holders would think, but also a good man to marry. So much more innocent than her of their environment. Duly outraged that everyone in the airplane safety movies was white, writing letters to the gym about oversexualised music videos, doing everything right by her. And now he was all gone.

On the flight home they were seated together. Girl watched as the prosperous couple behind them bought something from the duty free cart. The older Singaporean man, he bought a gold watch for himself. Girl had never actually seen someone buy something from the cart. She wanted to tell Jude but he was asleep or pretending to be asleep. On Girl's other side was a woman who had drawn her eyebrows on hard. Her hair burnt with constant dying. As the signal went that the plane had landed, she stood and nudged Girl with her body persistently making her move into the aisle which was already too crammed. Girl could never understand the eagerness to stand and wait in planes. She kept looking at Girl and pushing her and she felt so tired of being pushed and pushed by white people in Australia and then pushed by Malaysian people who moved fast and wrung each day of its hours. She moved where the woman seemed to want her to be and nuzzled Jude. The man who had bought the gold watch lifted a yellow suitcase from above Girl's head and passed it on to the woman.

"Gam sia," the woman said. Then added "Teng kok lang boh cho ani Kwan."

Teng kok – what did that mean again. Hong Kong? Japanese? Mainland Chinese. This is what it meant.

"Teng kok lang are everywhere nowadays," the Singaporean's wife said.

"The teng kok girl stared at me but didn't help me," the lady said, as if to give an example of the badness of teng kok lang.

Girl wondered what to do, whether to speak back to them in Hokkien, to apologise, to—. She began to cry silently as they waited to get off. And Jude finally snapped, like a breaking bough. He held her in his arms.

It was the last time she really saw him. They gave their passports separately at customs and then Girl was held back to be randomly searched while Jude walked free.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The phone was ringing. Girl picked it up and passed it to Ah Ma and stayed in the room to watch her TV. *Seinfeld*, the pensioner's version of *Friends* was on and Ah Ma laughed at all the wrong places. She called it *siao lang hee*. *Crazy people show*. There was such affection in the way Ah Ma called people crazy. On the phone, Ah Ma was telling a story about how Uncle Andrew dropped her and Ni Na off at Gladstone Park Plaza last week and drove off. Ah Ma and Ni Na went to the OK Café. They ordered the special deal, cappuccinos with Splenda and slice of cake apiece. Ah Ma, the dark forest and Ni Na, the orange and poppy seed. Ah Ma commented on the coffee. The oversweetness of the cake. Ni Na, her eyes like two dusty marbles said nothing much. No intimate spillage of secrets, no swapping of gossip. Ni Na hadn't been the same since she moved into the nursing home. She didn't eat the way she used to eat or speak the way she used to speak.

"Where is your son?" Ah said to Ni Na. "He's taking a long time"

"Can you hold my bag? I'm going to the toilet," Ni Na said."

Ah Ma waited with Ni Na's bag. She waited and waiting was always slower for her. A woman who was never taught to read or write, except for her name in wobbly empty strokes, who never got the hang of an old Nokia brick and who wouldn't dare go near a smartphone. Waiting was different for her. It was purified of all distraction. She waited and there was no way to track her waiting. She'd never had a watch to wear and suburban shopping plazas are those places where no one knows what time it is. She waited.

Ah Ma stopped waiting, started looking. She waited outside the toilet, then walked straight inside. Shit, thick and shameless, lined the floor and the basin of one of the toilets like the mud tracks of an animal. Ni Na was nowhere nearby. Not knowing what to do, Ah Ma grabbed handfuls of paper towel and tried to clean the floor and the basin and the toilet cubicle. She cleaned and cleaned, mopping up the shit with paper towel and binning it all into a toilet, flushing intermittently. When she had done all she could, she washed her hands and walked out, feeling the rank smell sticking to her clothes.

She walked into all of the shops, nut shop, the fish and chip shop, the surf shop. It was in Millers that the shop girl directs her to the change rooms. Clumps of shit spot the carpet. After a few minutes, Ni Na came out holding a soggy pair of pants with rich brown stains and wearing a new pair of Millers pants.

“I’m just paying for these,” she said to Ah Ma, touching the price-tag dangling from her waist.

“How much?” she asked the shop girl, false teeth grinning.

“79.99.”

“Great, can you scan me?” She leaned her hip towards the counter and stretched the price tag out to her.

The shop girl scanned the price tag.

“Do you have my purse?” Ni Na asked Ah Ma, but she had already left the store.

“May, it was all over Ni Na’s pants. I felt shame like death. Ah. Ah. No, you don’t understand. It was for all to see. Okay. Bye.”

Ah Ma rested the phone on the ironing board in her bedroom. She turned off her small TV, an austere grey and black cube topped by a batik cloth and those dogs who have jeweled and gold collars and are forever nodding. She resumed ironing.

Ma called Girl into the kitchen.

“I’m going to Coles. Ask Ah Ma if she wants me to drop her off to visit Ni Na in the nursing home on my way out. I made some double-boiled pear juice this morning, she can bring her some. The old people like it because the pear goes soft.”

Girl ran back into Ah Ma’s room.

“Ah Ma,” Girl interrupted her and she looked at her, proud and angry as a queen.

“Ah Ma, Ma’s asking if you want to visit Ni Na.”

“Can’t you see how busy I am today,” she said.

The phone rang again.

“Get the phone for me,” Ah Ma said. “May said she’d call back and so did Maggie.”

Girl went back into the kitchen for the phone.

“Is she ready to go?” Ma asked.

“She’s busy,” Girl said. “I’m free, though.”

Girl wrapped a bottle of Ma’s double-boiled pear juice in tea towels, thin and fraying with time, and secured them with skinny rubber bands. She balanced the bottle in the basket of her bike and started pedalling. She went the back-creek way though she wasn’t really allowed to. Her parents were worried someone would snatch her away and no one would know because the creek was pretty quiet in the middle of the day.

When Girl was in year seven, she thought her legs were too thick for love. She'd go on these long walks in her neighborhood, even in the cold and dark. A man with something missing in his eyes pulled over his car on a street and wound the window down. The headlights cold and white. And how he asked her if she wanted to come with him and she walked around his car, no words in her mouth and then she was running and looking back and at him and he was just looking at her. That something was still missing from his eyes but she wasn't sure what it was. When she told her Ma about it she kept tossing cabbage and turmeric and mustard seeds in the pan with her hands. With her mouth, she blamed the time of day, her silky floral culottes, her aloneness and Girl worked out that the thing that the man was missing was shame.

Girl locked her bike against a drop off zone sign. From the outside, the nursing home looked like it has been decorated by a very polite, unnecessarily apologetic person whose thoughts you could never really be sure of. Cream-coloured bricks and beige rendering. On the inside it smelled like detergent and steam and urine.

A nurse came on out of her office and touched Girl on the elbow.

"Hi, can I help you?"

Her lips were coloured out of the lines with discount-bin lipstick and her hands were quick. Girl tried not to compare herself to her. She was probably the kind of woman who could run a house and stretch a dollar. The kind of woman Girl knew she'd never be.

"I'm looking for Ni Na."

"Ni Na ...?" She looked at her differently.

"Tina," Girl corrected herself. She was nine or ten when she realised that Ni Na was really Tina and that "Ni Na" was just Ah Ma's way of trying to say her English name.

"Tina ... Wu?"

"Yeah."

"I'll just make sure she's still awake ... a lot of our residents take a nap around this time. Should I tell her its family?"

"Yes." She didn't know why she lied but she lied.

The nurse held a finger up and moved quickly down the corridor. Girl waited by her office, looked into her washed-out reflection in the window. Licked some lipstick off her lips.

“She’s in the TV room,” the lady said. “Would you like to see her?”

The TV room was filled with shiny vinyl chairs with legs of good wood, sturdy and supportive; the kind of chairs you could trust with your life. In wheelchairs or sitting in the sturdy chairs were the residents. They were mostly dozing or had their eyes fixed on the closing credits of *Annie Hall* on the TV. One man spoke in Chinese to a woman who responded in an Eastern European language Girl didn’t recognise. When she walked into the room, their eyes trailed behind her.

“Not a problem, not a problem,” the nurse was saying to herself. Then, “Mrs. Tan, look, here’s your *granddaughter* ... what’s your name, again?”

The other residents turned around again, some had a sour wrinkle in their mouths as if they had tasted vinegar. Aunty Ni Na looked radiant though, like someone who had won an invisible tournament and was at the invisible press conference. She was dressed the same as always. A red polyester pantsuit with a gold butterfly brooch. Her white collar was scalloped and embroidered. Coloured glass like unreal jewels pinned her hair back. But the texture of her skin was different. Girl thought that if it was a garment, she wouldn’t have purchased it. This fabric looked as if it would pull, she might have said, gently scolding the seller.

“How are you, Ah Ma?” Girl said, with a wink in her voice.

“Not bad, not bad, dah-LING.” She shouted the last part and a few of the dozing residents woke up and stared her way.

“Yeah, what have you been up to?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Nothing.”

The opening credits of *Annie Hall* came on. *The food at this place is really terrible tsch*, says Alvy Singer, sounding as if he has said the line so many times before.

“Oh.”

“How did you come? Did you drive?”

“No.”

“Did you drive over here then? How long does it take to drive here?”

“No, I can’t drive yet, I rode my bike.”

“You must learn to drive. Very important thing. Number One important thing. If you can drive, you can do anything. I used to drive everywhere. I used up petrol as if it was water. The worse thing was when my son took my car keys away from me. And after that I couldn’t do anything for myself or for anyone else. Do and do and do. I used to do for everyone. But now I’m here.”

“Is this your glass?” Girl asked.

“Yes.”

Girl unwrapped the bottle of pear juice and began pouring it.

“You need a spoon to scoop up the pear and fungi and dates. Should I ask?”

“This is what it’s like. I have to ask for even a spoon now. This isn’t my house, Girl.”

Girl looked down at her empty hands.

“I’ll bring you a spoon next time. Sorry I didn’t think of it, Aunty.”

“That’s okay, Girl.”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Tan, your son called and said he will take you out for dinner at six o’ clock. You need to get ready.”

Girl hadn’t seen the nurse coming; she felt electric with shock.

“I have to go. See you later, Girl,” Ni Na smiled her sweetest up at the nurse. Her gold and silver teeth showed.

Girl pedalled home as hard as she could. She didn’t want Ni Na’s son, Andrew, seeing her at the nursing home.

After the first visit, Girl started to pedal over to Ni Na’s nursing home on quiet mornings when she had nothing to do. She often had nothing to do. She was in the liminal space between finishing school and starting university and she didn’t have friends or a boyfriend or hobbies or anything, really, to fill it. Except the guilt that was building a black hole inside of her. And these visits to the home alleviated her guilt. It made her feel that she was good or that if she wasn’t then she was evening out her badness with some goodness somehow. The other residents started to know her name and they asked her if she wanted to sit with them at mealtimes. They looked funny when she elected to sit with Ni Na. They watched their conversations, faces turned towards them like weathervanes.

On one of these mornings, Ni Na asked after Ah Ma.

“Her health isn’t too good,” Girl lied, her eyeline wobbly.

“When you are young and you can do things, everyone loves you.”

Girl looked away. On the TV, Alvy Singer was rambling: *Annie and I broke up and I-I still can't get my mind around that. You know, I-I keep sifting the pieces of the relationship ...*

“But it’s hard to keep friends when you’re old and useless. It’s even hard to get your own to take care of you. Girl, I nursed my Ma till the day she died. You think it wasn’t hard? It is hard to take care of someone who can’t wash themselves, can’t do

anything for themselves. Everyone was scared to see her. You know how the Chinese are about death and hock. Now my own son, he grows up in Australia, he pays for strangers to care for me. He is like the children of the ang moh.”

The nurse knocked on the door of Ni Na’s bedroom.

“Tina, your son is here early to see you. He would like to take you to get your hair set and done. You’re a lucky girl aren’t you. Still looking so beautiful at your age?”

Girl made to get away quickly but Uncle Andrew was right behind the nurse. He seemed like a woolly grey donkey to her. Grey pilling jumper, grey hair coming out of his ears, dry, grey skin. Something they never seemed to tell you is that when the time comes to look after your parents, you yourself will look in need of looking after.

“Hello Girl,” he said, “haven’t seen you in a long time.” A smile broke but it looked to Girl as if it was produced at knifepoint.

“Hello Uncle.”

“Ma. Are you ready to go?”

“Yes, dah-ling,” Ni Na said.

“Do you need a ride anywhere, Girl” Uncle Andrew asked.

“I’m on my bike,” she said before adding, “I don’t need any help.”

Girl got up, flexing her moral muscle tone as she went. As Girl pedalled home, the scenery around her blurred, painted over in the colours of anger.

Ah Ma held the phone between her cheek and shoulder. The TV was on and she was ironing with her hands and nodding with her chin. A shrill voice, persistent like the sound of a pressure cooker was on the other side of the line saying this and that.

When Ah Ma set her mind and ground her teeth to something, her focus upon it was total. In the day, while the clothes were still cold and wet, she plucked them off the line and lay them out on her ironing board. And all night she ironed and ironed and ironed. She never went to school but her ironing was absolutely mathematical. All the right creases at all the right angles. Flip the shirt over and flip it back again. And when the fabric went smooth and compliant beneath her hand, she arranged Girl’s school shirt or Ba’s underwear or Ma’s scrubs on a hanger and called Girl downstairs to distribute them. Girl liked the smell and feel of warm cotton-blend in winter. Girl stood in the warm light of the doorway and watched her a while. The strength in her thin arms was brutal.

Ah Ma tried to interrupt the person on the other side of the line a few times. Her mouth stopped and started like an old engine. When she did get a shot at speaking, her voice was loud. Like so many old people, she shouted into the telephone as if to make up for the distance between her and the person she was talking to.

“I don’t like. I don’t like it at all, May. It’s shameful.”

Girl listened then realised that Ah Ma wasn’t talking about Ni Na at all. She went into the kitchen. Ma was at the dining table eating rice and leftover soft tofu and fried bits of pork chop. She bit into a bright chilli padi in her left hand between every few mouthfuls. She had one leg up on the chair, kampung style, in her purple scrubs. Outside the window the morning was a quiet colour.

“Ma.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m going to bed in a minute, so.”

“I heard Ah Ma talking bad about you on the phone to Aunty May.”

“So?”

“So she—”

“She’s always like that,” Ma said, “she’s scared to become useless like Ni Na. She’s afraid to visit, even, in case she never comes out.”

“But I—”

“But it’s always been like that,” she said, placing her hands on the table to push herself up. “Can you wash this one bowl for Ma? I’m so tired I thought I would fall asleep at the lights.”

Girl didn’t visit Ni Na for a while. She got caught up with other things. When Girl thought about Ni Na, and visiting her, she said to herself: next week would be better.

Girl got caught up with other things, she got caught up with things because, in her heart of hearts, she knew she was afraid to visit her. Girl was afraid she’d bump into Uncle Andrew. In the way of teenage insecurity, which is not yet early adult narcissism but almost, she felt paranoid that he’d know she pretended to be Ni Na’s granddaughter not once but many times. Ah Ma wouldn’t visit and, most of all, Girl was afraid that Ni Na would ask after her.

Ma received a call from Uncle to Andrew to say that Ni Na had passed in her sleep a few days after Girl passed her probationary driving test. They said the same old things on the phone. Peacefully. Painlessly. A good way to go. A good way to go. A good way to go. A good way. Good. Good. Good. Good.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Her arms were worn from work in the sun, her hands hard with folds like undone origami. The mortar and pestle and ginger had not only pounded into her sensibility but into her skin. The bathroom door was locked and Girl knew from the *shhhh shhhh shhhh shhhh* sounds inside that she had a coarse brush for scrubbing clothes in one hand, a green bar of hard soap in the other and was endlessly washing and washing her hands of their wrong colour and texture. Girl knocked on the door.

“Ah Ma, are you ready?”

“Tan.”

Shhhh shhhh shhhh shhhh.

Girl knocked harder.

“Not so long, Ah Ma.”

“Tan, tan.”

She was moving slower in those days and doing stranger things. Ah Ma came out of the bathroom in a blue blouse with a wide collar that was sparkly with diamantes and a sort of string cut from the same cloth that was laced in and out of the collar. Her hands were the colour of a juicy cut of raw steak. Shiny and pink and white-veined. She carried her cane in one hand and her bag – the one with the teddy-bear printed on the front and inspirational quotes on the back – in the other.

“Kiah,” she said, tilting her cauliflower hair towards the door.

They walked to the Little Nicky’s on Mickelham Road. When it opened, Girl was in grade three and it was the first truly fancy café in Gladstone Park. It served fresh juices, focaccia and Turkish bread in lieu of normal bread and rather than bacon and eggs it boasted on its menu: Eggs Benedict, Eggs Florentine, Eggs Chesapeake and Eggs Mornay. Instead of normal tomatoes, they used Roma; in place of button mushrooms, they used portobello and it wasn’t chips they served, but greedy looking thick-cut wedges.

Girl remembered how Matteo, the school loser of Gladstone Park Primary became the school prince when they found out his dad was the owner of Little Nicky’s and his older sister, a waitress there. Matteo, hand perpetually up his nose, soft brown eyes like a cow’s, obsessed with acting and singing and dancing like he thought he was a girl. *I believe in*

miracleeeeeesssss! he would always sing with his arms wide open for a hug that never came. How they laughed at him, saying “shut up, Matteo” if they saw his mouth ever so slightly opening. They never let him get a word in because they knew it would be the usual raving about his drama school, the same stupid songs and moves. But after the opening of Little Nicky’s, Amelia Aldridge, the most popular girl in their year level, the girl with a red ribbon tying one pigtail and a white ribbon around the other pigtail, started paying him some attention. She sat with him at lunch and told him he had nice eyes and that she liked the way he spiked his hair up at the front. *I believe in miracleeeeeesssss!* Girl thought sullenly when she saw them together. It wrecked everything, realising that a fool could be chosen for a fairy tale because it made you realise you weren’t chosen at all. Girl remembered she walked past the big tree with the branches that looked like they were arms asking “Why God?” and saw Amelia and her other friends sitting under it. Girl stood behind them until they noticed her.

“You should get a boyfriend, it’s really fun,” Amelia told Girl.

“But it’s like, *Metal Slug* and books are up here,” Girl raised her hand as high as she could go without making her top go all the way up, “and boys are down here.” Girl pointed at her bellybutton.

Amelia shrugged.

“I know-wuh but it’s not about where they’re up to. It’s like, if I’m Matteo’s girlfriend then I can marry him and if I can marry him, then I can divorce him and get the money his family made from Little Nicky’s. So-o? Do you want one or not-tuh?”

They walked and Ah Ma only had to stop to hold her heart once. She carried her cane under her arm as usual. At the lights, she went to cross.

“Ah Ma, it’s not yet.”

“They will stop for me, I am old,” she said and walked across the street, holding her palm up to the cars. Girl ran to catch up with her.

At Little Nicky’s they sat and drank cappuccinos and shared a cinnamon scroll, sticky with white sugar icing and spotty with raisins. Girl tried not to sound like a melodramatic teenager in an American sitcom, telling their mom they have a boyfriend and want to go to college in the same state as him. She breathed a long breath.

“Ah Ma, Ni Na is not anymore.”

“Pang,” she said, with half a scroll in her hand. She added, “Also not too oily.”

“She died last week.”

“Let’s buy hand cream later from Safeway,” she said. “Do you know which one is the right one?” She pulled out an empty bottle of Aloe Vera Vaseline from her bag. “This is the one I want. The other type is no good.”

PART FOUR

Chapter Twenty-Six

Books smelling of words, spines coming apart from their covers. Cheap dim lights. People wearing clothes so old they were probably made before the White Australia Policy was abolished. Amongst these skirts and shirts and shoes was a pair of gold-rimmed glasses and an unironed shirt. He was tall but he was often stooping as if he had never quite grown into his body. The geometry of his face was lovely, he had all the right angles for the light to hit on. He stooped down to get a book from the shelf that Girl was kneeling over.

“Sorry,” he said but he didn’t look sorry.

“It’s okay,” she stood up and they looked each other full in the face.

“I’m Noah.”

And then they were talking. He had the ability to make you feel as if every one of his thoughts was turned towards you. The same secret intimacy and fervour he exuded when reading *Middlemarch* was an advertisement for the kind of attentiveness he could offer the girl who was as good as fiction. In the university library where they had found each other in the Victorian section, he told Girl about how difficult it had been to read *Middlemarch* at first as if the book was a person he had just met, testing his mettle, waiting to see if he was trustworthy.

“And then one day, the book just opened itself up to me and all of that remoteness, the stand-offishness of the story, was gone.”

“I’ve never met anyone who reads like you,” Girl said, then regretted it, she should have said something to show how well-read she was, too.

“My mum is a poet, she taught me how to read a book.”

“I want to be a poet,” Girl had never wanted to be a poet but all of a sudden she wanted it very much.

“Really? What will you write about?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really like that question. Especially with poetry, it’s not a movie script.”

“That’s true.”

“What does your Mum write?”

“She writes a form of ancient Chinese poetry only a few people can read and even fewer living people can practise in. She says that Chinese poetry is different from English poetry, it’s more difficult but also more giving.”

“Your family sound like something out of those Chinese sword-fighting films my Baba watches,” Girl said. Again, she felt she was being stupid.

“How?”

“You know there was one my Ba watched, and a father was following around a teacher going about his business. The father was bowing and begging the teacher to apprentice his son.”

“You still call your dad *Baba*,” he said.

“So?”

“So,” he said, and smiled.

He continued speaking about how his father had been a painter and a calligrapher in Hang Zhou, his father’s father a photographer from Shou Zhou. Girl didn’t say much. Neither of her parents were artists, of course. She wondered what it would be like to be steeped in knowledge from the moment you were born, surrounded by books. Something jagged in her chest. Heart pain. She had always wanted to be someone. Now here was someone who had been someone since the day he was born.

“I like your skirt,” he finished his story by saying.

He looked pointedly at the hem of her skirt, the tense border between her body and the fabric. There are so many ways to be looked at and Girl found that she liked this kind of looking. His longings were wide open before her.

“What do you like about it?” she asked.

“I like the texture. Is it velvet?”

“Yes, it’s crushed velvet. You can make it by ironing wrinkles into velvet,” she said. She was excited to have some kind of expertise she could offer him.

“Oh.”

“But I don’t think that’s how they make it in the child-slave factories. What about your shirt, are all of those wrinkles part of the style or are you just too lazy to do your own ironing?”

He smiled and in that smile was a releasing of something. He liked her when she was irreverent.

“I don’t take care of myself. You should see what I eat.”

“What do you eat?”

“I usually just microwave frozen vegetables and tuna and rice. But at the moment, I’m all set. My grandma sent my sister down to visit me and she had made and frozen all this food for me.”

“How much?”

“I think it was about fourteen kilos.”

Girl started laughing.

“Your poor sister.”

“Oh, she’d been meaning to visit me for a really long time. It wasn’t like grandma just sent her.”

“Sure.”

“It’s true!”

“Are you the eldest child in your family?”

“How did you know?”

Girl laughed. She shook her head at him. Who knew that a pampered firstborn son could be so nice.

“I have a meeting now but I have to see you again.”

Normally, Girl would have rolled her eyes at this, another student saying they had a “meeting” when they probably just meant getting a coffee with another student who was editing the student magazine or whatever. But she didn’t roll her eyes, she smiled and said nothing because what else was there for her to say? He had been clear and unembarrassed and sure that she would say yes, so sure that she did not even have to say it. They exchanged numbers and he said he’d call her. That was when she felt he had hoovered up her heart while she wasn’t looking. The boys she had met at university so far had been skinny and pale, aspiring poets who hedged their bets with her, incrementally showing their interest, ready to withdraw it at any sign of coolness from her. Ignoring her one day and coming on strong the next. Refusing to ever admit they liked her, even after dozens of dates and inelegant hints, consumed by their fear of being turned down by a girl while going on and on about how they respected women. Noah was different. She liked him; she liked his straightforward heart.

He was a PhD student researching native plant life in Victorian literature. This was the thing Girl realised, that “research” really just meant putting two irrelevant things next to

each other, then showing how smart you were by drawing unlikely connections between them. Most days she would meet him at twelve and they would lie in the grass of the university lawn, the fresh green smell everywhere. Birds making hoarse whistling sounds. The oak with leaves like cellophane and the sun coming through them. The tree opening into a tangled network of branches where everything was interconnected, woven together. The ancient skin of the oak tree. Stretching out bodies stiff from reading onto a luxurious doona of thick grass. Couples having serious discussions, one girl with the expression of a sad clown. Parents with their kids taking photos, looking in the water. And the two of them in their cool enclave of green, reading books together. They barely spoke. There was a completeness in their silence.

He would walk her to class. He pulled her in sometimes, and she hoped that her peers, the other undergraduate students, most of them still reeling from their end of high school exams would look upon her and understand her achievement in attracting and keeping someone like him. Some girls hold their boyfriends like a pair of patent pumps or a new handbag, Girl covered herself with Noah like a suit jacket draped over the shoulders of a freezing girl at a night-time event.

Walking home after seeing Noah, Girl began noticing everything as if it was new, brand new. Red and white construction tape tied like a little girl's ribbon over metal gates, metal pipes chained together, scaffolding, ladders over an old building strangled by ivy, a help phone. A magpie labelled 248 wearing its wristband loudly like a music festival goer keeping it on for the next day, hoping to be asked all about it. Everything was stronger and sweeter than before, as if her tongue had tasted salt for the first time and it was good.

On weekends, visiting the public gardens, he knew all the names of the plants and everything about them. He walked slow and told her to touch the stickiness of furred leaves, break off a pine needle and smell it, close her eyes and listen closely. She wandered in amongst them, the huge prehistoric trees, dinosaur sized branches, delicate ferns covering the floor, the salty smell of new dirt. Staghorn fern sprouting alien arms, sticky with moths, ant-bitten, brownly unfurling, greenly slapped on; southern sassafras, pink flowers dropped like bad ideas into huge palms, shiny brown pus; shrimp plant; spiky Madagascar palm; pot marigold; delicate silver carpet; Canary Island palms; purple

toadflax; tiny leaves like seeds on the red screened snowflake plant; Bolivian fuchsia, red pearly chandeliers; Japanese aralia, outstretched arms asking for nothing but sun; thick and hardy leopard plant; Marlborough rock daisy; tail bluebell so small she had to put her glasses on; billy buttons not in bloom; common everlasting which were tiny moments of yellow; golden everlasting dying and dry; small and stingy Bhutan cypress; sapphire tower; blood lily, not at all what you'd expect, a thick cruel cactus; twin-flowered agave a sphere splitting up; Queen Victoria agave, a green porcupine; firewheel tree, cheerful globs of red; imperfect coastal hakea homesick and falling asleep; sandpaper fig, rough and sticky like Velcro; her favourite, highland breadfruit; golden oak, quieter than you'd expect; Osage orange, heavy enough to kill a man, bark 3D and so intricate like a wood carving of rushing water; pond peppery with algae, lily pads smooth yellow wrinkled green amphibian skinned; Scots pine; Japanese black pine, each needle soft with that quick scent, balding with bad skin; David viburnum, pettable like an animal, cute like a dog.

As he explained the names of the plants and their good years and bad years, their favourite temperatures and respective places in their respective ecosystems, she listened. She told him her thoughts, about the way the trees made her think of dinosaur legs, the common everlasting like drops of oil, he listened, and he loved the things she told him.

"You're becoming a poet," he said.

And she, in a moment in time when she didn't know if she understood anything, looked at him, grateful for his reassurance. She was becoming someone. It was happening at last. She was here now, with people who knew. And soon, she would know, too.

Though she didn't admit it to herself, she was not just flattered by his attention but intimidated by it. She was a different person around him, cleverer, funnier, more beautiful than she had ever thought of herself as being. And yet she was also stupider, more humourless, more unlovely than she had ever thought of herself as being. He was, in some way, better than her and she was everyday surprised that he had come down from his place to love her, to make her as good as him.

Noah opened the back gate and knocked on the glass sliding doors of Girl's house.

"Hello Grandma, hello Aunty," he said. "I have some mooncakes. Do you celebrate mid-autumn?"

“Of course,” Ma said. She was laughing. “Who do you think we are?”

Noah smiled and shrugged.

“Are you ready yet?” he asked Girl.

“Just putting my shoes on.”

She watched as Ah Ma began cutting open a red bean paste mooncake. Inside it was a burgundy night sky with a yellow moon. She was slicing the full moon into quarter moons then crescent moons.

“Oh, she likes them. It’s been so hard to get her to eat lately,” she said, mostly to herself. “You have the Grandma’s approval,” Ma said to Noah.

“We’ll be back by ten,” Noah said.

They went off together in his old car.

“Why did you think we didn’t take mooncake?” Girl said, buckling her seatbelt.

“I don’t know. Some of the things your mum thinks are Chinese. They’re not really Chinese. They’re Chinese-Malaysian. Like the Yee Siang and the Ang Khu.”

“What do you mean they’re not really Chinese?”

“They’re not.”

“What if they’re just from a different province to your family?”

“They are. That ‘province’ is Malaysia.”

“You know my mum always said you mainlanders have no manners. They say the best thing is to marry a Chinese girl from South-East Asia. That way you get the culture without the arrogance.”

“I know. That’s why I’m dating you. I would even say, you shouldn’t be dating me. You’re too good for me.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“What?”

“If I’m too good for you then why haven’t I met your family yet?”

“I don’t know.”

“How could you not know? With all your big thoughts and deep ideas. How could there be anything you actually don’t know?”

“I don’t know, it’s my grandma actually.”

“What?”

“I dated a girl who didn’t speak Mandarin once and she was so angry with me. And then my mum was angry with me. I just– I don’t want it to happen again.”

“But I still speak Chinese.”

“It’s not real Chinese. It’s dialect.”

Girl fell silent, all of the fight drained from her. They drove to the movies in silence, they walked into the theatre in silence, they queued for tickets in silence. When the film came on, Girl was relieved to hear the gunshots, the cries for help, the bad dialogue. She needed to hear someone speaking somewhere, even if they weren’t real people or places or conversations.

Once when Girl was a girl she had had a substitute teacher from Hong Kong come in. The teacher had asked her if she knew how to speak Mandarin and she had lied. The teacher began speaking to her in semi-automatic gunfire Mandarin and Girl had said the two words of Mandarin she knew, “Mayo, Mayo! Mayo Ren!” *No, no! No people!* She said it over and over, pleading with the teacher in her own way to stop. The teacher was laughing, and the other students were bored, playing with carpet-threads come undone and drawing on their hands. There was one girl who could speak Chinese, she sat in the corner laughing with big white teeth. They never saw the substitute teacher again. But the girl in Girl’s class who had laughed, she was still there. And Girl felt shame clouding her face every time their eyes met after that.

It was difficult to find an aggregate for this, the number of older Chinese women with tight hair and loose clothes who would speak to Girl in the streets, the supermarket, the cinema, the airport. They came up to her with the relief of a child seeing its mother after having been lost. They asked Girl for directions in Mandarin or Cantonese, they put their full confidence in her. Girl smiled and nodded her encouragement till they finished speaking. Then she would say the words, “I don’t speak Mandarin. Hokkien? Dialect?” Sometimes they forgave her, sometimes they didn’t.

One night, Girl dreamt that Noah and his family were seated at a long table with her family. His mother began to speak to him, holding his arm. She listened and she understood. She understood what they were saying to each other.

“I understand!” She said suddenly, and her swan feathers were bursting into full bloom over her body. All the shame she had felt about not understanding Chinese, real Chinese and not just the dialect she spoke with her Ah Ma, fell away.

With the force of her exclamation, she seemed to shake herself awake. She woke up with a glow in her chest, a memory of understanding. Then she realised it wasn’t a memory but a dream.

She woke up remembering she didn’t speak Mandarin. Remembering her parents were two nobodies from Kampung Bengali, her mum still proud they had owned a TV growing up, her dad just proud that he was alive. Her Ah Ma a forgotten woman who had spent her younger life doing other people’s dishes and couldn’t stop feeling that this was still who she was. And who was she, the daughter of these sons and daughters? Girl didn’t want to know.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Noah invited Girl to fly up with him to Sydney and it felt like a concession to Girl. They were to first attend an academic conference and then the wedding of one of Noah's close friends. Noah would be one of his groomsmen. A way of establishing the seriousness of their relationship without having it established to Noah's family. Though she couldn't really afford to, Girl bought a pass to the whole conference. She told Noah that she wanted to hear him present, but really she wanted to see if she would understand the other presentations.

Though she didn't expect to understand the pontificating disguised as intellectual curiosity, the ten-page long comments disguised as questions, the precarious sense of self disguised as arrogance, the automatically read-off-the-page presentations disguised as playful repartee, Girl found she did understand and that she understood even more than her clever boyfriend. She had always longed to meet someone cleverer than herself, to be taught and presided over somehow. To meet an old master in the full flower of his thoughts. But she never had met anyone yet who was cleverer than her. Her entry to academic circles through her boyfriend taught her that. These people were not all brilliant, they were mostly lucky, some lazy, others simply comfortable speaking often and loudly.

At the wedding, the bride – who looked unrecognisable even to herself with her Broadway make-up on – and the groom – who looked flushed with alcohol and success – kissed. They ate an eight-course Chinese meal of everything Girl could have ever wanted and more. Picked jellyfish and sesame, crab maw soup, whole fish, so fresh they looked as if they were still alive, a great lacquered pig. The crowd, bombarded by food, didn't bother even pretending they were listening to the speeches of the family members. Girl, knowing no one and sitting alone while Noah walked tall through the tables like a celebrity and organised so many Yam Seng toasts felt she was the only one listening, it was as if every line being delivered was being specially delivered to her, the only one lonely enough to listen. The mother of the bride stood draped in ghostly thin scarves and told her daughter in her speech, "in Chinese culture, your mother and father-in-law are now your mother and father." Girl felt as if she had been sucker-punched. She was already failing. She was

failing before she had even begun. And she had failed before; she remembered Jude's family. To them she was just another Chinese girl on a factory line of other Chinese girls.

She had always imagined herself as a girl in a long dress, with a box of chocolates shaped like seashells or maybe a box of mooncakes, a bag of Chinese doughnuts, a bag of almond biscuits. Anything it would take, she would buy the most expensive kind. She had always imagined herself being the perfect daughter, respectful, gentle, quiet, kind. They would be proud to be her mother and father. But how could she do it when they didn't even want her at their table. She felt herself disliking Noah's family, thinking they hate me, they're snobs, they're teng kok lang, they're not wah lang, and this, too, was a bad thought. The thought of a bad daughter, a bad girl. But there was no dress, no table, no mother, no daughter, no father, no chocolate, no biscuit, no cakes. If a girl is good but there is no one to be good to, then was she still a good girl? Is she still a girl?

They were in the car again on their way to a book launch of some person Noah knew who might notice if he didn't attend the book launch and then not attend Noah's future book launch which, when once these kinds of people were added up, would mean that there would be no one at Noah's future book launch, no future book launch and no future.

"I don't even know why I'm coming," Girl said.

"You don't have to, I never said you had to."

"You did."

"I didn't."

"You said you wanted me there, that it'd make you want to go."

"It's only because I love you so much."

"Don't say that. Don't even lie to me because if you loved me, you'd take me home to meet your family and you won't. So, you don't."

"Don't question the fact that I love you."

"I will. You can say it all you like but my mum always said talk is cheap and it is. It's not even cheap, it's free. Love is costly."

"Alright, you know what? Let's go right now, let's meet my family right now," Noah said.

He started twisting the steering wheel round and round and doing a U-turn. Cars honked and brakes screeched.

“Oh my God.”

“Don’t *Oh my God* me, we’re going over right now, right this second. Then you’ll know I love you and whatever else you want.”

“No, no I don’t want to.”

“Well, you’ve got no choice.”

“I’m not wearing the right dress.”

“Do you think that’ll matter to my mum and grandma?”

“Yes.”

“Well then that’s why you have to meet them, I guess. So you can find out they don’t care about any of that stuff.”

“I haven’t brought anything.”

“Now, you’re just making excuses.”

“No, it’s important to me.”

“Well, this is important to me. Isn’t this what you wanted?”

“But this isn’t how I wanted it.”

They pulled up at a townhouse. It was brick and beige and oxblood roofed. There was a bell that played an overlong song and Noah rang it repeatedly. He was pressing it over and over again so the song didn’t have time to finish and kept starting from the start again. He jabbed on the bell again and again. There was no response.

“There’s no one home. The lights are out,” Noah said. “Don’t be like that, they’re just out, it doesn’t mean anything. Let’s take you back home.”

But the Girl had gone. She was already making her own way home. The hot rush was inside her and she was running with a force that meant no one could catch her up.

As Girl came home and lay down on the carpet, lush with ancient dust, Ah Ma called Girl into her bedroom. Girl came in. Ah Ma was ironing with *Everybody Loves Raymond* on.

“Girl, do you have boyfriend or not?”

It seemed that she had been turning this question over in her mind since Girl had gone.

“Yes,” Girl lied.

“Does he have house?”

“No.”

“Does he have car?”

“Yes.”

“Does he have job?”

“No.”

“Find a good one with house, car, job, good-good, doesn’t go out at night. Settle down. Don’t change your mind.”

On the TV, Deborah, Marie and Amy were shaking with anger, pointing at a column in the obituary section. Raymond, Robert and Frank stood in the doorway shrinking. The angry wives and the cowering husbands. The imagined studio audience was laughing as if they’d never known sadness.

“Mm.”

“I know.”

“What?”

“I know you like ang moh.”

“Har?”

“I know you like ang moh.”

Raymond was explaining that they’d been at the races, eating hot dogs and placing bets, not at therapy. His wife stood like a lightweight boxer. They embraced. The studio audience said *awww* like they’d never seen love before.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

In her room, Girl alternated between looking up Noah's Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Spotify listens etc. etc. and looking up at the photos on her mirror of all the famous men she had ever wanted to sleep with. She had found the highest resolution images she could on Google images, printed the pictures out in black and white (cheaper), cut them out with white borders like a polaroid and stuck them up with Blu Tack. Baba wouldn't let her put Blu Tack on the walls (paint peeling) but the mirror was even better. Every time she did her hair she was coronated with a crown of handsome men. They watched her as she undressed, they motivated her to eat less and run more like so many perfect, brutal personal trainers. She looked up at them now, Hugh Grant, Richard Gere, Marco Pierre White, John Corbett. Hugh with the floppy hair and stuttering eyelids, Richard with those rimless glasses, Marco (there were a few photos of him, all when he was young) brandishing a cleaver, playing with a telephone cord, blowing smoke into the face of the camera, John shirtless while getting baptised in oil in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.

Today, she thought about her list of men in a new way. She Googled the various ex-wives, current wives, second wives and girlfriends of these men. All of them as white and skinny as patron saints. She had found what she was looking for, the sadomasochistic satisfaction of rejection. She made a new list a list of white men who had dated Asian women:

- Woody Allen and Soon-Yi Previn
- Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan
- Rupert Murdoch and Wendi Deng Murdoch
- Hugh Grant and Tinglan Hong

She read about their love stories, Allen in his mug shots at the police station; Zuckerberg in an apparently normal relationship but evil as an entrepreneur; Murdoch, ditto; Grant (she held onto this one like a talisman) who apparently impregnated Tinglan Hong at the same time as two other women. When he was asked about his baby with Hong by Ellen DeGeneres on her talk show, he joined in laughing at the baby's name. *Jing Xi*, they said, making it sound like two samurai swords clashing. If the collective age gaps of these couples were a person, that person would be ninety-two years old.

She moved on to making a list of Asian men and Asian women in love in Hollywood. The list went like this:

Girl put the two lists up on her mirror.

This was the montaged part in the non-existent Hollywood film about Girl's life when she began making herself throw up with a toothbrush she kept in her bag. Who knew it was that easy? In a past life, throwing up had been a betrayal of the body, it had blindsided her. She had found herself hovering over a plastic bag or a bucket or a toilet, backstabbed by herself. Now, it was a way of holding the body hostage, showing a self-command as absolute as God hovering over the void and making light out of his bare hands. She didn't know what she was throwing up. It wasn't just food, it wasn't just the "feeling" of being fat, as if weight gain was so tied up with the emotions that it didn't just make one feel a certain way, it was a feeling in and of itself, it was something else. She went to university in the mornings and threw up her breakfast in the public toilets in the park near her house, she threw up her lunch on campus, she went home and then dinner was a problem. How to throw it up? She let it sit there, burning in her stomach like a heap of hot coals on the head of an enemy. Making yourself throw up usually had the perk of being able to eat too much of everything and gain not much of anything but she starved herself too, for good measure, and ran. She could only run about two kilometres as she got weaker but that was plenty for burning off the little she was consuming. She began transforming into a beautiful woman in front of her mirror, adorned with handsome men. To mask this transformation, she wore big baggy clothes than hung like curtains around the soon to be opened exhibit of her body.

The fifth or the sixth day she did it was a dividing point, a clean knife between the now and the not yet. She had always wanted to be someone and now she was becoming someone. She got up early with a bright, shining sense of purpose. She microwaved half a sachet of berry-flavoured porridge. She ate it, chewing each bite at least fifteen times. She had five cups of weak black tea, re-using the same tea-bag each time. The black tea always made her feel nicely nauseous. She walked to the park near her house, went into the public toilets, which she had always despised for their inexplicable wetness, unflushed

shit and cavernous darkness. She took out a toothbrush from her backpack and made herself throw up. She heard herself gag from a funnel deep inside herself and then the food torpedoed into the toilet bowl. She removed another toothbrush from her bag and brushed her teeth.

She went to university, ran into the lecture hall to avoid being late, which was good, any extra exertion was good. The lecturer was a man with a bread-roll face, he wore a tee-shirt and jeans, clothes that communicated his relatability and honesty. He said he didn't know anything more about writing or reading poetry than the great you sitting in front of him did. No more than you and you and you and you and you and you he said pointing to students in different parts of the room. He pointed at Girl and Girl wanted to ask him if in that case he was no more entitled to his salary than she was. This was truly gweilo-speak, gweilo-words about the gweilo-world in which there were no experts – no one who was not an expert, no one who was bad at anything, no one who shouldn't refrain from giving their opinions, no one above anyone else, no distinctions made between anything. He had brought in an old-fashioned projector specially for the lecture and set it up slowly, making jokes about technology. Girl realized this was the custom for lectures in the humanities. He had a newspaper article printed onto contact paper on the projector. It was a review of a book about a Vietnamese refugee who was obsessed with the number eight and whose whole life was patterned after the number eight. The book review began by explaining the significance of the number eight in Chinese culture, rhyming *ba* with *fa*. It talked about luck in Chinese culture. Girl found the explanation embarrassing for some reason. She hoped no one associated her with it. He pulled out a big black sharpie and asked the students in the lecture theatre which words he should black out. This is how a poem is made, he said. The students yelled communally, BLACK IT OUT. They began by blacking out all the explanations about Chinese culture, they blacked out *ba* and *fa*. Girl felt a mysterious pain in her side as they did. She felt actual pain. Was she just hungry? They kept the words "Vietnamese Refugee". They were laughing at the poem they had made. As Girl packed her things back into the bag, she thought to herself about all the teachers and other concerned adults throughout her life who had told her to lighten up. But it wasn't so easy for her to lighten up when she already felt so light. How would it feel, she wondered, to be so solid, so heavy that you had anything to lose? She left the lecture hall.

She ate half a piece of bread without anything on it. She found a toilet, luxuriously clean this time, put the toothbrush down her windpipe again and found comfort and a kind

of meditative peace in the predictability of the routine. It was like a Gregorian chant or a ballerina's stretching at the barre, a discipline that was beautiful for the way it primed your soul and readied it to receive something good. She sat in the next class silent as a cat, watching the other students like they were a movie.

Her phone began ringing, it was her mum. She walked out of the class into the corridor, feeling mysterious and important.

"Ah Ma is going berserk at the moment. She won't stop yelling at me. She thinks you're *puar peh* and she keeps saying *Girl is vomiting, Girl is vomiting*. I had such a busy day then I finally sat down to have my lunch and she said to me, *you're here crossing your legs and Girl is crying. Your own child. You don't even care for your own child.*" Ma laughed a little at the last line. "She's so distressed and she keeps walking round and round in circles, in the house, then out again, and every time she passes me she's on about you again."

"Oh."

"Anyway, can you sort of like come home soon and just show her you're ok. If she sees you she'll feel reassured. Then she'll eat and take her medication and shower. She refuses to eat or drink or anything now."

"Can."

Girl heard Ma say those unnatural words, "sort of like," and thought how vulnerable parents were to their children's vernacular, fifty-year-old women sounding like teenagers.

"Yeah."

Girl went home. She was light with the feeling that the fingers of Ah Ma's mind had reached out and touched her own mind. When Girl got to the front door, Ah Ma was standing in the curtains of her bedroom window, the window open and the broken fly wire hanging open like a sigh. She was rubbing her hands and muttering. Her eyes were dusty as a library.

"Ah Ma," Girl said.

"Ei," she said.

Girl went inside. Ah Ma began laughing and laughing and pointing at her.

"Ah Ma," Girl said.

They looked at each other and said nothing as was their custom. Ah Ma turned back to the window and looked out onto the street rubbing her hands. Girl wondered if her sense of their telepathic connection was as silly as it seemed.

"How is she?" Ma asked.

“She’s laughing.”

“Will she eat?”

Girl went back into the room.

“Ah Ma, chiat pui.”

“You eat first, you eat first.”

“No, it’s time for you to eat.”

“You eat first.”

She came out empty-handed and warmed up some leftover food for herself up. She ate slowly, the food was burning a hole in her stomach. When she had enough, she took Ah Ma’s daytime medication and food in a bowl. Girl busied the food and the pink and white pills in. Ah Ma took them. Girl felt a sense of anti-climax.

“There she feels better now, knowing you’re alright,” Ma said. “She kept saying she had seen you vomiting twice once in a park and once at school. That you weren’t well and I have to take you home.”

Ma laughed and so did Girl. It was the seventh day and Girl decided to rest from her regime for the rest of the day. That was the first and the last day for Girl. The last day of her transformation and the first day of. Of she wasn’t sure what now.

PART FIVE

Chapter Twenty-Nine

After university finished there was the big green slab of the future. Girl veered away from the future and into the present, she went and got a job. She got a job as the Social Media Manager of the start-up business, Positive Energy. It was mysterious to her why a company that sold light and heat, that did the essential work of making a house come alive, would need to have an “online presence.” But the job was money and while money was many things to many people: validation; status; the ball and chain of social life; an opiate; emotional cushioning from existential despair; crass, not polite, conversation; an abstract number; a social bracket; money for Girl was money. She had noticed this when she was in school and watched her friends (or rather Jude and *his* friends) eating pancakes and ice cream for \$14.99. How could a person not choke on the difference between the price of the ingredients: flour (\$1 a kilo), eggs (\$2.50 a dozen), milk (\$2 for two litres), water (negligible), ice-cream (\$3 for two litres), meaning that two pancakes and one scoop of ice-cream must cost roughly 10.5 cents to make (and those weren’t even commercial prices), the skill required to make pancakes (none) and the price being paid? *I can just make them for you at home*, she often said to him, the effort of watching another person losing fourteen dollars and eighty-eight-and-a-half cents was exhausting for her. It took much more energy than the actual effort of gathering the ingredients together and making the thing itself. *It’s about the experience*, he would tell her, lengthening, dragging out, making that last word last for days. *Experience*. Money to some people was about *experiences*; a person who didn’t waste money would be, by this logic, woefully inexperienced, unenlightened in the ways in which one could move from pleasurable experience to pleasurable experience. So, money was money was money was money, for Girl. This was why she went from writing poems to writing tweets, from drawing pictures to uploading photos she had taken of her colleagues smiling their internet smiles.

The office was populated entirely by two types of people: a) university students sitting at the phones and b) graduates filling out excel spreadsheets. She was a freshly picked graduate already wilting in the icebox of the office air con. It was the kind of office where all of the desks were pushed together to make one huge “co-working space,” even though no one spoke to each other at it. It was the kind of office where signs that said “no bad vibes” and “be positive” filled your eyeline and if anyone said they were tired or

bored or couldn't wait to knock off, someone inevitably read one of these signs out to them until they were tattooed permanently onto your prefrontal cortex. The office had an old TV that had been converted into an aquarium with a few fish that were somehow smiling. It had an expensive basketball ring hanging over the recycling bin which would later be donated to a local community outreach program because no one ever dared to use it. There was a long slide that went from the third floor all the way down to the ground floor that you could use as an alternative to the elevator, though Girl had never seen anyone use it. Once Girl had to work overtime to cover for someone else on her team who had gotten ill right before end of financial year and she was given a "Most Dedicated Employee on the Floor Award" the next week. She wasn't given overtime pay but it was a nice thought anyway, it was something she could put up somewhere. They had Friday Night Drinks On Us when bottles of cider and beer and wine were brought into the office at four pm. This was not as exciting as it sounded, in fact the first hour and a half consisted of a team huddle (and by this, they meant superiors criticising people for misdemeanors such as turning up late or not getting enough sales and affirming those who had felt so anxious about being criticised that they had showed up conspicuously early, limiting fluid intake so they weren't seen as leaving their desk too often to pee etc. etc.) and the next hour and a half was mostly people getting drunk and saying the mean things they couldn't say when they were sober to expel their sadness at living and working in this great panopticon of positivity.

Girl sat next to a Katie with a thin face like a slice of white light. She was kind, always offering Girl cups of tea using her own good teabags which she kept in her drawer and pretzels and chocolates, even offering her a bite from her ham and cheese croissant once. She asked Girl if she minded that she was eating a tuna and bean salad at her desk and if there were any food smells she didn't like. Katie put the sales stats into a document and analysed the data. On the first Friday night, Katie asked Girl if she was going to stay for the second hour and a half of the Friday Night Drinks On Us. Girl didn't really need to be invited to this event, everyone was, but she liked that Katie invited her. The only thing was that she couldn't go no matter how much she tried to make herself. It felt too much like ruse. The free drinks in lieu of proper pay, it felt the company was paying her a sugary compliment in order to avoid having to speak to her. After that time, Katie didn't ask her about the drinks anymore. She missed the implicit invitations but felt she couldn't go along without one. Sometimes, sitting at her desk, scrolling through Facebook, she wondered why she had taken the job. She wondered if it was to prove to herself that it

was over. Though what “it” was she couldn’t say, even to herself. After all the talk of being a poet, of being someone who was writing a new kind of form, here she was. She copy-pasted a gif of a fat kid dancing and queued it up on Hootsuite for a TGIF post for the next week.

It was in the tearoom that they first saw each other. Girl was sitting at the table, eyes drawn inevitably towards the TV screen. She was eating a fried egg and tomato sauce sandwich and the news was on. It seemed that Kendall Jenner had come to Australia in order to pose wordlessly in front of some shops in Sydney.

“Hi.”

It was Jude but it wasn’t Jude. The Jude she remembered was the fly-wire Jude, thin-bodied, soft-mouthed and unserious-eyed. The Jude she saw was thicker, more oak trunk than birch bough. He was still beautiful, with hands like leaves and eyes like horses. But he was made from a different material somehow. It was strange what four years could do. She stared up at him, still as a picture of herself. “I didn’t know you worked here when I got the job. I guess it’s too late to quit now,” he said, the possibility of laughter moving behind his eyes.

He was speaking to her as if they were old friends with nothing behind them. It was as if she had offered him an old letter and he had returned to her a large piece of foolscap with nothing written on it. She felt herself pulled into the deal he was striking her, a pastless moment in time. Then she tore it up. She moved her silent gaze from him to the TV screen. In her sightline, she focused carefully on Kendall Jenner cutting a pink ribbon in front of a glass door until he ceased to exist. Out of the corner of her eyes, she traced a red figure, the watermelon rind smile turned to an empty passionfruit. She knew how rarely he lost control. His face slammed shut and he left the room with his hands curled into balls of fire.

She had to find out what he was doing there from Katie who, dependably, knew exactly what his role was and who had various hypotheses on how his recent interview had gone. She said he was working in sales, phoning people up to hassle them about which energy company they were with. But that the interviewers had loved his attitude, feeling that he embodied the values of the company and given him the unofficial role of Morale Captain as well. What that meant, no one really knew.

It turned out that Jude’s innovations as Morale Captain were nothing more than an extension of what the company already did for its workers. In addition to the slogans and the desire to make work a space where they didn’t just work, but a space where they could

play, now they could also *learn*. He organized monthly morale-boosting sessions in which everyone was called together to learn how to make dumplings or cut up flowers to make arrangements or how to ride a unicycle. He played the kind of music you heard at an eighteenth birthday party or an unusually tame nightclub through the sound system, and made a spectacle of his dancing through the office space for everyone to see. He wrote songs about the office on his guitar and performed them in the lunch hour when everyone would otherwise be sitting at their desk eating their meals while checking emails or, if they were feeling particularly rebellious, replying to Facebook messages. In addition to Friday Night Drinks On Us he instituted: Casual Friday, BYO pet to work day and also Email-free Friday. The last of these was particularly popular, it was the one day when they weren't allowed to send any internal emails but were encouraged to go up to the person they needed to contact, look them in the eye, ask them how they were and then communicate what they would otherwise communicate by email.

This was how, after months of carefully not entering the lunch room when the other person was in it, of leaving conversations as the other person began hovering at the border of it, of pretending to be completely blind to the presence of the other person, they made contact again. Girl received a call at her desk.

"Hi, there can I speak to the owner of the house?"

"I think there's been a wrong number," she said.

This was the kind of speech she had learned from working in an office. Not *you have the wrong number*, but *there's been a wrong number*, assigning no wrongdoing to anyone at all.

"Can I at least ask you which energy company you're with?"

"This is the number of an office."

"Well, then do you think we could get a drink?"

It was Jude's voice. She recognised it now. He was laughing.

Drinking always made her feel warm and sleepy like she was a small marsupial curled up in a pouch of dimly lit heat. They sat in the booth seats of a bar across the road from where they worked. What was there to say to each other?

"I'm sorry," Jude said.

Girl looked at him.

"I'm sorry for what happened to you in high school. I know it seemed like I thought it didn't mean anything. But it did."

"I have so much more to be sorry about. I'm so sorry."

“I know, but I wanted to say I was sorry anyway.”

“Thanks.”

It was strange how much this meant. It couldn't undo it but it could do something else. Though what that was, Girl wasn't so sure.

“Anyway, how did you end up here?”

“Where?”

“Here.”

“This bar?”

“No, I don't really mean a place. I mean a time. Working here.”

“I wanted to ask you the same thing.”

“It was advertised on a job ad board at my uni. And it was better than nothing.”

“So, you don't love being the Morale Captain?”

“I don't want to say anything that might be bad for morale.”

Girl laughed.

“But I still want to know how you ended up here. What happened to all your books and stories and drawings? I always thought you would end up being someone and I would be a footnote in your biography.”

“You don't really believe that do you?”

“What?”

“That's what everyone thinks when they're really young. At school, anyone who's good at maths is a famous mathematician, anyone who sings in the school musical is an opera singer, anyone half-good at anything is the next prime minister. You know.”

“I know that's what everyone thinks about themselves. But that's just what I thought about you.”

“Well, it turns out I'm no genius. Whatever that even means.”

“I don't know. I don't think a genius is a genius. It's just someone who's been loved enough to do the things they need to do.”

“What?”

“You just need to be loved well enough to have the liberty to do things.”

“Isn't that a bit. I don't know.”

“I know it sounds like that. But it's not. I think you should give it another go.”

“What?”

“This.”

Girl paused.

“I don’t think I can. I’m sorry but I don’t think I can,” she said.

Jude looked at her and in the surprise that swelled in his eyes she felt something like a confirmation. He hadn’t expected her to reject him. His presumption told her she was right to.

Chapter Thirty

Girl took a week of sick leave to avoid seeing Jude for a while. She spent most of her time lying in bed watching movies on her laptop, adjourning only to the kitchen for two-minute noodles or to the toilet. During one of her trips to the kitchen, Girl saw Ah Ma. Ah Ma, smaller than small in green polyester pants. Elastic waistband and cotton wool hair. Brown skin like dried persimmon and wearing only her white bra on top. Soft cup before it was romantic; lace flowers, translucent with age. Her eyes blue-rimmed and very black as she used her scrunched-up undervest, to rub the skin of her upper arm. She rubbed and rubbed until the skin was polished pink.

“Ma Ma, lou cho ha mih?”

“Beh peh.”

Her skin wouldn't go white. White like clean sheets in flight, wings clipped by plastic pegs on the line, white like a young girl with good skin. She went over to the condiments cupboard. Neat and full of things bought in bulk. Five litre glass bottles of soy sauce, dark, light, caramel. Extra virgin olive oil in a greasy metal tin and a bottle of distilled white vinegar for pickling things. Ah Ma unscrewed the cap of the vinegar, wet her undervest, then rubbed it on her arms. The smell burned the air with its mean, acid feeling. The skin on her arm, a great red wound.

Girl watched her. The desire to disappear or to be transfigured into a flash of white light, so often thought of as a young woman's disease. It made sense to her now that it was actually an old woman's problem.

The next day, Girl watched Ah Ma with sewing glasses on her nose, in compression socks and dry hard skin. Bent over Girl's wardrobe as she rifled through her sweaters, her socks and her handbag. She removed a make-up bag patterned with realistic looking cats on it from her handbag. A toothbrush, a blunt lipstick without a cap, a receipt, a crushed strip of Nurofen.

“Ah Ma, lou cho hamit?”

“Your bedroom is like salted vegetables. Wait a while and people might come over and then how will it be?”

“I'll do it myself.”

“I'm looking for my gold. My gold, someone's stolen it.”

“It's not here.”

She examined each item before re-organising it. Removed Girl's earrings from a cup in her room and put them into an old tobacco tin that used to belong to her Fat uncle. The books arranged roughly by how often Girl used them she re-arranged according to size and the colour of their spines. Crumpled up jumpers she folded on her knees and replaced but by texture rather than type, fleecy tracksuit pants, jumpers and jackets all piled together and denim jackets, shirts and jeans all together in another pile. Girl was too tired to confront her again, so she went into the kitchen and fixed herself some grilled cheese and tomato in a sandwich press. While the sandwich toasted, she went back into her room to check on her. There was a sort of fascinating alternate logic to the way she re-arranged Girl's bedroom. It took her some going through her things to work out which items were gone: step stool for reaching the higher shelves of her wardrobe, good silk shirt dress, lace bras, track pants, glass jar with metal lid, small hand towel for swimming and gold-painted earrings. As she walked into Ah Ma's room she could hear her sandwich hissing and spluttering as the cheese burnt on the grill. Ah Ma was emptying her drawers and the washing basket under her bed and laying out each of her possessions on her bed and on the floor. Spools of thread with sewing scissors, Body Shop foot cream, shells, dogs that nod their heads when you tapped them, cardigans, Danish Butter Style Cookie Tins, pants, bedsheets, fabric samples, bottles of dried chilli, Zam-Buk and Tiger Balm.

"Ah Ma, do you know where my towel is?"

"No, how would I know?"

"You tidied my room."

"I never touched your room, I didn't take anything!"

"You—"

"I never even stepped inside your room. It was someone else. Do you know who it could be? I can't find my gold. My rings and bracelets. Maybe May held them for me at the church and still has. Maybe Wesley. You know he's studying in the Sydney now? May hasn't come for a long time. Maybe she has been keeping for me."

Aunty May hadn't come round for a while and Girl guessed that maybe there weren't many church events on over the winter. But after a while it came out, this thing that had happened, a month and a half back. There were three versions of what might have happened that were all at once circulating amongst the Chinese church community.

1. While Ah Ma and Aunty May were standing on the piling, red carpet steps of the Chinese church, between the vase with fake flowers streaming out of its top and the stage and under the painted mural that reads GOD IS LOVE in gold, Ah Ma hit Aunty

May with her cane. Aunt May fell down the stairs and her leg had a bruise *this* big. A watercolour bruise painted blue and purple and grey and white. Ah Ma walked away, her face shorn of remorse.

2. While Ah Ma and Aunt May were standing on the cement steps of the front of the church, near the signboard that read: *Chinese Church, Mandarin-spoken service 11am, Cantonese-spoken service 2pm, English-spoken service 6pm. All welcome here.* They were standing at the right-hand side, Ah Ma clutching the railing as she lowered her bad leg down slowly. The red, white and purple geraniums growing wild on the sloping soil next to the stairs, their big soft and frilly, black and green leaves mixing in with the maidenhair. Aunt May was helping Ah Ma, trying to carry her bag for her and Ah Ma bumped Aunt May's hand away with too much force and Aunt May, by far the younger but the weaker of the two women, fell down the stairs. Her eye was closed over with swelling for days. Even still, months on, she wonders if she needs cataract surgery.

3. While Ah Ma and Aunt May were standing on the black-veined marble steps of the baptism pit, they got into a row. Ah Ma asked Aunt May if she had her gold but Aunt May interpreted her question as an accusation. Aunt May had already begun to walk away in anger when Ah Ma drew back her cane to threaten Aunt May and accused her of lying. Aunt May went into the hall to get a serve of rice, plain egg omelette, radioactive curry chicken (too much turmeric and oil, not enough chili powder) and limp white cabbage. Ah Ma stood outside the hall, sulking, muttering under her breath, though no one heard exactly what she was saying.

When Girl heard this, she went into Ah Ma's room when she was in the front yard one morning and rummaged through her handbag. She found Ah Ma's tiny pocketbook with the names and numbers she had written down herself as a kid. Ah Ma had long forgotten how to use the phone. A skill unused for so long made her muscle memory atrophy. Most days she stood at the window gesturing wildly to the outside world. In the opaque version of her in the glass, Girl saw her face, relaxed with happiness, generous with laughter, her hands gesturing like a drama teacher. She gestured to the chilli plant under her window, her hands describing the shape of her plucking them, opening them up, drying them and watching their fertile coins rolling out when eaten. Girl had never seen her so happy and relaxed. *Dada chilli. Big chilli. Chilli Dada*, she says, while rubbing her hands together to sand them down. She said this to the friends she calls the Dada people and they are everywhere. On the TV she never turned off, outside her window, behind the big sliding doors that led towards the backyard. Girl looked for May's

number amongst the five or six numbers scrawled onto the first page, the A-section. The rest of the pages in the book were blank. The phone was picked up almost immediately as if May had been sitting by the phone and waiting for this call for months.

“How come you don’t visit my Grandma anymore?”

“She tried to hit me.”

“She’s old, she’s not well.”

“She meant it.”

“How do you know she meant it?”

“She did.”

“How do you know? Don’t you have compassion on the old? She didn’t mean it.”

“She did.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I do.”

“Why would she try that?”

“Because.”

“Because what.”

“Because I asked her about her past as a maid. I wanted to counsel her, let her talk about it. Open up.”

“What did she say?”

“She tried to hit me. And I ran.”

Girl hung up. The doctors said that the hippocampus and the amygdala, those strange foreign place names, were becoming unmoored from the rest of the brain. The frontal cortex was shrinking, its nerve cells were blinking like bad lights, then their bulbs were blowing altogether. Girl couldn’t understand it. They said the brain was damaged. But how could something undamaged become damaged without cause.

This was what Girl understood: The silence around these things was Ah Ma’s right. A right to not have to explain herself, not to open up, not to have her story pitied and prayed for and known. Ah Ma had known what she was doing. She would never forgive what had happened to her. But she could forget it. She was forgetting more and more these days, forgetting even to be angry, to judge, to yell, to be herself. And this was when Girl worked out what to do next. She went to write her down. She went back to write her down.

Chapter Thirty-One

Girl goes back. She goes back in time and place. Her and Baba are the only ones who can get leave, so. Baba never speaks much: what's past is past. But he has the self-righteousness of someone who has seen and suffered enough. He thinks people are to blame for their own problems; if he could escape in Malaysia then why can't they escape in Australia? Girl and Baba, they argue about this on the plane, they argue about it in the airport and then they are driving out of the airport in silence. He thinks Australia is too soft, too good, like a big bed with lots of pillows. Everyone is half-asleep there. This sounds like scorn, but then think. This is what he wanted for his girl.

They are driving slowly past the sea, half unseeable behind a green and blue block of flats, tall green fences in that pandan colour, empty stall shaped like a young coconut, Protons parked parallel, bougainvillea, a Tropicana Twister vending machine, a temple, high-rise flats and construction sites for more high-rise flats, the sound of someone starting their motorcycle, abandoned parking lots, the rust fences taken over by lush weeds, a small playground in dirty pastel, a Malay woman with a Mayo Magic apron and plastic gloves on is staring at them. Last time there was only one temple around, now there are so many. Then they are there, back in the place he left. There is a wide-open space, dirt driven on, there is a tree with green mangos clustered on it, all alone. A Tiger beer and a Guinness ad, both upside-down, used as what? Girl does not know. There are roosters in cages and pigeons hanging from the roof in their cages, there's a small rust covering over a car. Oh ga-u garage kee. Last time boh. There's even a garage now. They walk through their garage to a narrow walkway stuffed with pot plants, dusty plastic chairs, those glass windows shaped like large blinds that you could shut in or out. There's the sound of a baby fussing, a Bollywood song playing from somewhere inside, miscellaneous yelling, glimpses of lit-up shrines. A red letterbox, 2940 hanging on a fence covered in clothes and leaves. A house just like all the others, wood, white, rust, with a motor out the front and a Manchester United jersey hanging from the line. There it is. They are walking and an old Malay woman, at once one-hundred years old and thirty years old with the face of a soothsayer, hits Baba hard on the arm. He looks at her. He is looking at her and she is saying his name. She was there then and she is there now. She is ninety-five, she says, but she is still having children. She has eighteen children and eighty-seven grandchildren. She hits him again in disbelief. Maggie is dying, she says.

She doesn't say it like gossip or like a message, she says it like a prophecy. Dad nods but says nothing. They keep talking in Malay.

Girl wanders off to the back of the house, looking at the deep-down street drain. A fat rat runs past, rubbish floating along in the water. A voice creeps right up behind her.

"Hello, Ah Girl."

"Hello, Aunty," she says.

It is an auto-reply, Girl says it without even turning around.

"Not Aunty, Grandma."

Her hands are grasping Girl's waist as if afraid it might unfurl. She kisses her on the cheek. There are kisses that are given and kisses that are taken. This was a kiss that had been taken. Girl says nothing about it.

Later Girl would ask Baba who the woman was, and Baba would say that Ah Ma was the Wife Number One and that the woman who called herself Grandma was Wife Number Two. Girl would think: *Before this I thought that first meant the athlete on the podium, the one who holds a place no other can claim.* It was the opposite way when it came to wives, Girl now knew. First means the one who was not enough, the one who was cast out. Ah Ma became a maid in a big, strange house after the second wife moved in. She cared for other people's children, cleaned other people's houses, cooked other people's food so that her children could play with the boss's children; she lived in a corner room of the big house and ate the scraps that fell from their lips.

Wife Number Two looked ordinary. No one looked like Ah Ma with her dark skin, sad eyes and bitter mouth. Her hunch and bad leg drifting over floorboards. She was happiest when she was angry and making other people angry. The second wife was a woman like other women. Fresh perm and hair dyed a blue-black colour. She liked to be likeable. Her glasses were darkening in the sun. Girl was often surprised by the unremarkableness of the women men left their wives for. Often, they were younger but uglier, fatter, shorter. Other times they looked and sounded identical to the first. In Girl's view, men had bad taste in women and women had bad taste in men.

As she turned these things over in her mind, Girl felt anger blooming in her like a sudden flower. This was the sin that fell upon the third and fourth generations. The anger that would mark her and her children's children forever. She was afraid it might kill her

the way it had killed Ma's own ma. She had found Ah Ma's rage monotonous and heavy as it pressed down on her childhood. Her casual violence and her hard face, her self-pity. Now Girl knew something else. No maid raged and grimaced like Ah Ma. A maid is the angel of the house, wordless, smiling stupidly, nodding, eating last, agreeing. She is the perfect mother no one ever has. And so, Ah Ma never really thought of herself as a maid anymore. She had come into Girl's childhood as a mother, angry at her sons, a spy compulsively betraying her daughter-in-law, a grandmother chastising her grandchildren, a matriarch demanding the best of the best for her and for her alone.

They were already leaving, the back way, walking to the beach. There, she saw a boat turned over, abandoned, purple flowers and green leaves growing all over it. There was a broken aquarium with a motor helmet in it like a large round fish. There was a sign faded from the sun, advertising Satay Ayam, Satay Daging and Ketupat Nasi. A wheelbarrow and a bicycle were turned over on the path. Then there was the beach; it used to come all the way up but now it is only this. Still, it was beautiful, it was always beautiful. You could see Penang from there, crowned by its heavenly cloud of smog. And the little boats with the fisherman and the big blue emptiness. This was where her Baba used to watch the fisherman catching the tiny sweet fish, bringing the haul in, selling, bartering. Now not so much of that, but still.

When Girl was small enough her Aunty Maggie used to live in a big house with shiny tiles and a collection of all the different McDonald's toys released with Happy Meals each week. Now she is living in the house of Ba's cousins who Girl has only seen once or twice. The family are thin and brown and grasping. The kind of rich people that never buy a new jacket, who just like the feeling of the money being there.

Ba goes to visit Aunty Maggie while Girl sits with Uncle, a small man in glasses and with a thin, undecided moustache. His daughter Angeline moves so slowly as if her limbs are always thinking before they speak. Girl dislikes Angeline and the slow way she raises a cup to her lips, the way she drinks, speak, walks. More to the point, Girl dislikes Angeline because when she and her dad visited Melbourne on holiday, they stayed with Girl's family to avoid paying for the cost of a hotel, Angeline became Ah Ma's obsession. Ah Ma gave her money, food, even items of Girl's clothing, Ah Ma hoarded from the washing basket, cleaned and wrapped in paper as if they were a store-bought gift. Seeing

Angeline wearing her sweaters, even the ones she didn't like all that much, was a memory Girl nursed even now as she sat with Angeline and her dad, drinking tins of Kickapoo, eating groundnuts.

"How is your study, Girl," Uncle asks, wiping his glasses, pedantic as an Iman.

"I'm working."

"What is it? Art or what?" Angeline asks.

"No, media," Girl lies again. She doesn't dare make her lie more extravagant than that.

"Mediacoms?" Angeline says, with genuine confusion in her slow voice.

"I might go and check on Baba," Girl says.

Girl walks down the hallway to a little room with a Chinese calendar on it. It is frayed at the top where the days have been ripped away. Baba is sitting on a chair near a bed. Aunty Maggie is sleeping.

"I think I tired her out," Baba says.

"So how?"

"Not good. I better go say hello to your Uncle. You'll stay here is it?"

"Yeah."

Girl sits with Aunty Maggie and watches her sleep. Maggie is Ah Ma's opposite; younger, fairer, sweet-lipped with round eyes rimmed by blue. The things that made her beautiful when she was young are now the things that Girl thinks are taking her body away. Ah Ma is dark, robust, solid, cruel, she will survive anything and anyone. Maggie, gentle and thinner, is smaller than small in the face of death. She begins coughing and sits up. Girl pats Aunty Maggie on the back and passes her a glass of water.

"Gam sia," she coughs and drinks.

"That's ok," Girl says.

"Har?"

"I'm Girl, my Baba is just outside."

"Girl?"

"Girl."

"Ah. How is your Ah Ma?"

"She is good, she's losing her memory."

"Ah ah."

"But she's healthy, strong. She can still eat."

"Be good-good, ok? Take care of Ah Ma."

“Yes.”

“She is just like that, you know?”

“Yes.”

“She... ”

“Yes.”

“I couldn’t help her, Girl. I was just a small girl, there was nothing I could do.”

“Do you remember what it was like for her?”

“Yes. And no.”

“I saw Wife Number Two yesterday.”

“Yes. But not only that.”

Aunty Maggie, she knows the story, it is a short one. Ah Kong, he was tricked into marrying Ah Ma and never loved her. He had been promised Maggie, Ah Ma’s younger, fair-skinned sister but the family had tricked him into marrying their elder daughter. He left her for his second wife. Thus, she became a maid again. It had always been like that. First, Ah Ma’s parents had preferred her sister to her, giving her the good bits of the meat and the few eggs they had, and calling Ah Ma greedy for raising a spoon to her lips. Then the husband who had wanted the younger sister and not the older. Who had Aunty Maggie been then? Was she Rachel, satisfied to watch Leah suffer, or was she someone else?

Aunty Maggie falls into the mystery of sleep after this. Girl leaves her and Baba says goodbye to his cousin. In the car Girl tells Baba about her revelations. He surprises her by speaking about them. He doesn’t think the story was true. He thinks he knows the story. He knows where the story has ended for Girl. The philandering man leaves for a second wife. Later he takes on a third and even fourth wife. The bad man and the woman all alone.

It is true that Ah Ma’s parents hadn’t liked the sight of their firstborn daughter much. They had beat her for the misdemeanours of her younger siblings. They married her off to the town drunk. He gave her two children and spent his payslip on alcohol on the way home. She became a maid, washing other people’s clothes to feed her children. But he would beat her, take her small money and guzzle it. Both her children died. Ah Kong, he heard about Ah Ma. He had had compassion on her, married her and drove off to Johor with her to save her life. She had loved him but he had never loved her. He had left her for his second wife. She became a maid again.

Aunty Maggie is gone the following Sunday. They receive a slip of paper entitled

“O B I T U A R Y” and indicating the date of the Leaving Behind Loves Ones, Night Service, Cortege Leaving and the Cremation. There is a church built in the modern religious style with the geometric wall-feature at the front, backlit and tall, wood-panelled ceilings that make the pastor look small. The crowd overflow into a small tent at the side for latecomers with plastic chairs and a screen with a digital image of a white cross bursting into light and clouds. People wear clothes in the smart Johor style, jeans, dark polos, white tee-shirts with slogans, sneakers for the young and airy shirts and long pants, fresh perms, sneakers and loafers for the old. Baba and Girl are ushered into the latecomers’ tent and given a full-colour pamphlet with a hill, a starburst, a rainbow and the words: WHAT A DAY THAT WILL BE WHEN MY JESUS I SEE. After this, the cremation hall. There is the coffin in the centre, surrounded by lit-up orange walls. Girl sees Maggie’s face through the glass of the coffin and wonders if this is how the cremation occurs, right in front of the guests, will those orange walls light up and devour the body right there? The family put clothes in the coffin and the mourners put flowers, sandalwood and clove in behind them. But the body is taken away. Girl is relieved, she did not want to see the body burning bright with death.

As they pack in their hotel room, Baba and Girl are fighting. Baba is angry at Girl for not tying her shoe-laces properly, for leaving water around the sink, for not packing, and angry that she has crushed her clothes into the bag instead of folding them, for being *nuah*, for being wet mud that can’t stick on the wall, which just slides off, lazy, as it is, for. For, for, for. Girl is angry and crying absurdly. Her tears are sad but also red, welted with the hot rush, and she thinks: *This anger then, is my inheritance*. Her anger is the sin of the father falling to the third and the fourth generations; her anger is her inheritance, her *kim*, her gold.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Girl woke up late for her first day back at work. She ran after the tram and then ran to the office. She slipped in without anyone noticing and then sat at her desk as if she had been there all her life. She skipped breakfast and by ten thirty she had faded like an old garment after too many washes. She moved to the tearoom to think about having a cup of tea with enough milk to count as a breakfast. On the table was leftover catering from yesterday's meeting. She looked happily over the almost good-as-new fruit, quiches, sandwiches, rolls and dips. She quickly ate a sandwich triangle filled with egg and spinach and then a tuna salad roll. She put a few extra sandwiches in her pocket to save them for lunch. They sat snugly, half-crushed in her pocket for the next few hours.

At noon, as Girl was looking over her Hootsuite posts, she threw up at her desk. Vomit cradled itself in the crevices of her keyboard, filled her mug, covered her papers and stationery and began creating a waterfall of itself that reached from the desk to the floor. Briefly, Girl felt purified and made right with the world. Then she vomited up what was left of her insides, bile and water soaked the vomit already on her desk. By now, people were staring. There was nothing positive about this. There was no way to think of this as, in some way, good vibes. Everyone was looking at her as if she had shared something horribly personal to which there was no way to respond but silence. Katie was out for a meeting or she would have come to her aid. But this was really the risk of putting all of your social eggs into the basket of a single colleague, you had no one and nothing to call on except, perhaps, your god, when they happened to be out of the office. From eyes that felt boiled and peeled, Girl looked out at her audience. She saw eyes and eyes like so many ripe round fruit turned towards her. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve and in her mind's eye saw the abjectness of this image, a person turned inside out, a body run amok. She thought she should say something, but she was afraid that if she opened her mouth she would vomit again. She walked unsteadily to the tearoom to find a cloth. When she got there, she found it was beyond her to stand. She lay down across three chairs in a line. She closed her eyes. This seemed like the only option. To close her eyes and enter a cocoon of solitude where nothing existed outside of the fuzzy dots behind her eyelids.

“Are you ready?”

It was Jude, he had a cloth in one hand and a bottle of disinfectant in the other.

“What for?”

“To go home. I'm taking you home.”

What about my desk? Girl wanted to say but she found herself closing her eyes and saying nothing.

“I’ve taken care of it,” he said, as if he knew.

“Really?”

“It’s as if it never happened. Well, the smell is still there but it’ll go away,”

They went together to her desk and everything had been restored to its former state, if anything it was cleaner.

“I’ll wait near the lifts for you,” Jude said.

With slow hands, Girl gathered up her belongings, swept them into her bag and met Jude at the lifts. She felt weak. He took her to his house, and she lay down on his couch and fell asleep.

When she woke up, he was sitting on a chair, reading. His face cracked open like a coconut. A milky smile.

“How was your nap?”

“What time is it?”

“Almost six o’clock. Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

“I made some soup.”

“Didn’t you have to go back into work?”

“I can do some overtime tomorrow to make it up.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to.”

“Thanks for cleaning up the vomit. I’m so sorry.”

“It was a joy.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“No, it wasn’t. But I wanted to do it.”

That was how they walked back into each other. That was how they became each other again.

Chapter Thirty-Three

It was the mid-autumn festival when Girl began feeling that she might be able to write Ah Ma down. She had been writing for years now, no longer a genius in her own estimation but someone who had been treated like one. Jude picked up the books at the library she wanted on the way home from work, bought all of the things that Ma had always said made the mind strong, fresh fish, tofu, lots of still-wet vegetables, corn, sweet potatoes. She had given up writing tweets for Positive Energy at his insistence and had begun sitting at home, writing. During her long self-appointed lunch hour, Girl walked to the Chinese grocer near her house. She was looking for mooncakes. Red bean, lotus seed, coconut, five-nut. They were there in their huge paper boxes. She wondered what to buy Ah Ma, at the last moment she pivoted towards waiting till the weekend to buy her some from a bigger store. These looked too sweet, and anyway, thirty-five dollars was an obscene price to pay. She bought herself a single blood orange and walked home, peeling and eating it. The thing she had written had grown longer and longer but though the number of words she had accumulated comforted her, she knew numbers didn't tell you anything about anything. She had racked up tens of thousands of words like mileage on a car but it didn't mean she was driving anywhere in particular. Girl promised herself, as she looked at the blank page on her screen, the cursor flickering like an anxious heartbeat, that she would never write another book again. The prospect of this energised her enough to keep writing till Jude came home. She looked at the clock. He would be home in half an hour, which was just enough time to right the house she had somehow turned upside down during his absence and hastily clean the dishes she'd accumulated over the course of only a few hours. *Like salted vegetables*, Girl tried on the thought like an overcoat. It didn't suit her. Deep down, Girl knew she enjoyed living in her own filth and, even then, she didn't think of it as filth. The moment she moved out of home, Girl knew there was no pleasure more exciting than not brushing her teeth, no act more liberating than leaving a dish in the sink. She was recovering from a childhood (and adulthood) of surveillance and hyper-hygienic practices. When would she grow up? Girl didn't know. Girl's phone buzzed. A text from Ma saying Ah Ma had had a heart attack. Girl's mind said nothing to her. She left the dishes on the counter and went to the hospital.

Ah Ma was lying there with oxygen tubes in her nose. She was pale and small and when Girl asked her if her heart was *tia*, she said *only a little*. She didn't look like it meant anything. But then, she had never worn sickness like a garment in her life entire. Yet, it

seemed impossible that she should die. Girl had this vision of Ah Ma outliving, outstripping them all, of Ah Ma being there, by her sickbed when she, not Ah Ma, died in her old age.

“Girl,” Ah Ma said, her eyes fluorescent.

“She’s been asking for you, asking when you’re coming home.”

“She never asks for your brother, you know. Only you.”

“Does she know what we’re going to do?” The doctor asked.

“They are going to put a tube inside your leg and check your heart to see what is wrong,” Ma told Ah Ma.

“Ok ok.”

“Are you going to tell her about the second part?” Girl asked Ma.

“No.”

As they began to wheel her away, Girl and Ma followed along, running alongside the bed.

“Cuat?” Ah Ma asked suddenly, sitting up. “Cuat?”

Cuat. Literally, cut, that blunt Chinese-Hokkien word for surgery. It rhymed with guat, hot, the Chinese-Hokkien word for cremation. Or was that the only word?

“Cuat,” Ma said. “If there is anything wrong, they will cuat.”

“Cuat.” Ah Ma began coughing and holding her chest. “Sim tia.” Heart pain.

The nurses and doctors set her down again.

“Ah Ma, wa tan hor lou!” Girl yelled as the bed was wheeled into a room she couldn’t enter. A room dark as an absence.

“Mein tan. Mein tan. Mein potang sekolah.” No need to wait. No need to wait. No need to skip school.

Girl and Baba sat in the patient lounge and waited. Baba had bought an orange and poppy seed muffin and coffee from a nearby petrol station. They spoke about globalism and free trade and Baba knew everything there was to know about it, as he always did about everything. It was good to hear him speak. The door opened and a man, helpless and baby-faced in soft blue scrubs, came into the patient lounge where they were waiting. He sat down in the chair opposite Girl and adjacent to Baba. He looked mostly at Girl; the

staff kept speaking to her as if the only reason why she would come would be to interpret for her parents. But there was nothing to interpret between them.

“Hi. Hi. Ok. We’ve done the angiogram. There’s a blockage in her heart.”

He took a pen out of his pocket and began drawing on the paper bag the muffin had come in. He drew a heart and shaded a black place where the blockage was supposed to be.

“She might have had this for months, years, it’s impossible for me to know. I don’t know how she’s stayed alive. She should have died, really. But here the heart has opened up two new channels, and it’s been pumping blood through them. We’ve also found that her kidneys are failing.”

Girl imagined the debris in the heart, hard and ugly. Calcium, waste deposits, fat, bits of stone and cement weighing it down. Girl thought about the heart’s new valves, undoing itself to re-make itself.

“We’ve stopped. We haven’t operated. I don’t think we’re doing anyone a service if we operate and she doesn’t make it through. At least now she can spend time with family. She can.” He looked at Baba.

“It’s ok. It’s alright. You’ve done everything you can,” Baba said soothing the doctor like a baby.

Girl wanted to ask Baba what would happen. Girl didn’t know what the doctor meant by what he said. Did he mean Ah Ma would live because of the new valves in her heart or did he mean she would die because of the blockage? But Girl knew that this was the one thing Baba didn’t know. Girl thought with joy about the way Ah Ma had made life continue living for her, the way she had made her future dance for her even when her heart was full of stones. She knew then and there that Ah Ma would still be with them for the next four, five even six years.

The new room was big with a large glass window that looked down at the life going on without us outside. Inside, Ah Ma was encircled by so many tubes from her legs, her nose, and there were so many colourful wires attached to patches all over her chest. They were going to heal her. Each wire was a pathway that led to a different way to heal her. Koh Koh came with a big bag of bananas, a Hershey’s chocolate bar, a can of Sunkist and a bottle of apple and pear juice. Ah Ma sat up and ate a banana and a piece of chocolate.

She was getting better, stronger. Perhaps she would be stronger than she had been before. Ninety years old and still lifting her feet to the bathroom sink to wash them like a ballerina at the barre. Now Girl would see her at ninety-one, ninety-two, hell, one hundred, even, washing her feet at the sink. She was eating, she was tasting life and life had not forgotten her. It was here.

“What did the doctor say?” Koh Koh asked.

“I wish I’d recorded him. Because I don’t know.”

Girl tried anyhow to explain it as best she could and at the end of it she could see how Koh Koh’s mind, a whirring machine with every part in place, running smoothly, could understand it better than she could.

“So there’s a blockage in one place and then the new arteries, the magic arteries open up and she saves herself,” he said.

He was laughing, he was so proud of Ah Ma. He was strangely opened up in this moment, as if he, himself, had undergone open heart surgery and they had never stitched him back up.

They stood by her bed and watched the free television channels on the TV that looked down on them. There was a seemingly endless infomercial on the benefits of turmeric powder. Two women with bright hair and thin smiles and one man with a velvet blazer that Girl could tell he thought a lot of, were presenting the powder. They were mixing it into banana smoothies, into chocolate milkshakes, into hyperactive curries. Everything was a dull, thick, yellow colour. Ah Ma started laughing and laughing and pointing at the TV. Koh Koh and Girl laughed too. A nurse came to take Ah Ma’s blood pressure and when she was done, Ah Ma sat up and said “Ok, Ok.” She said it with the voice of two hands clapped together to indicate an ending.

She was ready to leave the hospital now that the test was done. She tried to get out of bed and they pushed her back down.

That night, Girl couldn’t sleep. She kept waking up to this vision of Ah Ma with her mouth open in sadness or in pain, she couldn’t tell. Then there was an image of Ah Ma curled up and naked, with soft white hairs all along her back like a wounded animal. Her dreams had turned to this. She was so afraid for Ah Ma. What if she wanted something in the middle of the night and she couldn’t tell the nurses about it? What if they didn’t

understand her? What if she woke up and felt lonely? Girl didn't want her to be alone. Some years ago Ah Ma had been in hospital for a broken leg and when she had needed to go to the toilet, she had pressed the button to call the nurse over. The nurse hadn't come so she had jumped out of her high-up hospital bed. They had tied her to the bed after that. They said she couldn't understand English, but it was really they who couldn't understand Chinese. What if they couldn't understand her tonight? And what if they tied her up now? Girl imagined walking into the hospital with all its lights off. No, she shouldn't go.

The next morning, Girl woke up to a text message from Ma saying Ah Ma was worried about her, wondering when Girl was coming home. She also sent a photo of Ah Ma sitting up in bed, eating a banana. *The nurses didn't want her to sit up yet, but I took control of the situation*, Ma texted. She was making a recovery that only those who loved her could see. She had always risen from the dead like that. *They laugh at us when we call for Lazarus to leave his tomb but here he is, unharmed and smelling sweetly of myrrh and aloes, dressed in linen strips*, Girl thought. She asked Jude if he could take off work to see Ah Ma and he said yes. They loitered around the house, tired and eventually sat themselves in front of the TV in their pyjamas to watch an episode of *Seinfeld*. What was it that Ah Ma had called *Seinfeld*? *Siao Lang Hee*. Crazy People Show. They talked about what they would have for dinner, would packet ravioli be ok? Should they buy new jeans for Jude or should they wait until they were completely destroyed?

When Girl and Jude got to the hospital, Ah Ma was lying down with an oxygen mask over her face. Her skin looked paler than before. She was trying to get up again. Baba set her back down. Jude flashed her his school-photo smile, all teeth and nose. She smiled then changed her mind. Smiling was letting her guard down. She turned her face from him motioned at him with her hand to go away.

"Poh," she said.

He came closer and offered her his hand. She smacked it hard. Then looked at it.

"So much fur. Ang moh cui. Lah sam cui." *White devil. Dirty devil.*

We laughed.

"She said you're the devil," Ma said.

Jude laughed, holding his mouth as if it might fall off.

"Coh boh sui. Coh pai cuah see." *Pants not beautiful. Pants bad to look at to death.*

“He was no money to buy new pants,” Ma quipped.

Ah Ma turned her head away and muttered to herself.

“That’s her last wish for me, is it?” Jude laughed.

“Yep, new pants,” Ma said.

“What do you mean, last wish?” Girl said.

Ah Ma tried to get up again. Baba pushed her down.

“Wa ai pung,” *I want to put it down*, the Hokkien words for going to the toilet.

Baba explained that she couldn’t get up. She needed to lie down.

“Tam.” *Wet*, she said.

“Boh tam.”

“Chow bee.” *Bad smell*, she said.

“Boh chow bee.”

It was true, there was a catheter connected to her, hanging on the bed. Girl waited to see the tubes turn ochre. But they didn’t. This might have been a sign, but she was not sure if she believed in signs then.

Girl went back to the hospital at dinnertime that night. Ah Ma was sleeping but she woke up when she heard their voices.

“I made her some mi sua soup,” Ma said. “Go and get it.”

Girl went to the patient lounge where Baba was eating fried rice and retrieved the soup.

“I’ll eat later,” Ah Ma said.

“Have a bit now,” Ma told her.

“Ok,” Ah Ma said.

Then it took her over. Girl had heard of demon possessions, evil or impure spirits that filled the soul as if it was an empty bottle. But this was different. It was a body possessed by pain, pure pain, white and furious. The pain was taking the body away as if it was the body that belonged to the pain not the pain that belonged to the body. Ah Ma’s pupils were always sad black centres circled by a computer-blue pigment. Now her eyes rolled back in her head again and again. Now she closed her eyes tightly like the skin was a bag and the drawstring had been tightened. She was thrashing around on the bed as if she might be thrown off it. She scratched wildly at her skin and scratched hard at her hair.

There were colourful wires attached to every part of her chest and arms and she was tearing them off with a frightening articulateness. She felt each wire and ripped it off her, she threw the oxygen tubes in her nostrils off the bed, she took one hand to the plastic hospital tag circling her wrist and broke free of it. She pushed their officious hands off her and waved them away. She was like Samson breaking his cords.

And Ma, who had always reasoned with her and saved her when she was half-dead, who had brought her from the grave time and time again, now she was telling her “ok, ok, tia? Tia ah? Jai Jai Jai. Ok ok ok.” And every time she said ok, she was letting her go, even helping her rip off the patches and cords. She was a nurse who had always felt she had to fight to maintain the sacredness of life, to the point of controlling, manipulating, persuading, resurrecting the body. Now she seemed suddenly convinced of the sacredness of death, its rightful claim over the body. She was crying as she did it because she could not make it right for Ah Ma. She lay on top of her and hugged her. Girl felt Ah Ma’s hands gripping her hands like she wanted to hurt them. And the pain it went on and on while the nurses tried to find the doctor, told them to wait for him – he was coming, he was busy, he was somewhere on the other side of the ward, he was here he was there – but he was not in front of them. The nurses were afraid to give Ah Ma morphine without the doctor’s permission, they were afraid of the family, of what they might do to them in their grief, they were afraid of death itself. They were young nurses, with squirrel eyes and bird voices. They didn’t know anything about it and their lack of knowledge made them afraid. Ah Ma was throttling herself, gripping the thin skin around her throat, beating her chest as if it was her enemy. Girl took her hands and she tried to use her hands to beat herself. She used her knuckles like they were a grater she could shred her skin with. But Ah Ma pushed Girl off her. Her eyes opened suddenly, and they were still. She looked at her. *Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl*. She called her. Girl held her with ungentle hands. The nurse came in, the doctor had been found and he had given his permission. The bandages on her arms were undone and the nurse injected the liquid that would render Ah Ma barely conscious. *Tia, tia, tia. Gin tia*, Ah Ma was saying. Then slowly her breathing was turned down. She was here and not here, and underneath her not-here-ness was the oldest pain. *Har*, she cried out now and then as if asking what it was that was happening to her. Then the morphine made her quiet. She breathed and did not open her eyes anymore. Ma told Girl to go home. She said even Ah Ma’s breaths were still strong and they might last for days. Girl should sleep and then if Ah Ma was still there, she could take the next watch over from her and Baba. Girl went home. She fell asleep at ten.

At half past one in the morning Girl had a phone call from Koh Koh. He said nothing when she picked up. The silence on the line was what he had to say. Girl went to the hospital. Ah Ma's body was beautiful. Though Girl knew she was dead, she looked so happy that she might have been alive. Her skin had a smooth sheen as if it had been sanded down. She was shining. Her hair was neat, parted to the side, it was as if she had been to the movies, not to the last great fight. She did not look like a shell, she looked full like the moon. She had left Girl without saying goodbye. But then she had never said goodbye, only kee, *go*.

They sat around the bed with Styrofoam cups of water and slow faces. It was 1:45am. There was a story, and they were telling it from when Baba was a boy and Ah Ma had taken him to Penang. The island was only a ferry ride away, but it was special for them to go there. On the street was an Indian and a bird in a cage filled with scraps of paper. Ah Ma paid one ringgit to the Indian and the bird bent down to pick up two scraps of paper. The woman read aloud the first one, "You will travel all over the world," she said to Baba. The second one, "Your life has been wrong but your old age will be right," she said to Ah Ma. Baba nearly cried with anger. How cynical to sell lies that looked like dreams to them, he had thought. And yet they had all come true.

They waited for the doctor to come and pronounce her dead. After the doctor came, the nurse handed out proof-of-death tickets to Girl and Koh Koh so that they could get their days off work and they left her there. It was raining out and the wet tarmac shone so brightly in the face of the streetlamps that it had no colour.

In the car, Girl sat in the driver's seat and watched a ray of dust float across her eyeline. It was way before the lighttime, the part of the day that looks like night. She thought about what had happened. That night was the night that Girl was reborn. The person who had raised her had been raised up. She put the key in the ignition and thought, she had to raise herself now.

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