THE PRETENDERS
AND
WHY DO YOU WANT TO KNOW?
WRITING A MEMOIR IN THE FACE OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA
A REFLECTIVE THESIS

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy by

Franchesca Giselle
Liauw

Department of Arts and Humanities,
Brunel University
London

Abstract

This thesis consists of a memoir and a critical commentary. The memoir, *The Pretenders*, follows three generations of my family, from my grandparents' experiences during the Japanese Occupation, through my father's childhood amongst the rubber plantations of Indonesia, to my upbringing in modern day Singapore. The memoir examines depression, and the failings of material wealth, while exploring how a family struggles to live up to and accept the success of their forefathers. Using Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory as a basis, the accompanying critical commentary questions how my grandparents' experiences during the Second World War affected my father's childhood and how the lingering trauma is continued in our own relationship.

By analysing *The Pretenders* in conjunction with three narratives which are thematically linked through their exploration of familial relations, Alice Pung's *Her Father's Daughter* (2011), Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), and Irene Vilar's *The Ladies Gallery* (1998), the first chapter of my thesis examines the narrative devices used by these writers in order to present the way their identity is impacted by intergenerational trauma. This search for identity follows two stages, (1) an attempt to reconcile their parents' traumatic past with their own upbringing, and (2) an attempt to understand the differences between the country their parents' trauma originated from with the country they were raised in. The second chapter considers how the myths that build a nation are echoed in the myths that build a family legacy. The chapter continues by examining the use of phantoms as a writing device and how familial myths can root an otherwise unanchored diasporic history. The third chapter reflects on the choices a memoirist can make in portraying their subjects, and concludes that a balance between artistic licence and ethics is required when presenting 'truth'.

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The Pretenders

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Prologue

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Isk

Pontianak

1942

On his way to bury his family's possessions, Isk ponders the value of their fortune. Three generations of Lees in Indonesia, three generations of commodities, gone in a stroke. It’s been four months since the Japanese washed up on their shores, bringing with them promises of freedom and fear-wrought whispers of change. The buildings that housed his neighbours were now ghostly reminders of previous lives. Many had fled to the jungle’s interior, counting on the land to protect what they could not. Though his family wanted to stay, to hang on to what they could, Isk knew it was time to leave. Better to face the jungle than execution; better the unknown than imprisonment. Anything was better than what happened to Teng.

The night before they leave, Isk fills a cloth sack with whatever he can fit inside: jade statues with sombre faces, diamond strands hung with winking sapphires and blood-deep rubies, jewelled pendants modelled after insects, and four gold bars. He's spent a few days contemplating what to bring, knowing that once they are gone, their house will be pillaged, that whatever the soldiers leave behind will be taken by the desperate. So, Isk takes what he can. Enough to start over—if they make it.

Isk doesn’t tell anyone what he's doing, fearing for the safety of his family. Knowing that the more information they possess, the more likely they'll be in danger. It's become common knowledge that those who stand against the occupiers’ ideas of freedom are branded enemies of freedom themselves. So Isk sets off on his own, tiptoeing out of his room past his sleeping brothers and sister. He loops around the house—if the empty building could still be called his house—before slipping into the dense cover of the jungle.

Why do things seem more valuable once they are gone? Isk thinks about this as he makes his way into the jungle. These possessions never seemed like much to him, but now, grasped in his shaking hands, they feel like everything. He tries not to

think of how the sentiment applies to people, the ones who faded from his life, who left large gaping holes in a tapestry of once bright memories. No—now is not the time for dwelling on the past. It is time to push on in hope for a future. Isk continues his steady beat into the darkness. Fear of being found forces him to wander torch-less into the night, but he decides it's better to stumble than to be discovered. If he were caught, there would be no reasonable explanation for the bag of wealth he carries in one hand and the garden shovel gripped in the other.

Isk knows the area's inhabitants are few, but tales of single-minded guerrilla fighters and the soldiers that pursue them make him thankful that he has taken what he feels are necessary precautions. He'd spent the week practising the precise route he now walks. Thoughts of his family's final possessions stashed under a floorboard hasten his feet to learn the patterns of the land, the way the roots fall, and the feel of the dirt, while his hands practise wiping sweat, steadying themselves on rough, mossy bark. But preparation does little to still the beating of his heart or to help his eyes adjust to the light of the moon as he makes his way through the shadowed trees.

Isk has never spent a night in the jungle, never realized how loud it can be, how disorientating. The jungle calls to him. The wind rustles through the leaves in longing, the treetops dance. Bullfrogs croak a staccato beat in lazy competition with the erratic rhythm of singing crickets. He spent a childhood zigzagging through these trees, wondering about the men who made it their home. It was frightening how easy a home could be turned into a wasteland; how comfort could become danger.

Soon he believes he is being followed. He hadn't noticed at first—too focused on where to plant his feet—but he is sure now. It—whatever it is—is right behind him, rustling, echoing, footsteps unsteady but fast.

The wind whispers his name. Panic rises from his stomach to his throat. His thoughts ricochet across his mind, each strand too fast to make an impact. Should he run? No – running will mean falling. What if he hid? But where? Every tree is as much an opening as a shelter. What will he do if he is found? *Isk!* He stops. That voice isn't the wind. Someone is calling his name. The question that's been haunting him since the soldiers snatched his life from under his feet flies to the forefront of his mind. He's sure of the answer now. If it comes to it, he will use the shovel in his hand, he will defend himself, and then he will run as fast as possible. But his certainty falters as something grabs his arm. Isk stifles a yell as his body freezes in

place. His mind flashes to his shovel. Use it, he commands himself. *Use it!* But then the pressure on his arm fades, the voice fading into nothing as the song of the jungle returns. Had he imagined it? Was it all some sick dream? He wants to laugh. The panic makes him feel mad with fear, with the slow creeping realization that he's never felt more alone.

He steadies himself, taking large, deep breaths, reminding himself that this moment, these months, have been all too real. Thoughts turn to his grandfather. To the gun pointed at his head as he dug. The tears that fell from his grandmother's eyes as she watched them kick her husband's lifeless body. Down the hole his grandfather went, his grandmother not long after. They never spoke of what happened. The horrible event left like something stuck to one's teeth. Uncomfortable to mention, easier left ignored. He thinks of his brother, innocent and wide-eyed, always willing to listen, to question the things he didn't understand. What did Teng think when the bomb hit his school? When life became nothing but a fleeting moment in the vast space of time? Teng had been the catalyst, the reason for them to flee. No, Isk won't let them have anyone else—he can still stand, he can still breathe.

Feeling determined, Isk continues down his path. He feels the trees against his hands and thinks how different it all looks in the night. He knows their valuables will be no use if they can't return for them afterwards, but they will also be useless if someone finds them before they can come back. They can't take them on their journey. It's already dangerous to be Chinese; they can't be Chinese with wealth. When planning his route, Isk made sure the spot he picked wasn't too far from their home but far enough that it wouldn't be found. When he reaches the solemn tree, the tallest of its brethren, but not the greatest in width, he places the sack down so that he may begin to dig.

As he digs, he remembers running through the plantations as a child. The sing-song voices of his friends echoing after him as they played hide-and-seek amongst the trees. It wasn't that long ago—four years perhaps. He'd never forget his special place to hide. He admired his hiding spot, his tree. The way it blended with the others yet always left an impression long after he'd gone home. It was the embodiment of the ideals he'd begun to form when his pa first sat him down and asked what kind of man he imagined himself to be. To be great without grandeur, he'd thought. To know where you stand, but to retain the ability to change.

Isk isn't sure how long it takes him to dig. He's no stranger to manual labour, having spent hot, dizzy afternoons working on the plantations. Like his father before him, his father believed that his children wouldn't be able to lead until they'd learned to rise through the ranks themselves. Each position builds character, he told the young Isk. After all, a leader can't ask men to do something he won't do himself.

Isk's hands shake from the strain of the shovel, the metal cool against his cracked, sweating palms. Thankfully the dirt has been loosened from the rain. With each blow of the shovel's head came a promise that soon this too would be over. When the hole is large enough, Isk places the sack inside its womb.

When he finishes the task, he lets himself be scared, but only for a moment, then he covers what he opened. He isn't sure what will happen next, what the coming year will bring, if he will live to see this spot again. Kneeling before the tree, he thinks for a final time about his childhood, one that was ripped faster than the change of a season. He thinks of his family – of the ones he has lost, and the ones he will have to protect. When he first happened upon this tree, he knew it was where he would bury their hopes. He knew of the risks he'd take and the person he knew he could be. This tree might echo the past, but – if done right – this tree would hold their future.

*

Part One
The Return

*

Mercy

London to Singapore

2018

It's a grey afternoon as the tube rattles across its tracks, dipping beneath the earth below Islington. I am prepared for the descent—for that moment where I can move my gaze past the ageing man seated in front of me—to catch my reflection in the darkened window. My reflection looks back at me and smiles. *Dad is selling the company*, it says. *What will you do now?*

Tomorrow I am making my way back home. *Home.* What an elusive word. I haven't lived in Singapore for eight years, and I still think of it as home. I've lived in London for two of those eight, and I still feel like a stranger on these streets. If it

wasn't for Cal I'd probably have… What would I have done? Remained in Singapore, worked for my dad, learned Malay and eventually have taken over the company? Yeah, that would've never happened.

When I step out into Green Park, it starts to rain. A light patter, enough to ignore, since it never lasts that long. Not like the thunderstorms back home; rain that leaves the house shaking. I used to watch from the window, comforted by the fact that I was tucked safely inside. Now I'm living with Cal in Homerton. I could live elsewhere, on my own, but when he offered me a place he was so genuine, so full of belief that he was helping me, that I couldn't say no.

I still like to come to Green Park though. I do my errands around here just so I can go to Waterstones. When I was a child Dad and I would spend Sundays browsing bookshops. He'd pick out the classics and I'd browse for manga, coming together at the end to share our spoils.

Today I am headed for the Boots around the corner. It's huge. Aisle upon aisle of items meant to fix or cure you, or make you look better. If I went to the pharmacist and asked if she had a cure for the past, what would she say? Would she have something to give me? Or would she give me the same look everyone else does, the one which tells me I have no reason to be sad. I guess, right now, in this moment, I feel okay. The weather helps, and so does the crowd. It's always nice to be in a crowded store feeling like you are a part of something—even if it's a hive mind directed towards shopping. But shopping helps too. It gives me purpose and direction.

At the checkout the cashier tells me to smile. So I smile at him and rap my bitten nails against the counter.

'Where are you from?' he asks, ringing the first item.

I hesitate, unsure of which answer I will pick today. This simple question is something I have spent my entire life being asked. It doesn't matter if I'm in London, at college in America, even growing up in Singapore, I have always been from somewhere else. The cashier is expectant. Recently, thanks to Trump, my American accent will warrant many a political conversation, so I always try my best to deflect it.

'Singapore,' I finally say.

'Really? You don't look Asian.'

I tap my card on the machine.

'Although,' he says, studying my face, 'I can see it now. Around the eyes.'

‘I’m mixed,’ I reply. ‘My mom is Puerto Rican.’

‘Ah,’ he replies, ‘exotic.’

I laugh as if he's the first person I've had this conversation with.

'Have a nice day,' I say.

Leaving the store, I replay the conversation in my head. It's funny how often moments like these occur, and yet I never know how to handle them. Perhaps I'm too compliant, too ready to give people what they want. I've spent years hiding between the lines of the mixed-race, mixed-face confusion of my upbringing. Maybe if I knew who I was people wouldn't be so curious.

It’s rush hour when I make my way back to the tube. A man with large, round glasses and a bicycle enters my carriage. Bodies shuffle sideways, each trying their best to make room while keeping possession of the little space they've managed to occupy. Back to front, front to back, packed as close as can be. I try not to catch the man’s eyes but there’s something about the way he stands, the tilt of his hat. Like I know him.

The first time I rode the underground was with my dad. I was seventeen, in London for a family holiday. Seeing Dad's face during that trip was like watching him become something other. The way his eyes lit up when he took us around, talking about the days when he lived in Bayswater as a kid, made me feel nostalgic for moments I was never a part of.

Now London is my temporary home, though it has potential to be more than temporary. When I think of London a photograph my ah ma has in her apartment comes to mind. I can recall every detail. My grandmother's hair set in its usual bun, her red dress fashionable yet reserved; my uncle, tall and slim with thick, round glasses. My grandfather, firm yet gentle, and my father, a small child of four, grinning madly. My father's family, elegant as they are sad, trapped in a picture of one of their many afternoons in Hyde Park.

When Dad lived in London, it was the centre of the rubber world. Ah Kong made his most important connections here. Ah Kong was never anxious or lost. He would never spend his days ‘wandering’. I try to imagine the white-painted exteriors of my father's childhood home. *It was a large flat,* he told me, *but then again, I was small.* There are times when I find myself wanting to venture to Bayswater to seek it out. Yet the thought that it won't be as he described scares me. Sometimes, second-hand nostalgia is better than first-hand reality.

Walking down the stairs of the station I notice the man on the bike. He's waiting. I pause, then hurry down the road. My flat isn't far, but the walk feels like an eternity, each step accompanied by the thought that someone is watching me, waiting for the right moment to attack. Safely at my door I look around. There's no one there. When did I start to fear the people on the streets?

Back in the apartment, I pack. It's pointless, since most of my stuff is still in Singapore, but there's the essentials, the stuff I take with me no matter the trip. A stuffed horse I've had since I was five, a worn copy of *The Fountainhead* that Mom and Dad gave me for my sixteenth birthday, and my favourite sleeping shirt.

I hear my grandmother's voice: *When are you moving home?*

Soon, I lie. *Only another few years, then I'll move back.*

Before Cal, it felt easy to leave London, but now there are nights we spend wrapped together on the couch. Lost in his half-lipped smile, his hands keeping me still, quieting all my jumbling nerves, why would I want to leave? With Cal, there's no pretence, no need to prove that I'm more than I am. He knows me—all my crooked lines and whispering thoughts. He listens to my tainted stories, like when I was training to qualify for the Olympics. He hangs my less than perfect paintings on his wall and tells people that he's proud. I've found love. But even so, it's not enough.

When Cal comes home, he cooks us dinner. It's easy for him to tell me about his day, about all the little things that make it his. It's harder for me to talk about mine.

'So,' he starts, breaking the silence, 'is your dad really selling the company?'

He walks over with two steaming bowls of bacalao and rice, topped with a fried egg. Cal jokes that the bacalao is because he's Portuguese, and the fried egg is because I'm Chinese. It's silly, but it makes me wonder why he sees me as more Chinese than Puerto Rican? Does that come from me, or him?

'Yeah,' I say, picking up my spoon. 'It's crazy to think about; the business has been in our family for four generations.'

'Five,' he says, 'counting you.'

'I don't count,' I say.

He looks at me but keeps silent, knowing well enough when I don't want to talk about something. We eat dinner accompanied by the television. Sitcoms are my favourite thing to watch because they are formulaic. It doesn't matter what drama is

unfolding, or how wacky the scheme, by the end of the episode, everything is just as perfect as it began. And if it isn't, it'll only take one more episode to become so.

When we finish dinner, Cal tries to pick up the conversation from where we had left it. ‘I only ask,’ he says, as if he needs an excuse, ‘because you seem nervous lately.’

I move to pick up the dishes and shrug.

He stops me. ‘You don’t have to do those right now.’

I do, otherwise I won't be able to stop thinking about them, but that's not the point. The point is we’re talking about things that make me feel uncomfortable. It’s a family habit. Something makes you feel bad, push it down.

‘I’m fine,’ I say, turning on the taps. ‘I guess I always thought I’d have the company. That eventually I’d continue the family business. But I guess I wasn’t raised for it. Not Chinese enough.’

The excuse sounds right. Yeah, I think, it’s not that I’ve never shown an interest. That Dad and I have trouble seeing eye to eye. It’s that I have different ambitions, a different upbringing. Still, it feels like I am losing a part of me; something I never realized was a part of me. I think of my grandfather—dropping out of school to provide for his family, building the company by eighteen. I can't help but feel like it's too late for me. That I've had all my moments and all I've done is watch them slip by.

When I make my way to bed Cal stays in the living room, I know he'll spend the next hour checking football scores on his phone. He never watches the games, but he loves to analyse them. The bed is cold when I get in, so I pull the blankets up and unlock my phone. There's an eighty-per-cent discount on Net-a-Porter that I've been dying to take advantage of. I scroll down rows of dresses and activewear. I click, and click, and for a second, I feel better.

When Cal finally comes to bed, I'm under the covers, pretending to be asleep.

‘Are you excited?’ Cal asks, knowing I’m awake. ‘About going home?’

I debate on whether I should continue faking. ‘More nervous,’ I say, giving in. ‘It’s not just any visit.’

Cal nods, ‘Still, it’s home. What’s there to be nervous about?’

Knowing my family, there will be meetings with people I’ve never met, and decisions that I won’t actually be a part of. I close my eyes and wonder how many cracks the family business has filled; how many will be exposed once it’s gone. I

think of my father, silent and unwavering, a conversation I am always trying to fill. Of my grandmother, locked in her ivory apartment. I think of my grandfather, gone, but all too present. And finally of my mother, keeping us together, pushing against the darkness that threatens to pull us apart. I want to tell Cal that the silences eventually add up. That after all we've buried there's bound to be ghosts.

Instead, I say, 'Yeah. You're right.'

*

Morning starts on the plush burgundy seat of the plane. The flat screen in front of me shows a smiling stewardess walking along a marina before flashing to the company's logo, *Welcome on Board*, it winks. A real-life stewardess, one with a face like a porcelain doll—heavy eyes and red lips—walks down the aisle.

'Champagne, orange juice, water?' she recites.

'Can I have some water?' I reply.

'Sure,' she says, pausing to check a piece of paper, 'Ms Lee. I'll go get you a bottle.'

I smile in thanks and watch as people make their way to their seats. Some will be returning home; others will be using Singapore as a transit. You can tell the purpose of their trip by the way they dress. Couples dressed in loose elephant-patterned pants and heavy backpacks. They'll be looking for temples, probably headed to Vietnam or Cambodia. Suits and sleek black hand luggage, Japanese businessmen. They'll stay in Singapore. Sweater-clad parents with a clan of sharp-tongued children, English families going to visit their relatives.

A little boy kisses the elderly woman sitting across from me. 'Hey, Mum,' he says, turning to the woman behind him, 'let's sit here.'

'No, love,' she laughs, waving goodbye to her parents, 'these seats are for Grandma and Grandpa.'

The kid continues to question her as they make their way towards the back. Avoiding their eyes, I reach for my phone. A text for Cal saying goodbye, and a text for Mom telling her I've boarded.

When the plane arcs into the sky, I prepare for the fourteen-hour limbo. I read the in-flight menu, I pick movies, and then I replace my contact lenses with the glasses I've needed since I was five. I've taken this trip more times than I can count. Another routine, flying to and from my parents since the age of fourteen. Malaysia on the weekends to train with my coach and back to Singapore during the week for

school. I think of my parents. They'll be there to greet me when I land—the safety of my mother's arms, the smile that will catch my father's lips. I'm not sure how I survive without them. Yet somehow, I can never remain.

I wonder how much of my life has been dictated by my family, by the advice of those who've 'made it'. *Success is hard work,* Dad says. *Success is perseverance,* follows Ah Kong. Whenever I think of my grandfather, I think of the empire he built—a rubber tycoon born from the jewels he buried in the backyard. Stashed away when the Japanese invaded, unearthed to create a business I will never maintain. Now that legacy is being sold. Everything my grandfather built, gone in the curve of a pen.

You're too Western, my grandfather once said, dapper in his white pants, a bright pink polo, his balding head spotted and shiny. Memories of my grandfather are weekly lunches at the Four Seasons. Waiting for his driver to park outside my parents' brick house before sliding into the glossy Mercedes, careful not to knock into the cherry wood of his cane. Ah Kong may be gone, but he's interwoven in the fibre of my being. The Chinese part, the Indonesian part. The parts I've always felt too foreign to claim.

When I finally look up towards the screen of my television, my reflection catches me by surprise. *You're lost*, it says. I smile back. *I know.*

*

As soon as I walk out of the luggage area at Changi Airport my parents are there to greet me. Mom looks every bit as beautiful as I remember—petite and slender, dressed in a flowing dress and heels. Her thin blonde hair is tied in a loose ponytail framing her high cheekbones and hazel eyes. There are a few more wrinkles around her eyes, a little more tiredness in the right light, but she's still Mom, hugging me tight while she asks about my flight. When she finally lets me go, I turn to my dad. He lingers in the back as usual, allowing Mom to have her time.

'Hey, Mercy,' he says, taking my suitcase.

'Hey, Dad,' I echo, pulling him into a hug.

When I was a kid, he would always shy away from hugs. Mom, ever affectionate, taught me to love with abandon, yet Dad had trouble adjusting. According to him, kids weren't supposed to hug their parents, they were supposed to respect them. Yet here he is, softened by time, letting me hug him as if it's always been this way.

'How's Alex?' I ask as we make our way to the car.

‘He’s okay,’ Mom replies, ‘He’s in camp. He hates it, of course, but what to do, he’s only just started his two years.’

'We're proud of him,' Dad continues, before launching into a tale of his own time in the army. I try to catch the words as they fall, but they slip past me, dissipating into the air before they've had the time to register. Ever since my brother started his national service, Dad has been nothing but proud. As if my brother’s actions could retract the hands of time.

The air is stifling as we make our way into the car park, coating the city in a sense of timelessness. The first taste of home is always the transition from the air-conditioned airport into the muggy car park. For all Singapore’s change, all its development, at least the weather manages to stay the same. I feel myself begin to sweat, a thin line dotting my upper lip like a moustache.

As we make our way through the lot, I look for our car, but can't find it. When we finally stop in front of a large silver Bentley, Dad begins to fish for his keys. 'You like it?' he asks, knowing what my answer will be.

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘Really cool, Dad. What about the other cars?’

‘We kept them,’ he says, shrugging. ‘This is our family car now.’

Now that he is retiring, Dad has been buying all the things he never dared. *Assets*, he said, when I questioned our new possessions, *are essential*. *Of course*, I replied, nodding as if I understood. Now that the in-fighting and backstabbing, all the quirks that come with a family business, are soon to be over I can’t help but feel like Dad looks a little more relaxed. Like he’s finally found a way out of the past.

As we make our way down the highway I soak in the city. The multicoloured Housing and Development Board’s public housing, the endless amount of greenery attached to the roads—it’s been so long since I’ve seen these manicured streets. Despite the closed-down restaurants or newly fronted malls, it feels like I’ve never left at all. Singaporeans have always said I’m not Singaporean, but I feel more akin to this city than the one I was born in.

Last summer Cal and I went to a wedding in Portugal. It was there that one of his friends, in between drunken laughs, told me that he thinks Singapore is soulless. I looked at him, the way you look at anyone who is trying to pass off an insult as a fact, and asked how long he had spent there. *A week,* he said, *but it was enough time*. Enough time for what? I wondered. I have lived in Singapore for almost my entire life. The island is half of the blood running through my veins, and even then,

it's not enough to understand. *We have a soul*, I said to him, ending the conversation. It's just not clear-cut. It's lost in all of its possibilities; it's young and old all at once; it's learning.

As the car makes its way down Old Holland Road, I think of how when I was a kid I was convinced wild animals were hiding in the dense jungle that encases the road. The darkness still frightens me now—the silence that encompasses the long, winding street uncharacteristic for a modern city. Taxi drivers that have brought me home in the early hours of the morning would tell me of the ghosts that walk this road, of the female passengers with long dark hair that make their way into the cab, only to disappear when the destination they've asked to be brought to has been reached.

People are scared of this part of Bukit Timah because of the giant field by our house. It was once a Chinese cemetery, but the bodies are now exhumed, the land waiting for whatever luxury condos end up being built. The field has remained unclaimed for over twenty years, empty and strange for an overcrowded island. There was once a giant snake that coiled itself on top of a lamppost and a bomb they found and detonated from World War Two.

My home, next to that beautiful, haunted field, is a red-bricked nexus to the past. Once owned by a British spy, then by a rich man's mistress, it was finally bought by my grandfather, who split the land into three properties: one for his older brother, the middle one for himself, and the last one to rent. Now it belongs to my father, who just like me had grown up amongst its high ceilings and marble floors.

'So, how's London?' Dad finally asks as we make our way inside.

'It's great,' I reply.

'But?' Dad prods.

'This is home,' I smile, walking up the stairs.

*

It's a warm and rainy evening in early February when Dad and I go for congee. Mom has her friends over for her book club; Puerto Rican warrior queens in towering stilettoes and bright flowery dresses. I admire the way they arrive, gliding through our front door in long laughs with salon-perfect hair. For Mom and her friends, it's easy to just be. They communicate free from the shadow of anxious, hurried thoughts. They bend their limbs in graceful lines that match their long, fluttering lashes. They wear their confidence in shimmering diamond rings and endless necklaces that dip into

their breasts like the sun sinking below a valley. I can't help but envy their confidence. Like it's something I could've inherited.

Dad and I murmur greetings, returning their kisses with ones of our own. Puerto Ricans only do one kiss, but sometimes I forget and give two. I dread those awkward moments when my mouth connects with air, wishing I could take a mistake as just a mistake.

Dad and I wait for them to make it to the dining table before leaving. When they've situated themselves, Dad turns to me and smiles. 'Come on, let's get out of here.'

The ride to Tiong Bahru is quiet. The thoughts I reserve for moments alone with Dad seem unnecessary. For once, our lack of conversation doesn't feel unwanted. When we arrive most of the spaces reserved for cars are taken, but after a lap around the neighbourhood, we park next to a stark-white shophouse. Leaving the car behind we meander the string of trendy coffee shops and hawkers.

As we walk, I try to take in our surroundings with the same nostalgic gloss my father likes to apply. Ageing men smoke cigarettes in flip-flops, expat families coo at sunburnt toddlers, hawkers with their bright red and blue signs, large block-letter numbers promising the lowest price for a value meal. We pause by a Chinese steamboat restaurant lit up in neon. The restaurant's tables are filled with families, children on iPads and couples clicking away at their screens. We stop to ponder if we should join the crowd before pushing on in search of a place that isn't gasping for air.

I was hesitant before I left London, scared to leave Cal and the edges of a life I was beginning to fill in, but now I can't help but feel like I am where I belong. Singapore. My garden city—always growing, learning what to keep, what to throw out. This city with its clean streets, hiding CCTV in every corner of every shop, every alley. Me with my girlish demeanour, an easy smile, wide-eyed and easy to deceive. What do we work so hard to hide?

Shopping malls, cold as can be, ushering citizens through complex underground paths. People go from mall to mall without ever having to venture outside to breathe the heated, stagnant air. Skyscrapers spiral towards the heavens as they come to life at night, blinking their bright LEDs, welcoming people to a speck of land that has become Southeast Asia's financial hub. What will we become? When our past has been erased, when we've completed our transformation, bowing

in defeat to the glorified beast we've named progress. Yet for now, the past remains, interwoven with the things we hold dear.

As we walk along the asphalt, accompanied by the gaze of parked cars, of dark, blinded windows I think of the past, of the list of Lees who have made something from and with this city. How Alex and I sit, waiting to write the tail-end of a legacy.

'Do you come here with your friends?' Dad asks, turning to me.

'Sometimes,' I reply, 'It's a great place to come for brunch.'

'Sure,' Dad says, disappointed with my answer. 'Lots of trendy bakeries opening.'

To be honest, I'm exaggerating for his benefit, and even then, it's not right. The truth is, when my friends and I meet up at night, it's to stumble our way across the smattering of bespoke cocktail bars in the old red-light district. We get fucked up at clubs with *ang mohs* and shitty music. And if we do meet in the day, it's for sushi in a cheap chain or Coffee Bean for overpriced coffee.

'So, what do you want to eat?' Dad asks.

'I'm easy,' I shrug. 'It's up to you.'

'I'm easy,' Dad mirrors. 'You decide.'

We look at each other, waiting for the other to put their foot down. It makes me want to laugh. Awkward, stumbling moments like these used to leave me wondering if Dad listens when I speak. If it matters that most of my words are said to please him. I look at my father's face, the expression he wears, speaking without words. I hate how easy it is for my own words to turn into smooth, practised lies. I don't even have to think; they just fall out, tumbling so fast that even I believe them to be the truth.

Dad, I think. Growing up, I always tried to be as Singaporean as I could for you. Now, almost grown, walking around the neighbourhood with you, I'm still trying.

'Let's go for congee,' I finally say.

'Good idea,' Dad replies, perking up.

Going for congee means we have to loop back around the neighbourhood homes. As we pass, I notice that some of the windows are covered in thick black bars. It's strange that in a city so safe, so sheltered, its citizens would need to sequester themselves. It makes me think of the neighbourhood I used to live in in Boston, with its Puerto Rican flags hanging from barred windows and bullet-proof-

glassed corner stores, but I guess people had reason to be scared there. Here, in a trendy neighbourhood, the past only feels out of place.

'I love walking here,' Dad says. 'You know my grandmother used to live here.'

'Really?' I say, walking next to him, 'I didn't know that.'

'She was such a nice lady. Shame you never got to meet her.'

I let Dad continue, surprised at his sudden openness.

'Anyways, I've always thought this is Singapore at its best.'

This titbit, like all insights into his past, leaves me curious, unsatisfied at how much, yet how little I actually know. Another note to add to the mental fact list I've started to compile since last summer when Dad admitted to the family that he was thinking of selling his company and I acknowledged that I wanted to know more about his life. Mom already knew about the sale, her tired face keeping the family together, always listening, never arguing. For Alex and me, it came as a shock. Even though we have never expressed interest in taking over the family's rubber business, it was always something we thought we would have—a possibility to toy with without consideration.

When we get to the hawker that sells congee, Dad pauses before ordering his with minced meat, and mine with tofu. He orders breaded chicken and fried wontons with mayonnaise even though we are still recovering from the holidays. Dad looks at me to confirm the order. I nod, knowing that even though the two of us are frequently on a diet, binge eating is one of the things we have in common.

Dad makes his way over to an empty table as I fill a couple of the little blue bowls stacked by the side of the till with soy and chilli. When I join him on the black plastic chairs placed on the side of the road I feel the eyes of the people around us. *Ang moh,* their word used to describe foreigners. Why can't people tell that I'm his daughter? Mixed families aren't uncommon in Singapore these days, and everyone says I look like him. Some days I almost become him. Both of us hiding behind a smile that nobody questions, both riddled with countless worries. Granted, Dad's troubles seem more pressing than mine. But still, people ask him, *Is that your daughter? Yes,* Dad will say as I cling to his arm, *of course*.

Dad tells me of his latest fishing trip. About the crabs they caught and cooked. The monitor lizard that knocked its head against his window in the morning. I smile and laugh when required, but inside I am dying to talk about his past. I feel inspired by our short conversation earlier, less afraid than usual to try and speak with him

about the things that keep us up at night. When Dad pauses to reach for a piece of chicken, I blurt out the first coherent thought I can grasp.

'Will you miss the factories?'

'Maybe,' Dad takes a moment before continuing, 'but selling is the right decision. We can't continue. It's a different world now.'

If I was brave before, I am running now. 'What do you think Ah Kong would say?'

Dad shrugs. 'Like I said, it is the right decision.' He turns back towards his food, popping a wonton in his mouth before washing it down with a large sip of Diet Coke. 'What's with all the questions?'

It's my turn to shrug. 'I'm just curious.'

He laughs, 'Why? It's not very interesting.'

Now that it's out in the open, it feels silly, being so nervous, so ashamed that I want to find out about a family who I barely understand. Of a business I've spent my whole life trying to avoid. Thinking of my father's business always makes me feel strange—an enterprise construed of rigid men steeped in custom, of back-breaking labour worsened by the inescapable sun. It feels like an ancient song of the past, impossible to be understood beyond the myth of its time. Yet my father's business, and the stories that accompany it, are a legacy that haunts me, something I can never live up to.

'It's not just you,' I say, 'I'm curious about Ah Ma and Ah Kong too. About their lives during the occupation, about them fleeing Indonesia…'

The words come out in a rush, making me realize just how much they needed to be said. I wait for Dad to respond, half expecting him to just get up and leave.

'They didn't flee,' he says finally.

'They didn't?' I ask. 'Then why did they leave?'

I can see Dad begin to close up; it's in his smile, disarming and aloof, in the distant look that crosses his eyes. 'Ask me some other time.'

'Okay,' I pause, thinking of a way to restart the conversation. 'What about further back? Weren't our ancestors from China?'

Dad sighs, whether it's the night itself, or the fact that we rarely get any time together, he gives me one last moment. 'They came to Indonesia by steamship with only the clothes on their back.'

He stops. We look at each other. It's an unfamiliar dance.

It won't be tonight, but now I have an opening—a chance to ask Dad about his childhood, about the order of events that befell his parents, about how it affected his most turbulent years. I will try for it to sound casual, less like an interview, but I fear we don't speak often enough for me to pull it off.

Usually, I fill our dinners with rushed words. Yet tonight an equilibrium has formed. Give and take—the closest resemblance to a conversation we've had in a long while. I begin to tell him of the thoughts that have taken over my mind, the story I feel I need to know every time I think of my future, every time the past rears its head to greet me in the mirror.

Dad nods as if he understands but I know that we are coming from it from different angles. I'll always be more Western than Chinese, always be working to understand a past that he wishes to leave behind.

I don't tell him that I've already heard some of these stories, that they can change if he's willing to give me his perspective. I don't tell him that no matter how we try, whatever we say will never be the truth. Not the entire one.

*

Ernest

Indonesia

1960s

Ernest was a lonely child. When he moved back to Indonesia after those brief years in London, he had become something other than himself–a foreigner in a local body. His family was wealthy in a small neighbourhood and lived in a bungalow that was a little larger, a little brighter, than everybody else's. According to his father England had been a necessary move. And though it felt strange at first, it had suited them. London was a booming epicentre for those in the rubber trade, and his father's company was flourishing. On the weekends, Ernest used to go to the park with his nanny and admire the English children from afar, mimicking their laughter, the way they dared to dart away from their parents' watchful eyes. Now that they were back in Borneo, back in a home that was both new and old, Ernest wasn't sure what would remain and what would change.

Yesterday his father had taken the day off work to buy him a new bike. They had spent a rare afternoon together perusing the shop. He'd always admired the way his father spoke to people, as if he possessed a great secret and whoever he was talking to was fortunate enough to be included. Speaking to people was a lot harder

for Ernest. The words often got trapped, spinning round and round his mind before deciding they were best left unspoken. It was why the thought of making friends made Ernest feel anxious. The new bike was supposed to help him.

‘Just ask the other kids to join you,’ his father said, paying for the sleek red bike Ernest had chosen.

‘It’s like a Ferrari,’ Ernest laughed, looking up at his father.

‘Exactly,’ his father laughed, ‘it will be a hit.’

When Ernest summons up enough courage to ride his bike to the bottom of the street, the one where he's seen the other kids play, he's unsure of his father's words. Perhaps he'd been too wrapped up in the fact that Pa had taken an actual day off to realize the ridiculousness of his actions. A new bike wouldn't make him skinnier, or smarter, it wouldn't give him the words he needed to sound cool. When he finds himself at the bottom of the street surrounded by the curious stares of the neighbourhood kids, he almost turns back. He feels like they are drinking him in, observing his full cheeks and cropped hair, his starched white shirt and loafers. They know he is different—sometimes he thinks he wears it like a scent.

‘Hey, you!’ a kid calls out. The kid is not particularly large, or loud, but it’s clear that he’s in charge. It shows in the way he holds himself, a little higher, a little prouder than the rest. Ernest stops, unsure if he’s the one being called for.

‘Yeah. You.’ The kid beckons.

Ernest obliges, pedalling his way over.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Ernest.’ He smiles.

‘Funny name,’ the kid says.

‘Yeah,’ another one chimes in, ‘I like your bike though.’

Ernest takes a deep breath. 'Uh, thanks. My pa got it for me. You can borrow it if you want.'

‘Hey,’ the first kid says, walking up to him. ‘Why do you talk like that?’

‘What do you mean?’ Ernest asks, confused.

‘All funny,’ the kid says, placing his hand on Ernest’s bike handle.

Ernest blushes, knowing his accent is funny, that the combination of his childhood in England with the American school he now attends makes the way he pronounces things different. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says, ‘I don’t mean to.’

The kids laugh, and for a moment, it seems like things will go well. Ernest's heart thuds, sweat pooling beneath the rim of his glasses. He wipes them on his shorts, ready to mount his bike again, this time with friends.

The kid who had called out to him squints his eyes. ‘I don’t like the way you talk.’

The laughter breaks. The kids seem to sparkle as they move in around him, the street becoming a mirage of trees and concrete. Ernest watches as the kid leans down to trail his fingers through the mud formed by the previous night's storm. With a practised stroke, the kid's tiny dirt-filled hands push him to the ground.

His bike is next, the second kid mounting it with ease. He spits as he begins to pedal. ‘Don't cry,’ he laughs. ‘I’m sure Pa will just buy you a new one.’

The humidity seems to rise tenfold as the kids begin to fade from view. Why did he expect things to be different? It makes him feel ashamed, a sad mixture of sweat and mud. Ernest forces himself to stand, waiting for the tears he knows will fall. The shame can remain, but the tears can't. Neither Ma or Pa would be happy to see him crying, especially since he has just lost his bike. Waiting for his tears to dry, he slowly makes his way back home, debating whether or not he should tell his ma.

‘Hello?’ he calls.

Hello? the walls call back.

With his house seemingly empty, he makes his way towards the laundry room, but when he spots Tati by the kitchen, he stops. Tati hasn't been with them very long, but Ma seems to like her; she cooks and cleans well, meaning Ma doesn't have to join in. He misses his mother's cooking though; she always cooked in London. Tati, having heard him, comes from her room. She takes a moment, observing his mud-splattered clothes.

‘Aiyoh,’ she says, ‘what happened?’

‘Nothing,’ he lies, feeling the tears in his eyes.

Tati rushes him to the bathroom to change, ‘Take it off so I can wash it. Your ma will kill me if it stains. Where’s your bike? Should I clean it too?’

‘No,’ he whispers, looking to the floor. ‘Some boys took it.’

‘Oh, Ernest,’ she says, ‘should we tell your ma?’

Ernest begins to unbutton his shirt. He thinks of his mom, of how she might have comforted him if she was home. The fact that she’s out means she is having a

good time, and the last thing he wants is to make her unhappy. Their house is filled with enough sadness without him having to add to it.

‘No,’ he says finally, ‘please don’t tell her.’

‘Okay,’ she says, taking his clothes, ‘I’m going to make you something to eat.’

When Tati leaves, Ernest feels the weight of the afternoon wash over him. Perhaps it's better that his parents aren't there to ask him about his day. Affection is a stranger in his home, meaning there will be no kisses for his wounds or gentle hands to dry his stubborn tears. Pa would tell him to be a man, which for Pa means accepting the moment as fact, and Ma would look at him with her sad, dark eyes, wishing to be anywhere else. It's not that he feels sorry for himself, no, some people have it much worse, he is sure of that, but he just wishes for once, someone would try to understand.

Ernest spends the rest of his day playing with the collection of model cars he’s brought back from London. Every afternoon his mother would come home from wherever she was with a car waiting in her handbag. He missed London. Missed afternoons spent with his mother listening to The Beatles on the radio, or ones spent in the park picking chestnuts with his brother. He likes Tati, but the nanny who took care of him in London had a booming voice that made him feel like it was impossible to be lonely. They were happy then, all of them, living like a family, a real one.

Later that evening, when he hears voices in the hallway, he knows it is his mother. Perhaps her being home before his bedtime is a sign that he should tell her what happened. Though the fact he has spent the day debating whether or not to tell her probably means he shouldn't. Perhaps it is better to just enjoy her company instead. Maybe she'll be willing to teach him a card game, or tell him a story; she'd always been good at telling stories. When Ernest finds his ma, she is seated on the sofa, her legs, covered in a long skirt, curled up beneath her. Ernest goes to her quietly, afraid he might spook her, before resting his head in her lap.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asks.

‘Nothing,’ he says, avoiding her eyes.

‘Don’t lie,’ she says. ‘Tati told me your bike got stolen.’

Feeling betrayed, Ernest removes his head from his mother's lap. ‘She told you?’

‘Of course,’ his mother says, cupping his chin so that he has to meet her eyes. ‘Why didn’t you stand up for yourself?’

‘I don’t know,’ Ernest shrugs. ‘Maybe they needed it more than I do. Maybe they are just borrowing it and will return it when they are done.’

'You're too kind,' his mother laughs. ‘See what kindness gets you?’

When she lets go of his chin, Ernest knows he is dismissed. He makes his way up as quietly as he made his way down, but not before pausing at his brother's door. He knows Henry will be in there doing his homework. Maybe he will want to hang out, to tell him about his day without asking Ernest about his. Ernest knows that it isn’t kindness that got his bike stolen, it was cowardice. He thinks that he will never be strong like Ma and Pa. He’s heard stories of their time during the war. Heard of the things they had to do to survive. What was his stolen bike in comparison? How can he complain? When he goes to sleep, he finds it impossible to do so. He feels like something is watching him, waiting in the corners of his room, creeping along the edges of his mind.

The next morning when he comes down for school, Pa is waiting by the front door.

‘Ernest,’ he says, soft and stern, ‘what happened to your bike?’

‘I lost it,’ Ernest says quickly, unsure whether a lie or the truth would be better.

'Well, it seems to have become unlost,' his father says, moving to the side.

Ernest looks out the open door with shock. His bike is there, although not as sleek or as new as it had been the day before. The kids have used it, trashed it, and then discarded it. It isn’t Ernest’s first encounter with bullies; he knows what it means, a clear warning of what will happen if Ernest returns.

‘You’re so careless!’ his father accuses him. ‘Why would you say you lost it? You know you shouldn’t lie.’

‘Of course, Pa,’ Ernest says. ‘I promise, I’ll fix it.’

‘Well,’ his father sighs, ‘if you can’t, I’ll buy you a new one, but I won’t have any more time to go with you.’

The disappointment feels worse than the anger, Ernest knows this as he looks at his father. What would it matter if he told him the truth anyway? It wouldn't change anything.

When Ernest goes to retrieve his bike, his father shakes his head no. ‘Let Tati get it,’ he says, ‘you’ll be late for school.’

Ernest nods before going to get his bag. He contemplates saying something to Pa as he makes his way out but knows it won't make anything better. As he moves

past the discarded bike, he realizes the truth of his existence. He is alone. He is always alone. Things will never change.

*

Now that Ernest is ten, he feels like he can see through the illusion of change. Things may seem different, but usually, they are very much the same. The two years he's spent back in Borneo have shown him that even though the land has changed, he has not. Not that he minds, a friendless life is something that he can deal with. He likes being alone, to think what he wants, to do as he pleases. After all, people only end up making him feel uncomfortable, so perhaps he’s better off without them.

By now, Pa lives at work. Running his factories is a demanding affair, and he likes to ensure everything is done well from the bottom up. Ma has fallen in love with gambling. Hidden in secret dens and parlours of friends, she spends her afternoons living in unobserved danger. Ma has always loved complicated games, and baccarat is her reigning favourite. Pa grumbles that she loses as much as she wins, but he knows Ma doesn't care. The thrill of placing great bets, of her growing posse watching her treat money like bits of disposable paper, makes her feel untouchable.

The best days for Ernest are the ones where Pa brings him to work. Pa: stern, rigid in his tailor-made suits, hardened by life, by every tough decision he’s made since he lost his little brother to the war. Though Pa never returned to school, choosing to work instead, he is harsh with Ernest and Henry, willing them to do all the things he could not. Pa worked so that his family could be educated, worked to restore a name that was almost lost. Pa, determined andvigilant, never learnt what it meant to spend a day idle. Building orphanages, schools, churches, sending his employees’ children to university, never spending a penny on himself. Pa is both Ernest’s guiding force and his destroyer.

Those days—lost on the rubber plantation, skipping between the thin barks of the rigid trees, pressing his hands on the mossy wood, straining his eyes to see their leafy heads—are days of peace for Ernest. They are days to look fondly on, a glimmering string of memories to counter the ensuing presence of darkness. They are days where he slows to a wandering pace so that his father can catch up as he conducts his routine inspections. Ernest likes their walks around the plantations. Likes to watch the sweat form on the wrinkled, sun-stained foreheads of the men who tap the abundant trees for sap. With firm, practised strokes, they mark the gangling barks,

forming incisions so they can collect the sticky fluid that bleeds from the tree into their waiting bowls.

Ernest's least favourite part of the day is when they leave the plantation to make their way to the factory. Here the freshly made rubber is brought to be cleaned and cut before being sent to the customers. Though the trees are Ernest's favourite part, his family aren't the ones who own them; they own the processing plants instead. Strange, loud machines that take the sap and turn it into rubber.

The factories Ernest's family own are enclosed with metal-green planks that form a gap with the roof, the large gap ventilating the factory, granting a view of the jungle behind. Everything in the factory seems to be green or blue, camouflaging with the overwhelming backdrop. Like magic the sap is hurried after collection so that it can be heated and mixed with sulphur, to help with its hardening. For Ernest, this process is less attractive than the men with their trees. The scientists in the plant never stop to chat with him as the plantation workers do.

His father promises the scientists are friendly, just busy. Like you, Ernest thinks. It is a thought he'll never share—he knows how important his father is. He sees how the men who come to visit the factory speak to his dad, tipping their hats in respect as they sweat through their linen suits. He knows he should be proud, but it disappoints him instead. Maybe the less people care about his father, the more his father will care about coming home. It is something he will never be able to get past, this love of wishful thinking. For Ernest, his thoughts bring comfort reality often forgets.

At the back of the factory, there are rickety boats that bob in the river. The river's murky waters always give Ernest pause. He's seen children swimming in it, their heads bobbing in and out of the chocolate water. He's never even dipped a toe in—the clay-like surface makes the river seem bottomless. If he were to touch the water, he is sure he'll drown, even knowing how to swim cannot prevent the inevitability. The river will eat him up, and he'll spend an eternity lost, struggling against an endless tide. The boats seem even more elusive than the river, cut rubber stacked high on the ageing platforms, insides groaning as they make their way to the traders. The piles frighten him, so much weight for such a fragile structure.

A day in the factory always leaves Ernest feeling overwhelmed. It is frightening and fascinating at the same time, knowing that this is what his family does, what his legacy will be. Like magic, the people who work for his father turn sap into something useful, feeding foreign companies their rubber so they can make tyres. However

abstract it might feel, Ernest knows that one day it will be his. That he and Henry will grow to be just like their pa and their uncle Kai, living and breathing this business.

*

Another year passes, and even though Ernest is eleven, things seem more or less the same. Pa is away more often than not. Professional reasons have joined personal reasons, making the father he once accompanied to the factories become a stranger verging on fiction. The neighbourhood rumours hiss that his father has a mistress, but Ernest has a hard time believing it. How can Pa, a man who barely has time for his family, have time for another woman? Ernest never asks Pa if it is true, knowing that as a child, his place is not to ask questions. Instead, he watches, waiting for his parents to fall in love again, hoping that in the passing months something will change.

When something does change, it's not what Ernest expects. It's a Monday night in the Lee household, uncharacteristic in its lack of silence, in the fact that his father is home for dinner. Ma spent the early part of the evening in the kitchen with Tati, laughing and cooking. Ernest spent the entire time in the living room worried that if he wandered in, he would break the spell, but still wanting to be close enough to bask in its glow. When Pa comes home, it's with a smile for Ernest, and they sit in companionable silence till dinner is ready. Henry is with his grandparents for the evening, so when it's time to eat, it's just the three of them. Ernest doesn't mind that his brother isn't home; he is secretly pleased that he gets this moment to himself.

When Ma sits at the table, she looks like a picture straight from the television. Her eyes sparkle with quiet laughter, her dark hair contrasting the red of her lips. Ernest hopes Pa can see how beautiful she looks in the warm light of the dining room, just as much as he hopes Ma can see Pa. Pa is an equal force in a tan suit, the blue linen of his shirt pressed perfectly despite a day in the office, his glasses framing a soft, smiling face. Ernest blinks, wishing he could capture this moment, something to keep with him for the days when it feels like it can all fall apart.

After dinner, Ma excuses Tati, who is willing to do their dishes, to extend the moment a little longer. Ernest sits with his parents in the kitchen, placing himself on the floor by the entrance so he won't get in their way. Ma and Pa speak in hushed voices, their heads bent close. When Pa moves his hand to touch Ma on the waist, Ernest blushes at the intimacy, moving his eyes towards the floor. He lets the moment pass before he looks back up. It's then that he sees the change. There are tears in

Ma's eyes as she leans over the sink. Pa has stepped back, his expression blank, waiting.

‘I hate you,’ Ma whispers.

The words are soft, but they are strong enough to fill the room.

‘After all we’ve done.’ She trembles. ‘After all we’ve been through. When the Japanese left… when you rebuilt the company, I was there. I am always here.’

Ma is no longer whispering now, and it makes Ernest wish Pa would say something, anything, to bring her back. ‘I can’t change anything,’ Pa finally says, ‘I won’t.’

'Of course, you won't.' She laughs. 'You're too stubborn. Always sure that what you're doing is the right thing. The things you had to do, after the war. No one holds them against you. But it doesn’t mean you can hold them against us.'

‘Feng,’ Pa sighs, ‘Please. Not now. Not in front of Ernest.’

Ma doesn’t look at Ernest, she doesn’t look at anything. He can see her closing in on herself, on everything she’s held in. ‘If not now, then when? When, Isk? Tell me when will suit you. The next time you are home? The next time you are with her?’

'Her?' Pa moves towards Ma, but it only makes her step back, 'Feng, there's no *her*. You know that. Those are just rumours. Words whispered by those who wish us ill.'

Ernest feels like he should leave, but he can't. He's frozen by all the things he's wanted to ask, spilling out on to the kitchen floor. Then Ma reaches behind her. She's laughing, but it doesn't sound like a laugh, it's hysterical, tired. When she brings her hand back around, she's holding a knife. It gleams against the white tiles, poised, ready. Ernest has seen Ma chop the heads off chickens with that knife. He sees Pa like one of the chickens Ma brings home, prepared to accept its fate, knowing it might survive without its head, but not for long. Ma knows what to do, what she can do. Pa doesn't freeze; he moves his hands instead, crossing them to shield his face.

'Feng, please,' he says. 'Stop it.'

‘No!’ she screams. ‘I hate you. I hate you!’

Ernest wants to rush in, to jump in front of his father, to protect his parents from something they can never come back from, but what can he do? He’s just a child. When his parents were young they had to deal with the war. He’s not even supposed to ask questions, not even supposed to know something is wrong. Yet here it is, looking at him straight in the eye. Ma hates Pa enough to kill him. Pa is strong enough

to stay and sort it out. And Ernest? Ernest feels caught in the middle, watching, waiting, feeling as useless as he always feels.

‘What are you going to do?’ Pa yells. ‘Are you really going to kill me?’

'Yes,' Ma yells back. 'If I want to, I can!’

‘And what will it solve?’ Pa says, quieter. ‘Will it make you any happier?’

Ma presses Pa to the end of the kitchen, her screams turning into sobs. She's always been a being of quiet rage, filled with something dark—festering, bubbling—waiting for the right moment, the excuse to consume everything around her. Turns out this is the moment. Turns out she won't take it. Pa watches as Ma begins to drop the knife before reaching out to disarm her. His initial shock at Ma's anger has faded into disciplined practicality that he wears on his face. He knows that even though he's disarmed Ma she isn't any less dangerous, and he shouldn't be any less afraid.

‘You won’t even let me have this,’ Ma says, before dashing out the door.

Ernest and Pa wait. It takes only a few deep breaths till they hear the front door slam. Pa puts the knife down on the counter. When he turns towards the window, Ernest can see his shoulders shake. Ernest looks at the knife Pa has placed beside him. He reaches out to touch it, awed by its power, by its ability to change from something useful to harmful in the sweep of a hand. Pa stops him. He takes Ernest by the shoulders and looks him in the eye.

‘Are you okay?’ he asks, studying his face.

'I don't know,' Ernest says honestly. 'Are you?'

Pa takes a second to look at him then laughs, ‘I don’t know either.’

*

Ernest watches as Ma begins to shrink from their lives. Leaving before dinner, she'd return in the small hours of the morning with a gaggle of laughing women. These women would stumble across the furniture, waking Tati from her slumber to fetch them drinks. Sometimes they'd seek Ernest out, taking him from his room so he could tally their bets. At first, it annoyed him, but he soon began to crave the attention. It was embarrassing to admit, but he liked the way they laughed and teased his hair. He would stay up late into the night, racing his toy cars across an imaginary track, waiting to hear their slurred voices before wandering into the sitting room in the hope of being fussed over.

The nights when his mother's friends would come over for mahjong had once been an infrequent occurrence, but now that Pa rarely comes home they have become commonplace.

'And where is Isk tonight?' a woman asks, glancing casually at the row of tiles before her. The silence that ensues strangles the room's laughter as all eyes turn towards Ma.

Ernest looks up from his seat at the table. When he sees Ma, she is rigid, dark eyes flashing, mirroring the lightning that's accompanied them that evening. Ernest knows that look. It is the same one she gives him whenever he speaks out of turn.

'He's working late,' Ma says simply. 'Something your husband knows nothing about.'

The woman blushes, her gaze disappearing towards the table. Ernest can't help but admire Ma in her resolution, yet the image of her in the kitchen keeps him awake through the night. Ma has yet to speak to him about that night. After she fled the kitchen, he didn't see her again, not till a week later when she wandered into breakfast, smiling and talking as if nothing had ever happened.

The next time Ma's friends come over for mahjong Ernest looks for the woman who was brave enough to ask about Pa. A week of games pass, and her chair remains empty. The following week when Ernest spots a new face, sitting on her chair as if it were hers all along, Ernest knows he will never see the woman again.

On the rare occasions when Ma spends a night alone, she wanders aimlessly around the sparse living room. Like a guest she'll settle politely on the edge of one of the rattan armchairs, her slender legs crossed at the ankle, staring into space with her blank eyes as she moves her hands from their folded stance to fan her motionless face. Knowing she is there, Ernest follows, waiting for her to settle before daring to curl up beside her. For hours they'll sit alone in the room together. Neither will speak, their movements kept to a minimum. They are partners, comfortable in their silence, respectful of one another's lingering thoughts.

Staring at the round, pale planes of his mother's face, he imagines what his father's lover looks like. Is she fair and ebony all at once? Curved painted lips, a smile that only hints, long fingers that know how to caress, how to love. Some people said that she was Dutch. Perhaps she is blonde, then, and freckled with a long neck. Or maybe she is a woman who can talk. Someone he can confide in and cry to. He's never seen his father cry, but he imagines it would do him some good. He hopes

whoever she is she makes him happy. She has to make him happy; it is only fair that there is happiness to counter the sadness that creeps around his home. His mother never speaks about it. He'd watch her fix her hair, taming the black, coiling serpent into its nest, brushing colour on the milk of her cheeks, before turning side to side to admire her work.

One night he dares to touch her arm, hesitant in the unfamiliar contact.

'You're so beautiful.'

His whisper is honest in its child-like wonder, worried that the words might frighten her. She turns, the white of her eyes a bright moon against their stormy centre.

'Ernest.' She touches his cheek. 'Let's run away.'

His hand drops. Stunned at the nature of her comment, at the feel of her touch. Even at his age, he knows you can't run. You felt pain, you dealt with it, but you never ever shared it. 'Run?' he asks, suddenly afraid.

A ghost of a smile flits on her lips. 'Yes, darling. Run.'

He worries it's a trick. He knows she's sad, that he's sad, but did it mean they should leave? What about his brother? Wouldn't Father miss them?

Seeing the confusion in his eyes, she kisses his brow. 'Don't you want to be happy?'

It's the first time she's kissed him, at least the first time he can remember. He tries not to melt under the sweetness—under the thought that things could change. If they were to leave, they would escape everything that has come to trouble them. Far from the kids who judged him without ever bothering to ask, the neighbours who spend their evenings gossiping about his parents. Far from the large haunting house that never sees its family. A house that spends its nights waiting for a father who will never come home and a mother who hides her shame.

His mother straightens her back, breaking the spell of her uncharacteristic contact.

'Mummy is going to go to meet with her friends first. People will talk if I don't show up. But I'll be back for you. You know how to tell the time, right?'

He straightens, flashing his watch under her face. 'Of course.'

She steps towards the door. 'Good. Meet me outside the front gate at midnight.'

She's almost out the door when he stops her, his two small hands folding over her larger one. He's scared, but he tries his best to hide it. 'Do you promise?'

She smiles. 'I promise.'

*

Time seems to pass at an impossible pace. Minutes feel like hours as he waits in his room. Henry is at a friend's house, and he isn't sure where Pa is, so he eats the TV dinner Tati heats up for him. After dinner, he takes a long shower. Watching the droplets of water roll down his skin, he tries to imagine what his new home will look like. If the air in the hallways will feel this cold, if the chairs will be just as rigid in their gloom, if the cabinets will be filled with the same mocking painted porcelain. He wonders if they will go back to London; perhaps once they are settled, they can send for Henry. With his brother and his mother by his side, maybe his father will realize that a mistress cannot replace his family. Maybe their leaving will be the precipice. Headfirst they'll leap into the unknown, a family reborn.

It is half an hour to midnight when he begins to pack his bag. He doesn't know how far he will be going, so he limits himself to the number of toys he can take. He walks to his dresser and examines his collection of Matchbox cars. Leftovers from a time long gone, a dresser filled with empty promises. A display of disappointment stares back at him, row after row of shiny red anger, of baby-blue blues. It's a hard choice; his fingertips roll across the edges of the cars with care before settling on his favourite. A replica of James Bond's Aston DB4. Set in silver, its wheels tickle a path across the palm of his hand. He knows it won't matter. His ma can always buy him more. But he's a sentimental child, and each toy has earned a place in his heart—in the making of his journey. Chances are, he might make friends in his new home. Maybe they will like his toys as much as he does. In his new place, with his new friends, he is positive that he will learn what it is like to be happy.

He takes one last look at his room before heading down the stairs to put on his shoes. The laces fumble in his clumsy fingers, but he can tie them on his own. His brother spent ages trying to teach him, crossing ear over ear into a perfect coiling loop. *Like bunnies*, he'd laugh. Henry, six years older, would shake his head, a rare smile forming on his stoic face. The memory fades with the creak of the gate, the sticky night's heat coating his skin in greeting. He wipes off the thin layer of sweat that's formed on his upper lip. It's a thoughtless gesture. Too absorbed in dreams of his new life—a life far from the people who may look like him but are nothing like him.

Everything seems different in the dark. The street where he rides his bicycle is no longer filled with cold, staring eyes, by little mouths who accuse with the gossip they hear but do not understand. When he grips his hand, the Aston Martin presses

firm against his skin, bringing him back to the night. He wants to cry, but he tells himself that he’s strong. He makes his own dinner and ties his own shoes; he should be able to keep his tears to himself. His backpack starts to feel heavy, so he places it on the asphalt, watching as a line of red ants work their way across the concrete in perfect unison. Worried that the ants might decide to make his bag their new home he picks it up again, but as he begins to grow weary the fear of the ants and their stinging bite lessens, so he replaces his bag on the ground.

Legs crossed before him, Ernest takes his silver car and races it along the edges of his knees. It hides from henchmen under his thighs before coming in full vengeance around his ankles. The hands on his watch tick past midnight and he's filled with panic that he's wound it wrong. He tries his best to stay awake. He thinks he should go inside to get more toys to pass the time, but he worries that if he leaves his spot, his mom might come and think he's decided against joining her. When he finally gives in to sleep, he dreams of a street with laughter, with arms that beckon instead of cross—a street where he rides his bicycle with other boys, where his mom waits for him by the gate.

*

When he wakes, he feels the morning's sun beam across his face. Dreams mesh with reality in a convoluted orchestra of thoughts. He's confused, wondering where his mother has taken him, and when in the night she arrived. Somehow the street that has yet to come to life is the street he knows. He’s pensive as he stretches his back, now aching from a sleep slumped against the gate. Has he missed her? Did he get the wrong time? Maybe she never wanted to leave; he wouldn’t be surprised if he had made the whole thing up.

Sweat creeps along his neck, and he’s pretty sure he was visited in the night by a horde of mosquitoes. He scratches, enjoying the feel of his nails on his skin. As much as he wishes the conversation was made up, he knows the truth. He is resolute; there is no wavering found in his movements. Picking up his bag Ernest walks back through the gate and past the front door into his house. He may have never left his old home, but he has learned the first lesson of his new life. That morning he learns, a promise is a phrase that bears no meaning.

*

The next day he decides not to go to school. Changing into a tank top and shorts, he makes his way to the fridge. It's empty except for a few forgotten beers in its back

corner. He grabs a beer before hoisting himself on to the island in the middle of the kitchen. There's a half-pack of cigarettes discarded by the fruit bowl. He lights one up. From his spot on the counter, he can see out the window. When he coughs, he realizes just how quiet it is. Poor little Ernest, he chides himself, feeling like the last boy on earth, forsaken to the great mysteries of the universe. When he checks the time, he assumes that his father is at work, his brother at school, and his mother still nowhere to be seen. He goes past the laundry room to check if Tati is around. She'll scold him if she sees him drinking a beer. After all, she is the one who feeds him, who tucks him into bed at night, but when he peeks into her room, he sees that it's empty. It should make him sad, but the idea of solitude makes him feel relieved.

Since he's alone, he spends the day wandering his house. He opens all the cabinets with no intention of closing them, he traces his fingers across the walls, leaving clean white streaks against a light layer of dust. It's not until the afternoon that Henry comes home. He goes straight to the kitchen to lay out his homework. Ernest joins him, watching as he makes quick work of his maths.

'Why are you in a hurry?' Ernest asks.

Henry looks up, realizing he's not alone. 'Ah Kong is taking me to the movies.'

Ernest loves going to the movies, loves getting lost in romances with slick heroes and beautiful women, pondering great mysteries that never go unsolved, witnessing worlds so similar and yet so strange from his own. He dreams of being cool and composed like Steve McQueen, or debonair like Sean Connery. He's always been fascinated with beautiful people, with the way they seem to glow when they walk, how others always take the time to listen when they speak.

'Can I come?' he asks, trying not to sound hopeful.

Henry frowns. 'Ernest, you know you can't.'

Ernest nods, used to the fact that as the second son, he doesn't exist in his grandfather's eyes. His ah ma is the only one who ignores the pecking order, hiding toffees or little presents in her bag to give him in secret. He can barely remember his grandparents on his mother's side. He wonders if her mother looks like her; if her father wouldn't care what number son he is and take him to the movies instead.

Ernest spends the rest of the day in front of the television trying not to listen for the sound of the door. Waiting for Ma to return and take him, sorry that she left him, full of life-or-death excuses. Ma doesn't return that evening. A week passes without her face, then a month without her voice. Nobody talks about the fact that she is gone.

They don't take her photos down or store her belongings. Nothing changes in the months it takes for her to return. During the week Henry finishes his homework before taking Ernest out; hand in hand they wander the neighbourhood, two little boys who never had a mother to begin with. It becomes easy, bottling the things that hurt the most. When people ask Ernest where his mother has gone, he replies that she is away, and for a while, this simplified form of the truth is enough.

Half a year passes before the evening of her return. That night Pa makes a rare appearance at dinner. Henry and Ernest take a seat on either side of their father, their usual chatter falling into a respectful silence. Ernest knows it's best to speak only when spoken to, but the child in him is dying to ask about his mother. It's something he's wanted to ask every day since she's left but never has. Her absence, never spoken of, becomes a presence of its own. It touches everything she once owned, turning every dress, every piece of jewellery into an empty vessel waiting to be filled. One look at Henry's face keeps Ernest from asking the questions he so badly wants answers to. A burgeoning apprentice in the art of apathy, Henry has always been able to understand the workings of their family better. Still, Ernest thinks, perhaps he could get used to a life like this. The three of them eating dinner together, bound in wordless solidarity by the edges of their pain.

Dinner is ending when there’s a knock on the door. Nobody makes a move to open it. The knock comes again. Ernest looks at Pa’s motionless expression, watches as Henry moves his fork to his mouth with unnatural concentration. A third knock joins before he decides to make his way to the door. Ernest is not sure who he imagines will be behind it, but the sight of his mother smiling on the other side is the last thing on his mind.

Ma takes a second to look at him, drinking him in as if she’d seen him earlier that day.

‘Well, come on,’ she laughs, ‘aren’t you going to let me in?’

Dumbfounded Ernest lets her brush past him.

‘I see you’ve already had dinner,’ she smiles. ‘That’s good.’

About to shut the door, Ernest stops, spotting a girl making her way down their driveway. When the girl reaches the door, she smiles at him. Ernest doesn't let her in, taking a moment to study her. She has short hair that loops behind her ears, framing her broad face. She's skinny and small, and in her arms is a large bag that he assumes is full of clothes. For a second Ernest wonders if she's the reason Ma hadn't felt like

taking him when she left. It's clear to him now, after meeting his mother's gambling groupies, and now this new girl, Ernest knows how many people it takes to be forgotten.

‘Hey,’ the girl says to him, ‘we brought you a puppy.’

He's confused, unsure how this girl and his ma have become a 'we'. But when a white ball of fur peeks from behind her legs, his uncertainty is forgotten. The puppy's soft curls accentuate its hazel eyes, its stumpy legs thumping soundlessly on the tiled floor. When Ernest reaches for the puppy, it waits, its bright gaze both cautious and hopeful.

‘He’s mine?’

She smiles. ‘If you want him to be.’

When the puppy licks his hand, he smiles, forgetting for a second that his mother left, only to return with a stranger and a gift. He won't realize it, but that night Ernest makes a mental note—forgiveness is something you can buy.

*

The girl's name is Dina, and she is here to stay. By now, Ernest is used to refugees making their way into his home. His parents were always taking in distant relatives, sometimes even children from the people who worked in the factory. Pa is considered a generous man to those who know him and likes to help out whenever he can. Turns out Dina is his mother’s cousin. Shy and sweet, she follows his mother everywhere. Ernest comes downstairs and finds them playing cards, or sometimes, speaking late into the night. He tries not to feel jilted when she joins Ma and her friends for long hours of mahjong, knowing that they will accept him if he makes his way to the table, but feeling like he no longer can.

Even Henry, who will be leaving for America soon, having been accepted into a university to study engineering, is smitten. Even though Dina is twenty-three to his eighteen, they spend a lot of time together. Talking underneath the trees in the yard, laughing in front of the television. First Ma and now Henry. As if Dina somehow manages to be all the pieces that Ernest lacks. Dina is kind but knows when to stand her ground. She knows when to smile and when to remain unseen.

Soon Ernest begins to pick on Dina. If being bullied has taught him anything, it is the effectiveness of malice. It turns out it just requires practice.

‘You’re ugly,’ he says.

‘You’re handsome!’ she smiles.

‘You’re boring.’

‘You’re charming!’

It becomes an endless pattern. He bites—she fills the wound with honey. As time passes, Ernest begins to give up hope that he can make her cry. He thinks long into the night of what he can say to finally break her smile. Alone in the darkness of his room, he focuses on the silence, the phantom composed of all the words he’ll never say, detailed by all the ones he'll never hear. This presence that haunts him, that accompanies him into the night, only makes him feel empty, a void he’s discovered growing within.

‘Nobody wants you,’ he finally says one evening, staring at her with dark, shadowed eyes, with a particular type of cruelty that only children know how to inflict.

Dina, the sweet girl who never hurt a soul, crumbles before the little boy who discovers that hurting other people can make him forget that he is the one who is hurt.

‘You should be thankful that we took you in,’ he says, egged on by his success. ‘You have no friends. Your parents don’t want you. Without us, you'd be on the streets.’

What he says isn’t entirely true, Pa has told him that Dina’s family had sent her to live with them in the hope that she will have a better life. But words don’t have to be true to hurt, they only have to hint at it. As soon as the words leave his mouth, Ernest regrets them. The tears falling from Dina’s eyes only mirror his own. He doesn’t want her hate, doesn’t want to add another person to the growing list of people who will eventually abandon him. But it is too late for regret. Ernest watches as she flees to the drawing room, excusing herself when she passes Ma. Ma turns to look at Ernest before following Dina to her room. When she returns to the living room, Ernest knows he's in trouble.

Time seems to slow as Ma makes her way towards him. Stunned Ernest watches as she grabs him by his arms, dragging him towards the backyard. He is used to punishment; with caning a regular occurrence in his household he knows the routine. As if sensing his acceptance of her usual punishment, Ma storms into the house only to return with his dog’s collar in hand.

‘Ma?’ he asks, suddenly afraid.

Ma is silent as she leans down. Unsure of what she’s about to do Ernest waits. The moment Ma places the collar around his neck Ernest sees his phantom. It blinks at him, one hand on Ma’s shoulder, telling her that it’s the right thing to do, that there’s only one way that he will learn.

'This is where you'll stay tonight,' his mother snaps. 'If you cry, you will only stay longer.' She looks at him, waiting to see if he understands.

'Yes, Ma,' he whispers.

Chained by his dog's collar to a post in their backyard, Ernest isn't sure how to feel. No matter how much he has hurt Dina, he doesn't deserve this. But a voice from deep inside assures him that he does. As the night passes, he finds it impossible to sleep. Ma watches him from a seat in the living room, her evening plans thwarted by the desire to carry out his punishment. The collar is tight around his neck, further engulfing him in shame that he wishes would swallow him whole. Shame that makes its way through his stomach, clawing its way up to his throat and into his mind. The shame knows Ernest well; it feeds his fears, stroking every little insecurity. Even Poppy, his usually faithful companion, avoids Ernest as he stares into the darkness swatting at mosquitos with tired hands.

He never wanted to hurt Dina. It didn't feel right, hurting a person who had only ever been kind to him. He tries to blame his jealousy, his rage, the uncontrollable feeling he can't describe. Yet he knows none of those emotions are to blame. That feeling, the momentary one that came when Dina cried, was something he savoured, a power he didn't realize he could wield. It was him, all of it, and it makes him feel sick.

Ernest spends the rest of his night looking at Ma, wondering when she will come and set him free. She doesn't, of course, and he wants to kick himself for expecting anything different. She just watches him watching her, two shadows intertwined in the darkness of the night.

*

The next morning Dina comes to release him. As she leans down to undo the collar, he avoids her eyes. He spent the night lost in a haze, an endless loop of all the things he could say to make things alright. The collar made it impossible to rest, and his legs forget for a moment how to stand. When Dina offers him her hand to steady him, Ernest feels like he might cry.

'I'll never hurt you again,' he says suddenly.

Keeping his hand in hers, she tries to smile. 'I know.'

Ernest finds it awkward to make eye contact after this. There are no words to express the way that night makes him feel. If only Ma would speak to him about it, even if it is only to ask him if he has learned his lesson.

As summer passes Ernest begins to disappear beneath the baggy jumpers he finds in the back of his closet. Lost memories of London, hidden away, a time of his life that now seems unreal in its distance. Ernest spends long afternoons with Poppy. When he plays the piano Poppy howls along with him, and when he goes for a ride on his bike Poppy runs beside him. In the evening he sits with his bare feet pressed to the floor, combing his fingers through Poppy’s thick fur. It's moments like these when he thinks himself lucky. If Poppy had been skinnier, then the incident could've been much worse. Little things, he thinks, little things to keep going.

He will never speak of this time of his life. Not to the future daughter and son who might forgive his harsh words and rough exterior in the light of his childhood. No, he will never speak of violence, of abuse, of nights spent scared and lonely. He will tell his daughter that she has been raised soft, that her mother spoils her. That the only way to learn is to be shown by force. His daughter will think that there’s a gap in their generations that can’t be breached; his son will think his father doesn’t care. Ernest’s wife, Sylvia, will come from an upbringing entirely different from his own. She will undermine the beliefs he learned from fear with beliefs she learned from kindness. For Ernest, his son will know nothing of respect, his daughter will always replace duty with whimsy. His children will grow as strangers to Indonesia, to its culture, and though he will blame them, he will try his best to make sure they remain sheltered.

But that is a future not yet told. For now, Ernest is amazed at his mother’s convenient memory loss. At how easy it is for her to make all the hurt disappear. All she has to do is decide it doesn’t exist. Although the collar hasn’t left any marks, he feels like he can still feel it around his throat. One night he wakes gasping for air, frantic hands reaching to remove the phantom restraint. When his hands find his neck, he realizes he is in bed, that the darkness that lingers is only in his head. His breath attempts to steady his heart. His sheets are sweat-soaked and stale. Moving from his bed to the window, Ernest finds himself wondering if he will ever sleep again.

Another year passes before change makes its way onto the horizon. Ernest hasn’t even noticed that Pa is around less, but Ma confirms it with news of their move.

‘An office in Singapore,’ Ma says, full of excitement. ‘Isn’t it great? It will be a fresh start. Yes. A fresh start, that’s what we need.’

Ernest tries to feel Ma's excitement but finds that he can't muster the effort. Singapore may have been Ernest’s birthplace, but he has yet to live there. To him, it is just another step in the rising prosperity of his father’s business; a new country with

new opportunities for everyone but himself. Though in the back of his mind, he wonders, much like with his move to Indonesia, if Singapore will be something that might bring some form of happiness.

*

Singapore

1976

Certain tropes begin that will haunt Ernest for the rest of his life. What were once days lost on plantation grounds are now days spent in a stuffy secondary school. Walking the frost-white halls, Ernest tries his best to disappear in a uniform that only exposes his expanding waistline. Classes were never something he enjoyed and become something he enjoys even less in his effort to keep silent so the students won't snicker at his American accent. Before his first day of school, Pa had told him to be wary of the people who wanted to be his friends. To make sure they wanted to spend time with him and not the things that came with him. The advice made Ernest want to laugh, for he knew it wasn't his parent's wealth that divided him from his classmates. It was something deep within him.

Ernest does make one friend, though, a boy from Malaysia who prefers to be called Mo. Together they face the lunchtime perils of the cafeteria. Taking time to eat their packed lunches, sharing books written by Hemingway and Fleming, dreaming of unhappy people who lived champagne lives, troubles forgotten in the corners of the French Riviera or dazzling gun battles across the Alps. At fifteen Mo and Ernest feel like amateur philosophers, questioning without realizing that life's questions will never cease.

'Hey, Ernest,' Mo asks him at lunch. 'What do you think freedom is?'

Ernest takes his time before responding. He's been thinking about the word recently, and whether it is an illusion. 'Like riding a bicycle down a long road,' he says finally, 'knowing that there's no need to look behind you.' He glances at Mo, then shrugs. 'Why do you ask?'

Mo laughs, 'It's part of an essay question. I ended up writing some bullshit on having enough money. Basically, code for getting out of here.'

They grow quiet, their thoughts muffled by the sound of their schoolmates. Ernest thinks about Mo's words, about how no matter where he's lived, he's never felt free.

‘Hey, Ernest,’ Mo says, breaking their silence, ‘what are you doing after school? You want to hang out?’

‘I’d like to,’ Ernest replies, ‘but I can’t. Got to meet my dad after school.’

Mo nods. ‘That’s a bummer.’

Ernest shrugs. ‘Yeah.’

Mo looks at him. ‘Well, maybe tomorrow then.’

As they make their way back to class, Ernest wonders if he should tell Mo the truth. After all, Mo must find it weird that he never speaks about his parents, that he never invites him over, always choosing to go to Mo’s instead. But what would the truth be? At home, he has a father who loves work and a mother who loves herself. At home, he is stuck, trapped under ceaseless expectations, surrounded by people who can’t understand the freedom of his dreams. At home, conversation grasps for words that have meaning; he is tired of being frightened and the strained nonsense. And so, the days go on, strangers living in a big brick house.

Once they reach the classroom, Ernest knows it’s better to keep it to himself. These aren’t the kind of things you share. These are the things that make you seem crazy. If Mo were to come over, he'd feel like they were no longer kindred spirits, that the money Ernest's family possess could surely solve any problem they might encounter. Sure, money has brought Ernest most of the things he can dream of; it brought him to distant lands, and a multitude of opportunities, but it will never bring him the one thing he wants most.

*

When Pa comes to pick Ernest up from school, Ernest makes sure to be as far from the entrance as possible. He's managed to hide it from his parents, but he isn't doing very well in school. His teachers have trouble getting him to pay attention and his tutors spend their time listening to the stories he spins to distract them. Tired of being punished for his bad grades, Ernest began to bury his report cards in the yard. There is something about the act of burying them that fascinates him. As if compiled together, watered by the constant rain and sun, they will form a tree. Perhaps if the tree can grow, blossoming far from the papers that create its roots, he too can complete the cycle, transforming from a creature of darkness to one meant for the heavens.

Of course, hiding the fact that he was failing, didn’t mean that Ernest’s father didn’t know. He was worried, much like any other parent, that his son’s failures in

school would lead to a failure in life. Ernest's knows it is why he decides to bring him to the office that afternoon, hoping that if Ernest sees what will one day be his, he will be inspired to become more serious.

'How was school?' Pa asks.

'Fine,' Ernest replies, sliding into the car. 'How was work?'

'Fine,' Pa nods.

Ernest mumbles a greeting to Pa's driver before sinking into practised stillness.

'I thought that after a short trip to the office we could go for some *ais kacang*.'

Ernest masks his surprise before looking at Pa. 'Sure.'

Ernest tries not to see the cool syrupy ice and beans as a reward for an afternoon spent with his father. It feels strange sitting with him, pretending as if an afternoon together is an everyday happening. The drive to the office is quick, the city seeming to clear as they reach the section by the harbour that houses the taller buildings. His father's office is on the thirty-second floor of a building that overlooks the water. Inside the elevator, Ernest feels cramped; looking at the men in suits, stiff like mirror images, makes him wonder if he will ever be a part of the machine. Well-oiled and well-intentioned, trying to be a version of his father, a version that can keep all its parts in order. When they reach the glass doors of his father's office, he's greeted by an exact replica of the trees back in the plantation. He's delighted and reaches his hand out only to be disappointed when it connects with the feel of plastic.

His father laughs. 'It's just for display.'

The tree transports Ernest to his time as a child running through the plantations, reminding him for a brief moment that not everything with his father is terrible. He's quiet as they walk through the office. The people smile at him as they pass. A woman asks if he wants something to drink; his father introduces her as a distant cousin from China. When they reach his father's desk he's faced with a black-and-gold typewriter; its spotless keys beckon, poised, ready to take flight. It is love at first sight.

His father smiles. 'She can be yours one day.'

Ernest senses the trap. 'What do I have to do?'

'It's simple,' his dad says. 'Work for it.'

Ernest sighs, it's a disconnect they will never get over—a father living for work, a son trying his hardest to escape it. While his father's life has been one of do-or-die decisions, Ernest's life is brimming with the possibility of choice, of the opportunities of peace. He has other interests, other dreams. Some nights he dreams of being a pilot, other nights he thinks he'll be an archaeologist, but his deepest desire, the one he never speaks of in fear of jinxing its reality is that of becoming a writer.

'There's something else I want to show you.' Pa reaches for the safe under his desk, his fingers turning the knob left and then right.

Ernest waits, unsure of what Pa will bring out. When he produces a gold bar from the safe's depths Ernest is confused.

'This was one of the bars I buried,' Pa explains. 'I keep it here in this office as a reminder of where we've come from. It would be nice if you do the same when it's yours.'

'Sure.' Ernest shrugs, noncommittal, but wanting to get the afternoon over with.

For a moment, the typewriter felt like understanding, a peace offering. But the gold bar breaks the spell. Why does Pa spend so much time reminding him of the past? What good will it do when faced with the future? Then the afternoon continues, and though there's dessert, and there should be joy in that, all that remains are his father's words—endless repetitions drilled into his head since childhood; a myriad of sayings with no meaning.

Being the patriarch means being the glue that keeps it all together.

A problem is not a problem; it's just a situation to solve.

The only person who will have your back is you.

When they finally make their way home, Ernest feels tired, saddened by the fact that words are sometimes worse than silence. He thinks of the typewriter, of the stories that could dance upon its keys. One day, he thinks, I'll escape. One day, he says, I'll never look back.

That night, images of his father haunt him as he sleeps. Words of misled encouragement ricochet across his mind, entwining with thoughts of uselessness, melding into a thick, coiling knot of anxiety. When he wakes, covered in a light layer of cold sweat, he finds his darkness sitting at the foot of his bed, her eyes locked to his sleeping form. She leans over him, body trembling, hands reaching carefully

towards his face. Though his darkness often visits he never screams, even as she drags him deep into the night.

*

Mercy

Singapore

2018

We are late. It seems whenever something is important, we are always late. Dad is in a panic. The drive to the hotel is spent bickering, saying things we don't mean but keep inside. By the time we get to the Shangri-La, our anger has dissipated, diffusing as quickly as it began. The Shangri-La's doormen, men with large feathered hats, dressed in red tunics tied with a black sash, come to help us out of the car. We barely make it out of the vehicle before Dad speeds off towards the car park. I contemplate waiting for him, but Mom shakes her head.

Our shoes echo upon the white-and-gold-streaked floor as we make our way to the Chinese restaurant on the ground floor. A floral display decorates the middle of the lobby, an assortment of large white orchids and tinkling silver lights. Alex drags behind as we walk, snapchatting whichever girl he's deemed his flavour of the month. When Mom barks at him to hurry up, Alex takes a well-timed selfie and bites back.

At the restaurant we slip on our masks.

‘Reservation under Eddie,’ Mom smiles.

'Of course,' the hostess replies. She doesn't have to look at the computer, knowing that if it's under Eddie, then it's the room in the back. We follow her through the restaurant, past other celebrating families partaking in their *Lo Hei*, quiet under the gaze of strangers.

When we get to the private room my cousin Josephine gets up to greet us.

Turns out our panic was pointless. Ah Ma isn't even here yet.

‘Ah Ma says she’s almost here,’ Josephine says, leaning in for a hug.

‘Great,’ I smile, moving to let her husband Terry say his hellos.

Auntie Dina doesn’t get up from her chair, so I lean down instead. She looks small and frail amongst the chair’s white backdrop. When did she become so weathered? I’d always remembered her as vibrant, so full of life next to my stoic grandmother. When I go to give her a kiss on the cheek she smiles, ‘Hi, Mercy, when did you get back?’

‘About a week ago.’

Auntie Dina has always been a graceful woman, enquiring yet polite, never speaking out of turn, following whatever Ah Ma dictates as simply as day turns to night. When Uncle Henry left her for Janine, and then for Lara, she never complained, knowing that even though her husband had left Ah Ma would always remain.

When Dad arrives, he says nothing of his absent mother, nodding at everyone instead, before taking a seat beside me. While we wait, I try and form idle conversation with Jo and Terry. Jo and I are twelve years apart and only meet during these lunches. While we sometimes speak through messenger and even went for dinner the last time I came home, the feud between our fathers is an unspoken hurdle we’ve yet to pass.

Once everyone is seated, a waitress comes by to ask what tea we would like. When Jo tells her in Mandarin that we will wait for Ah Ma to decide, I feel a pang of jealousy. The jealousy is short-lived of course—it's not her fault that I've only recently taken an interest in our ancestry. I spent too long avoiding everything that could make me like my father, too long trying to ignore all the things that still exist.

It’s hard to have a meal at the Shangri-La without thinking of my grandfather. Every Sunday he would journey with his chauffeur in tow, to eat the buffet at the Line. I can still see him seated at the table they kept for him, staring out the window that overlooks the bounty of trees in the indoor garden. Ah Kong always made sure to talk to us, to ask about our lives, laughing at the amount of dessert that would spill out from our plates. When Ah Kong was alive, his best friend Wendy would join us for lunch. Wendy, a distant relative from China, was someone who grew up in the household of my great-great-great-grandfather's brother, the one who moved back from Indonesia once he made his money.

Wendy would always entice me with tales of my family back in China—of the impoverished brothers that came to Indonesia by ship—one, my grandfather's great-grandfather; the other, the brother who returned to build the family compound I'm warned not to visit. Wendy was good at filling the silence; from grand adventures in Tibet to her life in Hong Kong, nothing she said ever seemed dull. I remember being awed by the vast knowledge she possessed of my ancestors, pleased that someone was willing to tell me answers to questions that were otherwise ignored.

Now that Ah Kong is dead, we no longer go to the places he used to love, but shuffle around them instead. We ignore the buffet at the Line, and on the rare occasion we do go, it's never to his table. At first, I would ask where Wendy had disappeared to, but after all the blank smiles and quick shrugs, I stopped. I tell myself it's just the way my family processes. They never mention Ah Kong because it hurts. They ignore the absence of my banished uncle Henry and his wife Lara because they betrayed us. It's easier to share awkward silence with Eddie and his boyfriend, to pretend that we live a life of peace than to delve into the things that have the potential to break us.

Fifteen minutes later, Ah Ma arrives. Flanked like a queen on a chessboard, her nurse, Eddie, holds her on one side, while his boyfriend holds her on the other. Slowly they make their way to the three seats we've left empty for them. After a silent gesture from Mom, Alex and I approach our grandmother with a kiss for her cheek. I marvel at how soft her skin is, powdered like snow with just a touch of rose, while she accepts the affection with the gravity of a marble bust. This moment will be the most intimate contact we will have with her for the remainder of the afternoon. I greet Eddie with a small wave. Alex, more honest than I'll ever be, pointedly ignores both Eddie and his boyfriend.

The boyfriend—who will always remain as *the boyfriend*, since he's never bothered to introduce himself to me—reaches for the dim sum menu. Placing the menu on the lazy Susan, he rotates it in my direction. This is done at Ah Ma’s request, a wordless gesture, one that he’s learned to follow like a dog who knows what to do when there’s a treat involved. I catch a glimpse of the thick gold rings that decorate his hand. One of the rings has a Chinese character engraved on the front, another is composed of fat bands that wrap towards the knuckle like a snake—a minuscule diamond earring glints against the milk of his earlobe. Together Eddie and his boyfriend surround my grandmother, guarding her against the rest of the table, her family.

Ah Ma’s hands shake as she reaches for the toasted sesame bites in the middle of the table. It’s easy to forget that she’s in her late eighties—an age that’s never been confirmed due to her lack of a birth certificate. Every year we celebrate her birthday on the first of January, her actual birthday remaining a long-forgotten mystery. Her gaze turns to Eddie, but he’s fixated by his phone. Her eyes speak to

me before her mouth, *move them closer*. I rotate the lazy Susan in her direction. I wait for an acknowledgement. It never comes.

When Ah Kong was alive, Ah Ma used to interact with me in the only way she knew how. She would give me jewellery. Diamond earrings with amber flowers, a necklace dotted with ruby teardrops, a jade bangle and a jewelled pendant shaped to look like a ladybug—significant treasures for a quiet little girl. Yet I was never allowed to wear these jewels at family gatherings. *Never show that you're getting favoured*, Dad warned.

When I was younger I loved my presents; they felt like secret kisses. I stored them safely in a velvet box on my dresser. Now instead of my grandfather, we have Eddie. Eddie decides where Ah Ma goes, who she sees, what she gives. Now when Ah Ma looks at me, I only get the hardness of her eyes.

Jo interrupts my thoughts with a flash of her phone. 'It's the latest Huawei,' she says. When she hands it to me, I admire its glossy metallic hue. Jo shows me a picture she took of her friends the night before. The usual static glare of the hawker centre's lights is replaced by an immaculate glow; Jo's friends look as flawless as the phone's camera and the instant beauty mode fashions away any imperfections.

'Wow, looks great,' I say, thankful that Jo and I have found something to talk about.

'It has three Leica cameras,' she says.

'I have the model before this,' Dad interjects, 'let me see?' As soon as I pass the phone to Dad, he smiles. 'If you want we could go buy you one after lunch.'

It's nothing new, this wordless competition. Jo and I never join in, we are too different to even try. Jo has perfect hair, thick and long, black as midnight. You could say I dress better, taking to heart the lessons my mother instilled in me since birth. If I wanted to, I could brag that I've lived all over the world, but Jo knows all of our extended family by name. After all, Jo is full Chinese and speaks not only Mandarin and Hokkien, but Malay as well. Ever since Jo finished school, she's worked for the family business. She's learned all the names I'll never know and the ins and the outs of a company I can only imagine.

When Ah Kong was alive, Jo's father and second stepmother Lara would join us. We'd pose prettily for photos after brunches at the Regent. We'd squish in close, my father and his brother at opposite ends. Lara would touch my shoulder, trying her best to remind me that before she married my uncle, she was my maths tutor,

someone I used to spill secrets to after school. Terry, kind and straightforward, would count to three—always the photographer, never the subject—as we armed ourselves with our most winning pose. Together we'd turn our heads to the camera and smile, doing our best to fill the frame.

Jo is telling me about her latest trip to Korea when I hear my dad from across the table.

'Ma?' he calls out. 'Ma?' He's gesturing with his chopsticks to a dumpling the chef has designed to look like a watermelon.

Ah Ma doesn't flinch. She stares straight ahead, seeing and not seeing all at once. Eddie turns instead, speaking in the soft flutter he's perfected. 'She doesn't eat that.'

Dad flushes red, 'I'm just trying to show her.' He tries again. 'Ma.'

Ah Ma finally turns to look at what he is pointing at and laughs. He laughs. Their faces are mirror reflections; the same puppy-dog cheeks, the drooping slope of their nose. Together they turn to look at their plates knowing their conversation will not resume. Ah Ma's face resumes its natural state of disinterest while Dad's slips into practised silence.

I'm angry. I hate that I can never get angry without crying. '*Don't make a scene,*' I whisper in an attempt to calm myself. But—I can't help it—I turn to my mother and find that her expression illustrates my own.

'Did you see that?' I whisper.

'Yeah,' Mom whispers back.

We hurt for him, the women in his life. It's why we forgive him.

Before we left the house, Dad said that the lunch had been organized for my benefit. '*Because you're always gone*,' he says. 'Because you rarely visit. Because you don't get to eat good dim sum when you are in London.' I smile at him, pretending that Chinese food is something that only home can provide. 'That's why she orders in excess,' he says, '*to please you.*' The Peking duck, the roast pig with maraschino cherries for eyes, the quail, the free-flow of char siu and custard buns—none of it is for me, it's for Ah Ma. Everything is always for Ah Ma.

When I look at the faces that surround our table, so composed, so accepting of how things are, I wonder what truths they hide. Each of us is here, trapped in the same moment—morphing faces, gestures, masking thoughts bred from our individual experiences. The rest of my family, even Eddie and his boyfriend, have

their own truths, spawned from conversations and feelings that I will never know or translate. It's hard not to make them into villains—I try to see them in their own light—but in the end, it's still my point of view.

When the food arrives, Eddie rotates the glutinous rice towards me. There are two steaming pieces wrapped in banana leaves.

'Your favourite,' he says.

'I didn't order it,' I mumble.

His smile stretches towards his ears; he looks like a Cheshire cat, seemingly oblivious but calculating underneath. 'I ordered it for you.'

I reach for one in slow motion, my expression careful. As I free the rice from the leaf, I hear my grandmother's broken English. 'You eating in London?'

I pause, taken aback by how grandmotherly the question comes out.

'Of course she's eating!' Eddie laughs, 'Otherwise, she wouldn't come home so fat.'

What about you? I want to say. I don't. I never do. Just smile at him through clenched teeth.

I hate how normal this scene has become, how we all scramble to keep up appearances. It's hard not to look at our lunch table as a battleground. Eddie versus the rest of us. Family and interloper. My grandmother is silent in her dominion. When Lara and Henry voiced their opinions about Eddie they were banished. It's been years since we've shared a table and I've seen their faces. I wonder if things will change once the business is gone. Despite the tension these lunches are the one thing that's purely family—for Ah Ma instead of Ah Kong.

Lunch only ends after the *Lo Hei*. A large plate comes out surrounded by several smaller bowls. Each bowl is filled with different ingredients, each colourful and bright; some are pickled, others smell like fish. There are sauces and pillow-like crackers and giant chopsticks for tossing. I've never asked what the ingredients are even though every year we follow the same tradition. The waitress does the serving and the blessing, wishing things for us in Mandarin before leaving to let us do the rest ourselves. Together we stand grabbing bits of food in our chopsticks so that we can wish something for the New Year. Money, health and luck are the favourites, repeated over and over as we toss the ingredients higher and higher into the air. When we finish, we put a little of everything on our plates, but never as much as what we've spilt on to the table.

When lunch is over Eddie hands Ah Ma her pills. There must be at least ten cupped in the palm of her hand. Ah Ma swallows them without water as Eddie reads her the bill. After she signs we get ready to make our way to the car. Candy-coloured pills is not the only thing Eddie has introduced into Ah Ma's life; a dull-grey wheelchair has also joined the picture. It's been almost a year since he's convinced her that she no longer can walk. *Get some exercise*, Dad tells her, *or your body will forget how to live.* But she doesn't listen. Eddie is her confidant now. Taking her by the arm Eddie and his boyfriend manoeuvre Ah Ma on to the chair. The rest of the family walks on ahead.

When we get to the front of the hotel, Ah Ma asks if I want to buy bread from the bakery. Eddie brandishes Ah Ma's wallet like a knight proud of his sword. 'It's on me,' he says, 'buy anything you want.'

It's hard for me not to study my grandmother's face as Eddie browses the shelves for whatever he pleases. I try to picture the girl Ah Ma once was, scared, lonely, someone who was touched by war, who did everything in her power to change her fate. I try to see the woman who stole my grandfather's heart—the mighty woman who lay claim to a king. But her face is an impasse; her eyes are neither hopeful nor sad, her cheeks hang, the only evidence of eighty-something years on an otherwise youthful face. There is nothing there for me to hold on to, just stories from distant relatives. Ah Ma's own story is trapped in a fickle mind, one that doesn't believe in sharing. One that makes me scared to approach with the questions I so badly want to ask.

If Ah Ma has caught me staring at her, she does nothing to let it show. Our exchange of words for the day has reached a record of eight. *Hello. Hello. Are you tired? A little bit.* I don't want it to end like this. Don't want to return to London filled with thoughts of a woman who never speaks to me. It's a part of me I try and hide, the part that craves constant approval, that wants something more to hold on to.

I pull out my phone to show my grandmother a picture of Cal. It's a selfie of us seated on the cable car that goes from Royal Victoria to the O2. We look happy, complacent. Ah Ma's face crinkles in what I take to be a smile. 'Big beard,' she says, 'but handsome.'

Later Ah Ma will call my dad in a panic to tell him that Cal's beard might mean that he's a bad guy, that I'm getting old and should be thinking about getting married. She needs someone to take care of her, she'll say, and what's with all that studying?

When Eddie pulls the car around, his boyfriend goes to put the leftovers in the trunk. The rest of us wait like well-trained groupies behind a velvet rope. As Eddie gets ready to wheel Ah Ma to the car, I lean in to kiss her goodbye. The softness of her face contrasts with her disposition, and for a moment, I'm left feeling sorry for my grandmother. This woman bound to a chair. This woman who is nothing but human in her fear of becoming forgotten. If it were me, would I be any different? Aren't I, in a way, attempting to use what little power I have to form a connection?

My empathy is lost as soon as the show begins. Alex goes to open the door of the passenger's seat. There's a chorus of high-pitched goodbyes from Jo and Terry as Mom and I step away from the car. Dad has already disappeared to get our car when Eddie crashes the wheelchair into one of the gold posts that's used to form the taxi line. No one makes a comment.

When Eddie turns the engine on the doorman comes to the car for his usual send-off. Leaning forward, he brings his hand up to tip his feathered hat, his eyes smiling in place of his lips. *All hail the queen.*

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After our misadventures at lunch, we head to the marina, but not before stopping in Ion. Alex has plans with some friends, so it's just the three of us. The drive to Ion takes us past towering lampposts that look naked without the shimmering wreaths and sparkled banners that decorate them during Christmas. This year there was a life-size unicorn pulling a carriage outside of Forum, and a glitter-brushed mermaid swimming amongst seashells by Orchard Central. To say that the Christmas decorations are at times random would be putting it lightly. Yet the lack of decorations makes Orchard Road look empty, a reminder that everything, even forced joy, is temporary.

As we walk from the car park at Wheelock, through the underground leading to Ion, I am filled with dread. The lower levels are packed with people, each person walking as unhurried and relaxed as the other. The people don't shove, they shuffle instead, creating a chattering, texting hive that is impossible to avoid. I begin to withdraw as people brush past, unsure of which direction to step, or whether to move slower or faster. I look at my parents as they walk in front of me, calm and unaware. I've gotten used to the safety of my apartment, avoiding the chaotic streets of Oxford Circus and the lunchtime madness of Canary Wharf, glad that for now, I can choose to do so.

I take a deep breath and count to three as we make our way up the escalator past the typical round-the-world shops. H&M, Uniqlo, Zara—each surrounded by blank-faced mannequins posing in the latest recycled fashion, promising store-goers that despite age or colour they can look just like their neighbour. Not that I mind. I like that no matter where we are from, or what we do, in the end, we all unite for the national pastime of eating and shopping. After all, in a country so hot and congested, what else is there to do but shop?

On the ground floor, the crowd begins to disperse. The boutiques become more extensive, brighter. But there's still a line outside Louis Vuitton. A sturdy man in a trim black suit deciding when to let people in and when they should wait. The Valentino pop-up store in the centre of the mall is filled with girls in their twenties trying on spiky-toed pumps.

Around the corner from the escalator is Dad's favourite store, a watch shop that we always seem to find our way into no matter which country we might be visiting. My parents and I are still on the other side of the large glass doors when one of the clerks begins to wave, crossing the floor to open the door. His trim navy suit complements his slim figure; his dark hair is gelled carefully to the left. When we step inside a chorus of '*Hi, Mr and Mrs Lee'* resonates throughout the store, though only the clerk who opened the door calls my dad by his first name. 'Ernest,' he says, 'such a pleasure to see you.'

When we sit down at one of the tables, the clerk who opened the door extends his hand in greeting. 'I hear you're taking a PhD,' he says. 'You must be smart.'

I laugh, shaking his hand in return. 'Not really.'

Dad smiles. 'So have they arrived?'

The clerk nods, 'Give me a second to go get them. Would you guys like anything? Water? Tea? Cake?'

We all smile and shake our heads no. Dad claps me on the shoulder and asks me to take a look around. As I wander the small selection of watches they have on display, I think of the collection I have at home. It seems every time I come home to visit, I get one. I never wear them in London; most are left in Singapore, locked in my parent's safe. Sometimes I line them across my dresser to remind myself of Dad's affection. Turning their heavy metal faces like the GI Joes Dad used to give me when I was a child.

It's almost funny how much better Dad is at shopping than talking. While his conversations often go unfinished, his devotion to researching the value of material objects goes beyond meticulous. He knows the story behind every delicate stitch; can speak for hours on the dedicated attention to detail it requires to build the perfect watch. Growing up I found it strange that Dad spent more time with store managers and car dealers than his friends—that he couldn't remember his birthday but could name every model of Ferrari that has existed. In a way, it makes sense, Dad is friends with the people who work for him because he doesn't have to try. He's friends with store managers and car dealers because they share his hobbies. Unlike me, or even Alex, they have the interest required to carry the conversation, to make him feel wanted without asking him to do anything complicated in return.

'Anything you like?' Dad asks, coming up behind me.

'Sure,' I say, 'but I don't need anything.'

'Doesn't matter.' Dad smiles. 'Go ahead and pick something.'

The clerk pulls out a felt tray trimmed with leather and a pair of gloves before lining it with watches. I know nothing about watches—all I can judge are their smooth, simple faces. Dad and the clerk laugh like old friends; there's an ease in their laughter that we have yet to perfect. Their talk is mostly shop, so it's easy for me to zone out. I look to Dad for hints of the sadness that had taken over him during lunch. But like my grandmother his body is a wall; there is nothing to be found.

By the end of the encounter I have collected another keepsake. A fat metal watch, the cheapest of the bunch, with a sporty rubber band.

As we make our way back to the car park, Dad tells me about the clerk at the store. 'Ryan is from a *kampong* in Malaysia, but he's always been fascinated with watches. You know he's not even thirty, and they are already sending him to Switzerland for management training—'

'Dad,' I laugh, interrupting his sermon, 'just yesterday you couldn't remember my boyfriend's name.'

It's meant to sound like a joke, but resentment slips through my tone. I think of his tennis coach, his yoga teacher, and now this clerk. There's a rotating list of strangers who work for my father, who know more about him than I ever will. I think of the argument Dad and I had when he first accompanied me to London for my masters. Of how we didn't speak to each other for two days because I told him he

was obsessed with his yoga teacher. *She grew up with nothing*, he said. *I have so much respect for people who can overcome their upbringing.*

Now if it bothers me I don't talk about it; like my family I lock it inside, covering it with something pretty.

*

I can't help but feel like the more time passes, the more things stay the same. As a kid, days spent milling from one boutique to another would end with Dad retreating to the garden for his evening cigar. Some nights I would muster up the courage to join him, sitting on the floor, pressing my bare feet to the warm tiles, listening as he told me stories of when he first met Mom. *She was my first kiss*, he'd say, *my first everything.*

Those nights when Dad and I would sit accompanied by the noise of the gazebo's fan, up past a bedtime that was never set, would leave me feeling like we were indulging in some elaborate secret. Dad would pass me his cigar and say, *Take a puff.* Pressing the end to my lips, I'd try and mimic his actions, doing my best not to gag from the awful taste that would follow. Dad would laugh, taking his cigar back before winking. *Don't tell Mom.*

Over a decade later, the pattern is the same, but the location has changed. Now that Dad is retiring, he spends as little time at home as possible. If he isn't shopping, he is cycling. If he isn't smoking in the backyard, he's fishing with his friends. When he bought his new boat, all sleek and silver, he seemed to change. Not in an outright way, but in subtle motions, relaxing into a mellower version of himself. Whether it's the effect of the sea or the fact that he no longer worries about his father's business, I have yet to decide. Of course, Ah Ma has no clue about the boat. We aren't supposed to tell her, or the rest of Dad's family.

'Dad,' I say, breaking him out of his usual daze, 'do you think Eddie is dangerous?'

Dad and I are seated on the flybridge of *Encanto*. The captain is with us, but the sound of the waves and wind drown out any unwanted conversation. Mom is sitting at the front, one hand positioned on her hat to keep it from flying, the other propping her up on the off-white cushion.

'I don't know,' he says, shrugging, 'I think he makes my mom happy.'

When I think of Eddie, I think of his pasty complexion, the carpet-patterned silk shirts he likes to wear, the way he can make a giggle sound mocking. ‘He’s kind of rude,’ I say, ‘and controlling. I mean what is with the wheelchair?’

Dad shrugs. As if ignoring the fact that Eddie exists could make him disappear altogether. ‘She likes it,’ he says. ‘She’s old. She should be with someone who makes her happy.’

‘Yeah but—' I try again, this time with a little more conviction. ‘Don’t you think he’s just after her money?’

Dad stops. ‘It’s none of my business.’ He looks at me. ‘And none of yours.’

We continue our journey to St John in silence. I look out at the ocean before us. The boats that dot the horizon are mostly catamarans that people have hired for the weekend, but there is also a speckling of private yachts. You can tell the difference by their licence—S for chartered, SH for private. As we continue to make our way towards the island, Dad looks to his right and waves.

‘Who is that?’ I ask.

‘The guy who is arranging the sale of my company.’

I look out towards the boat. It’s big, beige, a classic sight on the grey water. The man is Caucasian, accompanied by the captain of his boat and a woman in a red bikini.

‘I thought the people who are buying it are Chinese.’

‘The company is,’ Dad says, ‘he just works for them.’

We are too far for me to gauge him but a part of me wants to see the man who is helping to write the end of our story. Thinking of the sale makes me feel rootless, cast to the winds of tide and change. No longer bound to a legacy, a pre-determined role. What do we do now? Anything we want. But I can’t, I’m stuck, looking to a past that is barely mine. When Dad takes a dinghy to the man's boat, I don't join him. He doesn't ask, and I don't offer.

Instead, Mom and I dive into the water. Mom floats inside a blue-and-white inflated ring, I grab on to the side and smile at her. I feel at peace with my mother. She’s taught me to be kind, to be strong and proud. All the parts of me that are whole, they come from her. My mother is the family’s confidante, the one person we are never silent with. She holds all our secrets, our hopes and fears. Dad is an enigma. He makes me feel broken, confused, wistful for some bigger picture. I think of his own mother, someone who withholds her love, who asks but doesn’t want to

give in return. She is nothing like my mother, and still, Dad and I are two pieces of the same mirror, reflecting the same thoughts, the same actions.

If Dad wanted he could use his childhood as an excuse, a reason behind his more absent traits. Except Dad has never used his childhood as an excuse or crutch for his misgivings. I often wonder if this is a form of enlightenment or if it's avoidance. Are people better off knowing how they are wired, or is it better not to give themselves that knowledge as an excuse?

The evening passes with fruitless fishing and a bottle of wine. The captain does a barbecue of shrimp and satay to accompany the biryani he's brought us from his wife's stall. It's all rather lovely, comforting in its familiarity. How many evenings have we spent just like this? How many more will we get?

The sun is setting when we make our way back to the marina. Dad and I sit at the back of the boat this time. As we cut through the water, I watch as the waves churn. The water below the boat becoming thick white foam, accepting in its ability to change.

'Do you think Alex will be alright?' Dad asks.

I turn to look at him, but he's not looking at me. 'You mean with the army?'

'Yeah, Mom says he's getting bullied for being half-Western. That he's unhappy.' Dad sighs. 'Not that he will speak to me about it. Maybe you could talk to him. Tell him it's something I've experienced.' The wind blows the smoke from Dad's cigar in my direction. I hate the scent, but I don't move. 'You know,' Dad continues, 'I wish he'd talk to me, the way he talks to you. I have so much advice to give him. So much I know he will understand.'

I don't want to feel it, but I do. Jealousy. 'You know you can talk to me,' I say.

'I know,' he replies. 'It's not the same though. It should be a father and son thing. Plus, I'm not worried about you. You're doing fine.'

I laugh. All those years I spent angry that Dad didn't want me to continue riding, that he didn't want me to go to art school, that he didn't believe in my path, and here he is accepting it all as if it's all he's ever done. If this is acceptance, then it doesn't make me feel as it should. Is it what I should do too? Accept? I find that the more that I know, the more I seem to forgive him, understand him. I wonder, am I sympathizing with my actual father or the father in my head? Do I know the father who has plot and trauma to explain the parts that have wounded me or the one that

is a jumble of mixed memories? Is my imagined father the same father I have trouble speaking to? Or have I created something else? A wish, an explanation.

When I lean into him, my face comes into contact with the softness of his shirt; the fleshiness of his skin accompanies the smell of subtle cologne and the dank earth of his cigar. At once, I'm a child trying to express the affection my mother taught me. *You're so squishy, Daddy*, I'd joke. Anger would flash through his face as he'd push me off. Now, when I lean into him, he accepts it. Now it feels like the most natural thing in the world. I think of how simple a hug is, how one small gesture can make all the anxiety disappear, but the spell of contact can only last so long.

When we pull into the marina Mom and I disembark first. We wait for Dad, but he signals us to go ahead. 'I'll be there in a second,' he says, pulling out a bag he's brought from Ion. Mom and I glance at each other before we continue walking.

The walk makes me feel distant as if I'm leaving behind a stranger. As we make our way back towards the car, the words I struggle to say come easier than they should.

I love you, Dad, I think. But I don't know you at all.

*

Ernest

Singapore

1979

Parents' weekend at Ernest's military camp means home-cooked food. A flock of protective mothers and eager fathers have come to greet their sons in their new habitat. Since the beginning of Singapore's formation all forms of young men have made their home in the camp. While most are from middle-class families, others need the military pay to support their homes, and some, like Ernest, hide their wealth in fear that it will make them a target. *Atas,* they would call him, knowing that jests are more often than not made with meaning.

Ernest feels conflicted. While he understands the duty, he doesn't understand the people. All his life he has lived like an outsider. Born Chinese but raised Western. Construed of countries that do not fit, and people who do not click. At lunch when he makes his way to a table, everyone will get up and leave. When he's in charge of leading marches, they sing songs that make fun of him. Day in and day out he's reminded that he's something other.

The first half-hour of parents' day ticks by with no sign of his mother. Ernest knows his father won't come to visit, and he won't blame him. Still, he holds out hope that at least his mother will come. The hour passes with him staring at his boots. They stare back at him, shining from the hours he spent that morning polishing them. His hope begins to falter. His family may not be close, but he always thought his mother and him shared a kinship, a bond that neither his stoic brother nor ambitious father could understand.

Ernest hears the door of the waiting room squeak open. The other boys look up towards the noise. His mother walks in, calm, poised, with not a care or notice for her tardiness. Standing there in a flared skirt, with red lips and a basket in her hand, makes Ernest think he has never seen a sight more beautiful.

'Ernest.' She smiles.

'Ma.' He smiles back.

When he gets up to follow his mom, he can feel the eyes of the boys around him. It makes him flush with pride. His mother showed up and did a damn good job of it.

'Are you hungry?' Ma asks, already knowing the answer.

The thought of his mother's cooking makes Ernest's stomach grumble, a welcome feeling after endless days of consuming tasteless combat rations straight from the tube. Even then, the thought of food is nothing in comparison to the sight of his mother's familiar face. He's been feeling starved of contact, of reassurance, of anything besides listless orders shouted from men who aren't much older or wiser.

When they make their way out on to the grass, his mother lays out a blanket with practised grace. As he turns to look at her, she smiles a wide, attractive smile, the kind where the upper lip curls in, displaying large straight teeth. He often wonders if she misses him while he is at camp. For now, her presence is proof enough that she does. There's so much he wants to ask her. He knows he owes her an apology for running away, for spending his last two years of high school in a boarding school in California. But the afternoon is too short for apologies, for all the things they never speak of.

The sun beats down on Ernest and his mother as they sit upon the freshly cut grass. Ernest spreads his fingers behind him in an attempt to support his back, but the grass is wet beneath his hands. His mother laughs at the grimace that spreads across his face and hands him a napkin. He wouldn't mind a bit of dirt if he hadn't

spent the last two weeks crawling through it. Digging trenches in the rain, trapping birds for dinner, fending off the leeches and maggots that live hidden amongst the earth's folds.

Ernest’s mother mumbles to herself as she pulls out various containers. ‘Your ah ma says I should’ve brought more food, but I told her there’s no way you’ve lost weight.’ She stops to look at him. ‘What’s going on? Are they not feeding you?’

‘Ma.’ Ernest pauses as he reaches for a brown paper bag. His fingers hesitate, itching to pull off the red rubber band. ‘I’m in the army. We just work hard.’

With her food spread before them, Ernest remembers that it's easier to sit together in silence. It's something they have perfected. Ernest had his TV dinners, his mother long nights with Dina, Henry his friends, and Pa had his work. Ernest finds peace in their silence. In silence, they can just be a mother and son. In silence, the sun and the grass, and everything that surrounds them, can become picture perfect, created just for this moment. In silence, it is easy to pretend, to be free of their past.

‘I'm lonely, Ernest.’ His mother breaks the spell—tears pool in the corner of her eyes.

Ernest looks at her, wishing she could just enjoy the moment. He wishes she'd ask him about his service—about what he's learned and what he feels.

‘What do you want me to do?’ he asks, knowing it won’t be enough.

‘Don’t leave me again,’ she says. ‘With Dina and Henry living in Chicago and your father being your father, I’ve spent the last couple of years alone.’

‘I can’t fix that, Ma,’ he says. I can’t fix you, he thinks.

‘Of course you can. When you're done with your service, you can stay in Singapore.’ Her eyes are wet as she moves her hand to cover Ernest’s own. ‘It’d be so much fun, just the two of us. Just like before. Remember?’

Ernest wants to join in, to relive his memories, to see what she does, but it’s too late.

‘I’m going back to America when I finish my service,’ he says. ‘I’ve already started looking at universities.’

When she lets go of his hand, she is no longer crying. ‘Well, if that's how you feel, I can't change it.’

‘You can come with me,’ he says. He means it. Hopeful for a second.

‘I can’t,’ she laughs. ‘This is my home. One day you’ll see, it’s yours too.’

They grow quiet again. Ernest continues to eat, listening to the laughter of the people around him. If someone were to look in, they'd see a mother and son in reunion, a pretty picture sitting empty in its frame. Ernest wonders if people can change. If he were to leave, would he be able to become someone else? Something divided from his birth, from his parents?

The hours seem to stretch before Ernest’s mother looks at him. Her eyes speak of worry, worry that her smile tries its best to cover, but Ernest knows better.

‘It's going to be okay, Ma,’ he finally says, reaching for her hand.

He knows this won’t be the end of the conversation. She’ll come up with some scheme, the next big reason for him to stay. All he wants is for his mother to smile at him. To pretend to be okay, so that he can go on pretending too. All he wants is for that smile to be real.

*

Isk

Pontianak

1942

Isk is standing on the edge. He isn't sure where he is. All he knows is that it's too bright. Too red. Red paints the horizon in thick dancing strokes. The sun drinks the colour like a man lost in the desert. It burns in its thirst. Isk looks below. Shadows cling to the edge; they form long screaming faces before dissipating like smoke—Isk shudders. Nothing exists below.

When Isk steps back from the edge, he realizes he's barefoot. The pavement licks his feet as he begins to wander. It's different, but he knows he's been here before.

As the emerald hills roll into view, he knows why it's familiar. It's his island, except it's empty. Not a sound can be heard. The clouds beyond the hills may make mountains in the sky, but nothing beats across the land. Hello? he whispers, afraid of what might whisper back.

Isk wanders past the muddy chocolate river that winds through the neighbourhood. His feet seem to move on their own, each step predetermined,

following a route only they seem to know. It's not long before he reaches a house. The white walls and iron fence seem familiar, but there's a darkness that oozes from the smashed windows. The darkness dips and curls, kissing bits of broken glass surrounding the little boy sitting by the open door. He seems to be crying, a packed lunch of rice and dried fish placed by his side. Even for his age, the boy is small, with thick glasses that hang heavily on his nose.

Teng? Isk whispers.

Teng doesn’t hear him. With a shaking hand, he wipes his tears and walks past Isk.

Isk turns to follow him, matching his steady pace. He knows the route. Side by side, Teng and Isk would make their way to school. Of the six siblings, Isk was the oldest and Teng, the second youngest. Every morning they would repeat their routine—every morning except one. Something in Isk stirs a flash of a pretty face, soft hands coaxing, his brother wet-cheeked and watching, a boy running far, far yet never reaching.

Now Isk watches Teng. He tries to catch up with him, but Teng manages to stay ahead no matter how fast he walks. The streets are empty as they make their way to school. The old woman who sells fresh sweet coconuts from a cart, the man that hawks spices and haircuts, the tuk-tuks, the eclectic chatter of pedestrians, even the mosquitoes are gone.

When they reach the school, Isk sees someone sleeping in the yard. How strange, he thinks, this lone figure shadowed by a sea of grass. Isk goes to wake the man, but when he leans down, he realizes something is wrong. The man has no eyes—just two empty, staring sockets, like cups made of bone begging to be filled. Red angry blisters burst around his arms and legs. They begin to dance as Isk gets close, threatening to jump from the man's body onto his own. The skin on the man's face is burnt beyond recognition, its charred texture a brittle reminder of the end. Isk stumbles backwards and falls. When he hits the ground, he realizes that the man is not alone. The once empty yard is now filled with shadows. Countless children line the grass, their figures slumped upon one another, lost in an endless slumber.

Isk scrambles to get up; his mind thinks only of his brother. He starts to run. The darkness is here too. It trickles through the children's open mouths, reaching for Isk like an old friend as he trips through the bodies spread before him. Though the

world crumbles to ash at his touch, Teng continues to walk towards the school with purpose.

Isk manages to reach Teng as the school's doors appear before him. But when he tries to grab on to his brother's shoulder, his hand slips through him instead. Frustrated, Isk continues to follow as they twist and turn towards a room. The darkness weaves with them, trailing just behind. When they reach Teng's classroom, Isk's lungs begin to fill with smoke. Clutching his chest in fear, Isk starts to cough. With each gasp of air comes a rush of darkness, spilling from his throat onto the floor. Teng sits, oblivious to his brother's plight. His eyes meet the window, he waits. Isk follows his brother's gaze. There's something falling, heavy, fast.

He knows what it is.

But when he jumps for Teng, it's too late.

A thunderous light emits from the school, encompassing the brothers in its glow. Isk hangs on to Teng in an attempt to shield him from the light. This time when he touches Teng, they connect. Why? Teng's voice vibrates through the light. Why did you let me go? The darkness lunges up from the school; dark, light, in the end, everything becomes one.

I'm sorry, Isk shouts. I'm sorry.

But when Teng finally looks him in the eye, he turns to dust.

*

Isk wakes shaking. More sweat and tears than flesh and bone. 'Teng,' he whispers.

It's been less than a month since Teng died. Trapped in his school, surrounded by classmates and teachers. Isk had meant to take him to school that morning, just like he had done all the mornings before. But he'd started a business with one of his father's friends selling black-market goods. Back and forth he'd cycle, mostly around the Dutch neighbourhoods. Soap and canned food for frightened families. It was necessary, making banana money for his family. But the guilt felt otherwise. Isk wonders what Teng thought when the bomb dropped. Did he blame him? Did he even have time to think? But wondering won't bring him back. Dreams won't either.

*

Isk and his family leave their home in silence. No tearful farewells, no long last looks. Just heads turned forward, eyes straight, not to the ground in defeat, and not to each

other. They don’t take much. Even though they might not be coming back—even though they want to. Isk’s mother carries her youngest, Jian, in her arms; her little girl, Mei, holds her other hand. The children don’t know but they can see, can feel the solemn procession, the importance of silence.

There are others who make their way from their homes. With wagons of goods for trading, with food, and mementoes that have no place in war. Isk is resigned. Scared of what hiding in the jungle will mean. He is fourteen and broken, fourteen and learning. His father coughs beside him. The move might be good for him, Isk thinks. Didn’t they say nature cured illness?

It’s becoming light now. The first rays of morning stream through the canopy of trees. Isk takes one final look at his house. His brothers always made fun of him for his lack of possessions. It never bothered Isk before, he didn’t need much. But now he wished he had something to say goodbye to. Something to hold on to.

*

Part Two
The Descent

*

Mercy

Malaysia to Singapore

2008

Happiness is wet showgrounds after a morning's rain, the sand clumping on my boots as I walk, forming small moving islands on the black leather I spent last night shining. I let the sand gather then fall. Z, my coach, is waiting for me by the end of the combination—a triple bar with poles painted in bright orange and white stripes. The jump I'm walking from is in the shape of the Petronas Towers, stark compared to the others, grey with potted plants, reminding us that we are in Malaysia. Moving from the towers, I work my way to Z, my legs mimicking my horse's long gaits to count the strides between the jumps. Four of my steps equals one step for my horse.

I will be fourth in the ring today, which means I have to finish walking the course with enough time to warm up. Mom sits on a table by the buffet. She doesn’t wave as I make my way past her, knowing I need to concentrate. Dad and Alex are back in Singapore. Alex hates horse riding; hates that it takes Mom away from him at months at a time. Dad is allergic to horses, so he stays away.

When I get to Z, he stinks of booze. It leaks through his pores, mingling with the sweat on his dark skin. Z is Malay but wealthy enough to bend the rules. His Dutch wife waits in the stands with their two kids. I think of earlier that summer when Mom left me in Z's care in Thailand. Z, my teammate, Ron, and I spent heavy nights partying. Lost on the streets of Pattaya we watched drag operas and ping-pong shows. I avoided Z's drunken touch as we made our way through sleazy bars where little boys sat on the laps of ageing men. Ron and I downed shots of sambuca as Z made friends with the girls at the Russian whipping bar. It was a strange month of forgetting, of seeing the city's teeming underbelly.

Back in Malaysia nights are quieter. My best friend and I watch anime in the creaking wooden shack above the stables. We light countless mosquito coils. In the darkness of the night we walk to the stables, treats in hand for our horses.

Z's signature half-smile waits on his lips when we finish walking the course. 'You got this?' He doesn't need to ask to know. Our symmetry as student and coach has become well-aligned throughout the season.

'Of course.' I smile back, confident in my sixteen years, never thinking that I'd be doing anything but winning. It's the final show of the summer, and I hold the lead in the Southeast Asian Young Rider division—but it's not over yet. If the rider from Hong Kong wins today, I'll be moved to second place.

'Alright. Just remember, second is the first loser,' Z jokes.

I laugh, but it's not a joke. Not when I tell everyone I meet that I'm Olympic bound. Not when Mom spends months away from home so I can compete around the world, paying the bills in secret from her own savings so Dad won't have a reason to make me stop. I hate that people relate riding with privilege. It means they don't really know the sweat and tears that go into the sport. Yes, the sport is expensive, but it's the horse that costs money, the living, breathing partner that makes our lives complete. You can't just shut off once you leave the stable. There's bills for grooming and stabling. Bills for the farrier, the vet, the feed and supplements. There's tack, and sometimes a masseuse. A horse is just as expensive and twice as needy as a child.

I don't know it yet, but next year my chestnut gelding will start refusing fences. He will begin in Hong Kong after winning the first show of the season. My expectations will have soared, winning against professionals, my first time competing in the Grand Prix. But Lancelot will learn fear. Fence after fence, he'll begin to

refuse, ducking so fast that it will take all my years of practised balance to keep from falling off. I'll spend evenings staring into the distance, wondering if it's the failure or the fear that keeps me from going back. Either way, it will be my last season.

But for now, I'm sixteen, and the summer is ripe with glory. The past three months have been like no other, travelling back and forth from Singapore to Malaysia. Just Mom and me singing along to the radio as we drive from showground to showground. Nothing in my fast, short life has ever felt this good, this right. Every Olympic dream that has crossed my mind since my first riding lesson seems within my grasp. At sixteen, everything still feels like it will go my way. Youthful optimism threads itself through my frame. At this moment, every disappointment I've encountered is just a story for my eventual victory. Failure is not something I understand. All my life I've been told that I can be anything I want, that if I work hard enough nothing can stand in my way. I'm arrogant. Confident that if I want something, it will be only a matter of time before I get it.

The announcer declares the arena closed as I make my way to find my groom. Lancelot stands restless at his side. Everything makes sense when I’m with my horse. Nothing can compete with the incredible high that accompanies being one with another being. The feeling of complete synchronization. One body, one mind. Soaring over fences, sand flying around us. Hours of training coming together for one short moment that feels like a lifetime.

Warm-up is never long, just enough to stretch Lancelot's legs, a couple of fences taken to ensure we're ready. It's chaotic with everyone riding at the same time, with their coaches yelling left and right, but we make it work. We've been competing together all season and know each other's quirks. When one of the stewards comes to signal us to the ring, Lancelot, and I are ready; we know what's coming, what's at stake.

When I enter, I make sure to canter the entire length, taking Lancelot past the jumps which might spook him. The bell rings once. I halt and salute the judge before pushing off in an easy canter. I clear the first jump in a breathtaking arc. I’ll never need another high. There will never be a drug as pure as the adrenaline that pumps its way through my ears. This is love everlasting. I would die for this feeling.

It doesn't take long for the triple bar to come into view. If I win today, then I'll be the Southeast Asian Young Rider Champion. If I win, then I will never need to wonder. My life will have meaning. But, like always, fear is there to hold me back. It

comes in a snap. A recollection of an accident I had not long ago. A flash of my face crashing headlong into a triple bar. The whole thing tumbling down from the force of my bones. Then it's gone, the fear fades in the two strides left for the fence. Lancelot's legs stretch out below us as he reaches for the sky. There is no place for fear in our unity. It fades, hiding in the nooks of my brain for another day. We are flying, conquering the clouds for a split second before touching back on the ground. We've done it.

As the crowd cheers, I release the reins to throw my fist in the air. My mouth bursts into a smile, my body shaking as I dismount. Mom rushes over with water. Z thumps me on the leg. This is it. I have become the greatest version of myself. Things can only go up from here.

*

Tonight, the sky wears black. It shrouds itself in neon letters and blinking lights. At this hour the road should be empty, but it is filled with yellow and blue taxis waiting to make a final fare before shift change. Teenagers stumble out of overpriced clubs and into McDonald's. Tourists wander past seafood restaurants lined with bubbling tanks. 'Come and choose,' the hosts holler, 'fresh, all fresh!' Inside a tank a crab fumbles past its cellmates towards the top, unaware of its shared fate. Drunk office men crowd a hawker up the road. They sit on plastic stools, waiting for their *bak chor mee* as cigarettes dangle from beer-stained lips.

Tonight, I wear black. Black skirt, black shirt, black heels for my pale, awkward legs. Eyeliner coats my large brown eyes in an attempt to look older—twenty, the age on my blue plastic ID. *Florida University*, it reads, *born in 1987*. My friends and I spent our evening drinking at our favourite bar. Mary, the woman who owns it, takes care of us as if we were her children. Warning us when the cops make their way for surprise raids or sending us home when we've had too much to drink. Her own daughter lives in Johor with her father. Mary doesn't talk about her much. She just listens as we throw our allowance on her ring-stained bar, watching as we play pool with other kids dressed in black.

When the cops arrive, we leave through the grey piss-smelling stairs, sliding down the bright yellow railing, laughing as we run out the backdoor that exits into the car park. We smoke Sampoernas as we make our way to a club in Boat Quay that we know will serve us. The feel of clove tickles my lungs as I smoke. I lick my lips for the sugary aftertaste. When we get to the club, I show my ID and smile. The bouncer

laughs and lets me in. Most weekends you can find us here. The graffitied walls and the pole located in the centre of the dancefloor make us feel like we are gritty. Like we understand anything other than the privileged, sheltered lives we try so hard to flee.

'Let's get a drink,' Kat says. Kat, with her endless dark hair, cinnamon highlights and bangs that frame her catlike eyes. Her cocoa skin hints at her mixed heritage, while her six-inch heels and mini skirt hint at her plans.

As we push our way to the bar, I take in the crowd. The club is filled with men from the navy. It's easy to tell who they are—their white T-shirts glowing next to their sunburnt cheeks. They are loud too, glad to be free from their months confined on a boat, far from their lives in America, partaking in Singapore's delights. There's a group with a table by the bar, watching as we make our way in. Laughing, head-tossing, my friends are so natural in their confidence. They feel young and beautiful, and for now, they are, pushing their way to the front of the bar like it was built for them. I follow, but I don't feel beautiful; I feel sixteen. I feel like if anyone wanted to, they could pierce through the disguise I spent hours perfecting in the bathroom mirror.

'*You don't belong here,'* a voice whispers.

'What?' I ask as a man nudges my arm.

'Do you want a drink?' he asks.

I look at Kat, then shrug. 'Sure. Jack and Coke, please.'

While we wait for our drinks, I look down at my hands. There would be silence if it wasn't for Kat, her arm slinked through mine.

'Where are you from?' she asks, smiling at the soldier.

'Tennessee,' he says. 'You know where that is?'

I resist the urge to roll my eyes, preparing whatever pack of lies I'll need for the evening. 'That's cool,' Kat says, speaking first. 'We are from England. We're just studying here for the semester.' Kat pulls on my arm.

I groan, knowing that I'll have to spend the rest of the night in a fake accent. 'Yeah,' I lie. 'We're architecture students.'

The soldier looks at us for a second. 'You guys look so young.'

Kat smiles, 'Of course we look young. We're twenty.'

My heartbeat races. I want him to say something, to call us out.

His disbelief lingers, and then it's gone. 'Come hang out with my friends,' he says.

Kat and I spend the rest of the evening drinking for free. We bring the rest of our friends over. Some of them dance on the bar top, pressing themselves against strangers, calling for free shots. I sit on the edge of the couch, listening as the soldier from the bar tells me about the places he's been. He slings his arm around the back of the sofa, his hand lingering close to my shoulder. It's not his fault, I tell myself. We are the liars. The ones trying to be something we are not. Yesterday I was watching a movie with my parents, our feet tangled on the couch. Mom was falling asleep as Dad and I laughed, poking her awake to ask her questions about the movie we were sure she couldn't answer. Now I'm drinking tequila, so I don't feel like a fraud. Sometimes I feel like there's two of me, the one who wants to be me, and the one who wants to be free.

But free of what? Why am I searching for something to help me forget when there should be nothing to forget? There's something inside of me, dark and haunting. I was a kid when I first discovered it. I would be playing with a Barbie or drawing pictures of horses and all of a sudden, I'd clutch my stomach and gasp. What's wrong?Mom would ask. Something is missing, I'd say.

It's an hour past midnight, and the soldier wants to kiss me. I can see it in his eyes. I want to puke. I feel it in my throat. It's the tequila and the whisky, or maybe it's the muscle relaxant Kat and I inhaled in the bathroom. To avoid the kiss, I run. When I make it outside, I vomit on the sidewalk. It feels both good and bad, like a mixture of shame and relief. Kat holds my hair as I lean down to puke again. She takes my bag from where I've thrown it on the ground, making sure it remains safe from my sick.

'It'll be a bitch to clean later,' she laughs, rubbing my back.

'Stupid, *stupid*, *stupid*,' I whisper to myself as I gag.

'Just a little more,' Kat soothes.

When I finish, I wipe the tears from my eyes. The burning sensation that fills my throat is awful, but at least the need to purge is over. When we move to sit by the sidewalk, Kat continues to rub my back as I catch myself somewhere between a laugh and a cry.

'I just wanted tonight to be different,' I mumble between tears.

Kat is about to ask me what I mean when the soldier from the club comes out.

‘Is she okay?’ he asks, moving to touch my shoulder.

Kat looks at him. ‘She’s fine.’

‘Let me help,’ he says. He sounds earnest. ‘I’ll take her to the bathroom.’

‘No, you won’t,’ Kat says. She’s serious now. No more pretence.

He looks like he wants to argue. ‘Whatever,’ he shrugs, before going back inside.

I can feel the eyes of the people around us. ‘I’ll be fine,’ I tell Kat as she begins to walk me to a cab. ‘You don’t have to bring me home.’

But she does. Our walk to the main road leads us past other drunken teens. Some are from our school, while the rest are from the other international schools. We all go to the same spots, filling the tables by the river with beer towers and laughter, wandering in and out of 7-Eleven to buy smokes or drinking slushies filled with vodka on the side of the bridge. While some kids have to sneak out of their homes, others are allowed to just be, their parents comforted that they live in a city so safe. But it doesn't matter where you live. When the city wears black, it looks the other way.

When we get in a cab, I tell the driver where to go. Doesn't matter how fucked up I am, I always manage to get home. I'm lucky the taxi uncles are kind; they even carry pink little plastic bags in the back of their cabs in case of emergency.

‘Dude,’ Kat giggles. ‘You puked everywhere. It was so gross.’

‘Hey,’ I retort. ‘Remember that night after Nine Inch Nails? You puked on my bedroom floor! I had to spend the whole morning digging it out of the cracks with toilet paper so my parents wouldn’t find out.’

‘Solidarity,’ she says in mock-seriousness. ‘But really, Lee,’ she squeezes my hand, ‘did you have fun tonight?’

I think back—of the brief flickers where I felt like something other than myself. How, if only for a moment, I was able to just exist. For once I wasn't a tourist in my life, merely visiting, haunted by a past I’ve yet to learn. Tonight, I was present, real.

‘Yeah,’ I say, watching as the lights from the street blur against the taxi window. ‘You were right. It’s fun to pretend.’

*

In the dark of the night, there's a soldier near the head of my bed.

The night Kat and I went drinking with soldiers, I tried to tell her that I was tired of sleeping with ghosts. Well, a ghost. My ghost. The one who waits for me.

Who does nothing but stare. Whenever I wake—to the shaking feeling that I'm not alone—I pray for him to be elsewhere. He never comes all at once, though I'm sure he's always there. He just likes to take his time. Like a soldier sneaking through the night, he's careful, discreet, waiting for me to acknowledge his presence. He doesn't wish to make a spectacle; he knows he's more a reminder than a promise.

The hazy outline of his uniform blends in with the shadows of my closet. I want to reach for my glasses, but fear that they will prove him real instead of an illusion has me shutting my eyes instead. The darkness does nothing to make him fade. I still feel him, watching, waiting. When I finally dare to open my eyes, his head swivels in my direction. I don't scream, I can't. Fear freezes my body in place.

Be brave, I tell myself. He isn't real. I take a couple of deep breaths and bury my face in my pillow, but there won't be any sleep tonight. When I open my eyes, he is still there, illuminated by the bathroom light I keep on in case of emergencies. So much for the protection of a night light. I think of Alex asleep in the trundle bed below me. It would be cruel to wake him. Little Alex, still sweet and innocent, laying his head on my shoulder as we watched cartoons before bed. Moving without complaint to the bed below when I told him I wanted space.

It takes me a while to look at the soldier fully. I'll never know if he's a figment of my imagination or a strange twist of reality. When I finally muster up the courage, he bows. It makes me think of a story my grandfather once told me. How, during the Occupation, the Japanese forced them to bow. Men, women and children—whenever a soldier passed if they didn't bow, they'd be beaten. *Respect*, he said, *all people want is respect, whether they deserve it or not.*

I don't know how to explain, but I know the soldier who appears in the middle of the night is Japanese. I'm sure of it, even though I know nothing of their uniforms, even though I can barely see him without my glasses. In my heart, I know. Later I will question these nights, examine the power of my thoughts, but tonight, I stare at him. I become the one who watches, who waits, till the waiting lulls me to sleep. When I wake again, he's gone. Still, I join Alex in the bed below, I don't want to take any chances.

The next morning, I make a rare appearance at breakfast. Dad is already outside smoking, but Mom is still there, reading the news on her phone.

‘Mom,’ I say, moving a croissant to my plate. ‘He was back again last night.’

Mom looks up from her phone. ‘Who was?’

'The soldier,' I say.

Mom sighs. 'Were you wearing your glasses?'

'No,' I say.

'So how can you be sure there was someone there?'

Though it makes me angry that she doesn't believe me, she's right. Without my glasses, I can't see a thing—just blurred shapes and swashes of colour. Yet, I know he was there. I know that he spent the night watching me from his corner by my closet. The alternative—that he wasn't, but I wished him to be—is much stranger.

'You know your father sees ghosts,' Mom says. 'Usually old women sitting on the edge of the bed. When he goes to Pontianak he always sees one sitting on the hotel chair. He thinks they are trying to take him.'

'Take him where?' I ask.

'Who knows,' she shrugs, returning to her phone, 'you both have such overactive imaginations.'

*

That afternoon, I meet my grandfather at the Four Seasons. Walking through the earth-toned marble of the lobby towards the restaurant makes me feel like a child—nothing like the girl who spent her weekend getting drunk with soldiers. The air thickens. I turn, expecting to find someone, but there's no one there. I shake it off as nerves. Meeting my grandfather for lunch is something new. Ah Kong is the patriarch. The man who both supports and guides the family. When I get home from our lunches, Dad likes to ask what we talk about. *Everything*, I gloat.

I find Ah Kong seated at a table for two, hidden in the back corner even though there aren't many people around. I lean down to kiss him on the cheek before taking the seat across from him.

'Sorry I'm late,' I say, hoping that he hasn't been waiting too long.

'It's fine,' he shrugs, 'I was early.'

When the waiter comes, he asks if we'd like anything from the buffet before it closes. Ah Kong shakes his head no before asking for a glass of hot water. Dad says Ah Kong's greatest fear is death; that's why he's so careful with what he eats. He doesn't smoke or drink either. He even checks his heart on a monitor in his living room every evening when he gets home from work. Looking at my grandfather I wonder how old he is. It's hard to tell. For as long I can remember his head has been surrounded by tufts of fading grey while the top remains bare. He has only a few

wrinkles around his eyes, and two drooping lines around his mouth. I've never asked how old he is. To be honest, I don't even know his real name. Just the Indonesian one he adopted so people wouldn't suspect him of being Chinese.

'What do you want to eat?' Ah Kong asks, while scanning the menu.

'I want the wagyu,' I say. At this age, I'm obsessed with anything vaguely Japanese. Anime, J-pop, boys with pale skin and light lipstick. I wonder what my grandparents would say if they knew. If Ah Kong would be disappointed by how readily I absorb their culture while ignoring my own.

'I think I'll have the same,' he says, closing the menu.

I'm both surprised and happy. It sounds silly, but Ah Kong breaking his diet at a meal where it's just the two of us makes me feel like an accomplice. We don't have a lot of moments, so when I tell Dad later that Ah Kong got steak with me, I feel proud, as if he was showing a side of himself just to me.

While we wait for the food, Ah Kong tells me stories. One about my father as a kid, another about… I watch the waiters close down the buffet. In retrospect, I wish I had been listening to my grandfather, but I'm at an age where everything in the world is just an extension of myself. At this point, my grandfather is only my grandfather, not someone with his own past, his own failures and dreams.

'I think that Westerners are too concerned with happiness,' Ah Kong says when I tune back in. 'It's something I've always envied, their ability to relax, to let themselves take it easy.'

I nod at him, unsure if he's saying this because it's what he thinks of me, or if he's asking me because I'm half-Western. I think of my mother's sister and how when I finally stopped chemically straightening my hair, her first response was that I looked less Asian. In the moment I was unsure of what to say—just as I'm unsure what to say now. No matter how hard I try, I don't fit in with either side of my extended family. We are too different, divided by distance and cultural prejudice. Each side assuming I'm too much of the other.

'My children ended up very Western,' Ah Kong says more to himself than me. 'I guess it was inevitable.'

When it comes down to it, I am not Chinese. Not enough at least. I don't speak Hokkien and I don't know the customs of our family. I celebrate the holidays but don't understand their meaning. Not that I think Dad knows more than I do. Even

though both his parents are Chinese. I feel like we both pretend, trying to cling to the ends we understand while making up the rest.

When the food arrives, I let the sound of fork and knife take over. But my grandfather has plenty of questions.

‘What do you want to do when you’re done with school?’

I want to work for you, I think. But it isn’t the answer he, or anyone for that matter, wants to hear. Dad and him, they don’t think I can do it. I don’t have the brain for it. I’m too soft around the edges. ‘Go to art school,’ I say finally. ‘Maybe work in advertising.’ I don't want to work in advertising, but I feel like it's the correct answer—a good defence for getting a degree in Fine Arts. Take it corporate, make it sound like it'll make you money.

‘There’s good money in that,’ he nods. ‘How’s horse riding going?’

I breathe a sigh of relief. Finally. Something I can brag about; something I’m sure of. ‘I’ll be in Malaysia again this summer,’ I say. ‘Last summer I was competing with five different horses. This summer it’ll only be three.’

‘And Lancelot?’

I smile. ‘He’s great. We won everything last summer.’

‘Yes,’ Ah Kong smiles. ‘Your father told me.’

'Thank you,' I say seriously. Lancelot is mine because of Ah Kong. When Ah Ma saw a picture of me riding on the Malaysian Airlines' brochure Ah Kong swore he'd buy me my next horse. I think of the countless children shipped off to barns in Germany and Holland, working as grooms in order for a chance to be sponsored, to be given the right horse. It’s silly but sometimes I am ashamed that my family sponsors me, as if it isn’t me that works hard to succeed.

That’s what I remember of our conversation. The rest blurs into the fog of memory. When I think of Ah Kong now, it feels like we never spoke. He's just a series of moving pictures. An exercise bicycle by an apartment window. A window that overlooks an expanse of trees and cargo ships. A long oak table with a heart monitor. A kitchen counter with red-lidded containers filled with *krupuk*. The sound of my teeth crunching on the *krupuk* as he speaks to me; the taste of fish melting on my tongue as I try my best to come up with an answer that makes me seem smart. Meaningless everyday motions. Swirling together till I feel like he never existed in the first place.

But when I remember us seated at our corner table for two, I can see his face. That lunch is one of the few things I remember. It's so clear, so crisp in the corners of my mind. In the moment it's enough, but it won't always be enough, not when I try and think of the pieces that tie us together. If I can't remember what was said, then what existed? Thoughts, gestures, feelings; unspoken they remain unreal, untouchable. Sometimes I wonder, would Ah Kong mean more or less if I knew him better?

*

Feng

Indonesia

1960

Feng knows that the smell of destruction is a scent more pungent than death. In the twenty or so years she's been alive she's come face to face with both. Death is final, absolute. Destruction is death delayed, a vision of the end without the promise of relief. Death comes to her in dreams of a lost childhood. Fading images of loved ones and acquaintances lined up against a wall: figures blurred, equal under the eyes of a gun. She sees shovels pressed in helpless hands; *Dig*, they say, *dig till you meet your end*. But those are thoughts for another day. Today there is no room for death, only the delaying of it.

Feng's breathless as she races up the stairs. Her new life has been one of relative relaxation; she tries to think of the last time she ran for anything. She is thankful for the skirt she has chosen to wear, the flowing fabric guaranteeing freedom of movement. Flashes of being hidden under floorboards, a radio held in small, trembling hands, are pushed away just as quickly as they come to mind. Chipped blue paint meets her fingertips as she takes a moment to rest against the wall. Decay is everywhere, she thinks, even in the homes of the fortunate.

When she reaches her destination, a plain wooden door, worn, not fitting its frame, she smooths the wrinkles from her outfit. Best not to look hurried, she thinks. Best to look calm. With a quick stroke, she resets her thick hair in its bun before bringing her knuckles to the wood in a soft rap. Not a moment later a woman peeks her head out, then ushers her inside.

The woman's voice is hushed as she shuts the door behind Feng. 'Were you seen?'

'No,' she says, 'I don't think so.'

The woman makes a face to match her voice. Her face is set in sharp angles, her thick lips more intimidating than sultry. ‘You don’t think, or you weren’t?’

Feng takes a deep breath and sequesters the desire to spit venom in return. She’s worked too hard to secure this woman’s friendship to ruin it now.

*

It had begun with a game of mahjong. All of her life's greatest moments seemed to start with a game of wit and chance. Although chance had very little to do with this one. It had only taken a couple of casual conversations to learn which mahjong parlours she needed to begin frequenting to find the woman. The woman was the wife of an important general, a general who controlled the prison where Feng's husband was being held.

For Feng, the hardest part of playing any game was pretending to be of only average skill, good enough to stay, but not good enough to win. *Never beat the people you want something from*, her uncle once told her. *Skill isn’t found in winning but in knowing when to lose*. It was strange realizing how easy it was for her to slip into the role of an actress. Painting on a perfect smile, knowing what to say and when not to speak at all. There was an art in manipulation, knowing who to befriend and who to deny. It was a role she had been perfecting her whole life. The only problem was that she was currently cast as the understudy, the woman who needed something, not the woman who had it all. But once her husband was free that would change; they were survivors, both of them.

Feng bided her time, spilling the right secrets, showing off her jewellery with a careful flick of the wrist. She became so good at playing the innocent doting wife she almost believed it herself. Throughout the months, Feng began to spend less time with her son and more time helping the general's wife with her own. Henry was still a child, but as soon as he was old enough, Feng would explain the importance of what she had done. That her actions were to guarantee the only thing that mattered. Safety.

Feng wonders for a moment how her husband is fairing in jail. Her thoughts crisscross between being frightened for him and thinking he deserves it. Why did he think he could get away with what he did? It's not that she had a problem with the shady dealings that sometimes accompanied his business, it's just that he never spoke about it. And though she knew better than to ask, she couldn't help but feel like if she had been on it from the beginning, they wouldn't have been in this mess.

In her opinion, the police had always known. They had just been waiting to expose him at a time that was more beneficial to their needs. It wasn't their morality that brought him down, it was their greed. As soon as his misdeeds were revealed, he was arrested and thrown in jail faster than he could calculate an escape.

Feng knows that Isk is fortunate to have her as his wife. For a wife skilled in games of deception and chance isn't born but created. Feng believes games reach far beyond the table, that they are ingrained in every aspect of one's social life. Politics just happen to be the flavour of the day. Even with Henry to worry about Feng is able to remain focused and ready. She wonders when this is all said and done if she should tell her son the real reason his father went to jail. If it will be better to fill his head with tales of heroism and injustice, or if he should face the reality of what he will one day inherit. One day her son will be old enough to remember, old enough for his parent's decisions to matter.

But for now, she is here. Here with every piece of jewellery she owns. Gifts from her husband's trips, for her birthdays, their anniversaries; everything that has been worth something in her life is now bundled together, ready to be bartered with. Feng thinks of her husband's tale of redemption, how after the occupation he rebuilt his family's legacy with the jewels he had buried under the earth. Twice now jewellery will be his saviour.

The general's wife places Feng's possessions in front of her. With careful hands she turns over the blood-red rubies Feng received when Henry was born. It pains her to part with them, but she doesn't let the sentimentality linger. With sacrifice will come reward. The woman pauses her inspection to take out a magnifying glass and a ruler. Placing the glass over the table, she leans down to study the smattering of diamonds that form one of Feng's rings.

'These will do.' The woman flicks her hand.

Despite the woman's flippancy, Feng remains cautious. After months of scheming, of playing nice, it all seems too easy. As if standing in the room bartering for her husband's fate isn't enough. 'How will I be sure?'

The woman smiles. 'Don't you trust me?'

Trust? Feng resists the urge to laugh. Who has time for trust? People are disappearing, the country changing. Feng can feel a growing state of unrest beginning to settle on the things she and Isk once knew. Everything will be different soon. She feels it in her gut, like little bubbles bursting in anticipation of a knife. She

thinks of Isk and of the unfortunate timing of his arrest. *When it comes to games of power, there is no such thing as a coincidence*; her uncle's voice returns, always present in moments of doubt. There are only decisions that have been made to look like accidents. Feng knows the woman is trying to bait her, trying to engage in one last battle by calling her out on her game, but it doesn't mean she has to bite.

'You know, Feng, I'm surprised.' The woman moves towards the floor-length mirror on the other side of the room. 'With this little fortune, you could've been free yourself.'

Feng smiles, knowing the end of this farce is near. 'Who says I'm not free?'

The woman pauses, pinning an emerald brooch to the collar of her blouse. Feng recognizes it from her last birthday. 'My dear, none of us are free. We're all slaves to something or other.' The woman pauses as if to say something more then decides against it. 'You have to leave, of course. You and your family can't remain here.'

Leave? Feng thinks no word has ever sounded so beautiful. The thought of leaving Borneo behind lifts a weight she hasn't realized she's been holding. Leaving means no more fear;, no more watching their backs or doubting their friends. She is more than okay with that. Isk and her have been planning to leave for some time now. Arrangements in Singapore have already been made. She has family living there, and Isk has his thoughts centred on having another child.

It'll be different there, Isk said, *you'll see, it'll be the right move.* Like always, Isk's grand statements excited her; how wonderful it must be to live a life of ambition, to expect things to go your way and end up having them do so. She thinks for a moment of Henry, of the frown his earnest little face will wear when she breaks the news. Will he be upset, leaving everything he knows behind? No, she will explain to him that they are just embarking on a new adventure. That he is descended from conquerors and explorers, and if he wants to have the world at his feet, he will have to see it first.

After her exchange with the general's wife, it doesn't take long for Isk to be released. It's all done in the rush that accompanies something hush-hush. It was early morning when Feng went to barter her possessions, and it is late afternoon when Isk is released from prison. When Isk walks out, it's with the composure of someone who has done no wrong. His posture is straight but relaxed, arms swaying by his sides. There's a cheery smile on his face as he shakes the hand of the man

who accompanies him out. When he sees Feng with Henry in one arm and tickets in the other, he locks eyes with her and nods.

'Hey,' she says.

'Hey,' he echoes. 'Ready to go?'

The journey to the airport is ridden in silence. Henry is clueless yet observant in the way only a child knows. He asks no questions, doesn't try to start a conversation. When he looks out the window of the car, he realizes the windows are darkened. Embarrassed at not realizing sooner, he looks back down at his hands. In the front, the general, the one married to the woman Feng spoke with, speaks in hushed tones with Feng's husband.

When they reach the airport, they are escorted to the gate. Almost there, Feng thinks. On the outside her face is composed; the mask she's perfected over the years settles with ease. Under the mask, there is nothing but chaos, her body rigid, waiting for it to all fall apart. She imagines that as soon as they step out of the car, soldiers will begin to surround them. Henry will cry, frightened by the impenetrable wall. Isk will look down at her in shame. When it becomes apparent that there's no escape, the sea of soldiers will part, revealing the general's wife. Decked in Feng's jewellery the woman's thick lips will crack into a long, wicked grin. *It's all a lie*, she'll laugh, throwing her head back as if to revel in Feng's futility, *how stupid were you, thinking you could be free?*

It's only when they board the plane that it dawns on Feng that they are really leaving. After settling Henry in his seat, she looks to her husband. She tries to see if his time in prison has wounded him, if there are visible cracks in his pride. If there are they don't show. He remains aloof as he asks a stewardess for some water, his manner relaxed and easy despite being dressed in the clothes he was arrested in. When Isk sits down and pulls at the sleeves of his shirt, Feng feels guilty for trying to catch him in a moment of weakness. Reaching for the bag she had packed in frightened haste she hands him a fresh pair of clothes.

'Something new,' she tells him.

He nods. 'New things for a new life.'

When Isk takes the clothes and heads to the bathroom to change Feng settles in her seat. She feels light, dizzy in the realization of what she's managed to accomplish. Till this point, everything good in her life had been because Isk had guaranteed it. Though he treats her like an equal, making grand gestures like signing

the office under her name, Feng can’t help but feel inferior. Her son, her fortune, her happiness, all of it had been thanks to him. His intelligence, his hard work, his frustratingly straightforward nature. But the fact that they are here, on this plane, ready to start anew—this is all her.

As the plane arcs into the sky, the voice of the general's wife enters her head. *You could have been free.* Feng smiles, silencing the voice for the last time. I am.

*

1950

The day Feng and Isk met began like any other. She's early for work. Not that she is ever late. She's been a schoolteacher for a little over a year and enjoys watching the children file one by one into her classroom, their sleepy little faces sweet and trusting. Teaching children wasn't what Feng's mother had envisioned for her only child, but Feng likes to think it suits her. Having had very little education herself, she feels proud that the school lets her handle the younger children. Believing the lessons she's learned from a life outside of the classroom to be as valuable to her students as the lessons she gives inside. Feng's students range from the ages of eight to ten and are ripe with curiosity. Nurturing questioning minds, she thinks, that will be my legacy. Giving them what I was robbed of; all the simple childhood delights.

Feng's family aren't wealthy. They are self-made from what she likes to 'humbly' call humble beginnings. On stuffy classroom days when the children are leaning more towards tedious than charming Feng dreams of lazy afternoons on a breezy, sun-speckled veranda. A life where she can spend days eating and drinking with not a care of who or what will be affected by her actions. Simple dreams, she tells herself. Being insignificant in a way that makes me happy instead of small. But dreams are often just that, and when reality called Feng chose to be in the one profession that she deemed the most fitting. If she were honest, she'd say that she didn't really like to work outside of the children. She hated smalltalk. All the *how are you*, and *it sure is hot today*. It all felt so banal. Hot? Of course it was hot. They lived in the tropics. It was never going to be anything else.

When it comes to the classroom Feng is the only adult, and it suits her. She likes the fact that she can decide what is to be said and what is to be done, and no one has the position to argue with her.

That being said, Feng thinks she is the opposite of a forceful woman. In fact, she tries her best to accomplish her tasks with what she considers is a subtle yet pronounced grace. When it comes to her family Feng is the child her mother needs her to be. Living in the capital means that rent isn't cheap, but the move seemed necessary after the war. Their old house was tainted by memories no one wanted to remember. Her mother never spoke of what occurred, of the growing up Feng had been forced to take part in. You weren't supposed to speak about those things; after all, what would it change?

It is only because they make extra money from the room that they keep available for rent that they can live in the city. Over the years, plenty of people have made Feng's home their own. This means that after making sure all the kids have been picked up after school, she has the task of making the lodgers comfortable. If they need something from the store, she will be the one to fetch it. She sweeps and washes, smiles and entertains. If the renters have children, she watches them in the evenings. If it is someone staying for business, she fetches cigarettes and newspapers for breakfast. But Feng doesn't mind that she has to share her home with strangers. Despite being sent on frequent errands, the lodgers tend to mind their own business and expect her to mind her own.

Earlier that morning, before she left for school, Feng's mother reminded her that someone new would be moving into their spare room. She didn't think much of it, being used to getting renters settled in when her mother is busy. The lodger is from Pontianak, but will be staying in the city for work. Feng figures that if he is coming from work, he won't reach the house till late in the evening. The little knowledge she has of men is that they like to drink after work to wash off the sins of the day. With her mother out, Feng takes the opportunity to read on the couch. The rare solitude means that she can lounge with her bare feet propped on the armrest. She's been trying to get through the same book for the past few months. It's shameful, but she is close to admitting that she doesn't really enjoy reading.

When Isk enters the house that afternoon Feng is only four pages past where she has begun. She isn't sure how long he's been standing by the door before he decides to clear his throat. The noise startles her, forcing her to sit up, embarrassment coating her face in a light shade of pink.

'Hi.' He extends his hand in greeting, a hesitant smile touching his lips. 'Are you the owner?'

Feng grasps his hand in return, trying her best not to judge him by his smooth fingers and the fact that he didn't introduce himself. 'No, my mother is. Are you our new lodger?'

'Yes,' he says, 'I'm Isk.'

Isk? She assumes it is short for something but figures if he wanted to be called by his full name he would have given it. 'I'm Feng. Let me show you to your room.'

The house is small, but it tries its best to be charming. There are two bedrooms, one which Feng shares with her mother, while the other is for lodgers. The kitchen connects to the sparse living room and a blue-and-white tiled bathroom shared by both rooms.

Feng speaks in a practised rhythm as they make their way to the room Isk will be staying in.

'The rules are simple,' she explains, 'Breakfast is at six and dinner is at seven if you'd like to join us. There's a schedule by the bathroom so we can all get ready in time for work. You won't be restricted to a curfew since you'll have a key, but please be reminded to be respectful of noise if you are expecting to be home late.'

Feng looks at Isk for confirmation which he gives with a nod before gesturing to the bedroom. The lodgers are either families or middle-aged men, but Isk is neither. Even though his cropped hair is beginning to thin in the front, she figures he can't be older than early to mid-twenties. He isn't tall, but he holds himself in a way that makes him appear as if he is. She wouldn't call him handsome, but he isn't bad to look at either. What he lacks in genetics he makes up for in composure. His white suit seems to be tailored to his proportions, and he walks with a calm, loose gait. Feng has never met anyone so at peace with themselves.

'How long will you be staying with us?' Feng asks, hoping the question will come off casual instead of rude. Isk hasn't come with much, just a beige hat in one hand and a small leather bag in the other. If she is rude, she'll hear of it later from her mother.

'I'm not sure.' He pauses as if thinking about how much he should say. 'I've come here to buy a new office. I was thinking of staying till it's all set up, but there's a lot to take care of back home as well.'

Feng isn't sure what to say in response. She feels caught between the need to mind her own business, and the curiosity she believes leads to a healthy life. If he

is here to buy a new office it means that he has some money, but if he has money, why is he staying with them? She imagines that rich men stay in swanky hotels closer to the city centre. On second thoughts, he is probably here on behalf of his boss. Sent ahead to scout for property so that when his boss arrives, he won't be wasting his time.

'I like it here,' Isk says. 'It feels like a home.'

Feng thinks of the spider larger than her palm that likes to climb the windowsill in the kitchen. She sees the faded spot on an overturned cushion from where she spilt coffee and attempted to clean it with bleach. There are bullfrogs who make a cacophony of sound after the rain and there is the feel of the worn wood on her bare feet.

She laughs. 'It is a home.'

Isk shrugs, not minding that Feng has missed his meaning. 'Of course.'

*

It doesn't take Feng long to get used to him. Prone to storytelling and laughter, his personality contrasts with the stark white suits that he irons both in the evening and in the morning before work. Though he spends his days out, he always makes his way home for dinner. Together they sit with her mother around the plastic table in the kitchen. Feng likes how Isk thanks her mother after a meal. He is bold, but never disrespectful. When they eat, he never reaches for anything first, and as a lodger, he never asks for more than they give him. Though he's only lived with them for a few months, it feels like he's always been there. For Feng, the months are comfortable and uneventful—a section of her life that she can look on fondly without any concrete memories.

It is late into the summer when Feng's mother asks her what she thinks of their lodger. Feng tries to think of what she knows of the strange man who she no longer sees as a stranger. Isk is pleasant yet reserved. After dinner, he either goes for a walk or heads to his room to turn in for the evening. She's never seen him smoke or stay out late. He never consumes alcohol or brings home women. She thinks of the moments where she catches him looking at her, and how instead of feeling flattered, she feels inspected like she isn't a woman, but something curious instead.

'He's boring,' she finally whispers to her mother.

Her mother sighs. 'Boring isn't bad.'

One evening after the day's rain has died down, Isk asks Feng if she would like to join him on his walk. Not wanting to be rude and aching to leave the house Feng complies. The moment they step outside Feng wishes to be back indoors—the road next to the house resembles a muddy lake. Bullfrogs have come out to join the crickets, and a chirping, croaking orchestra follows them as they walk—patches of loose dirt and soggy grass mush under their heels as they make their way to nowhere. Humidity creeps down Feng's neck, making her dress stick to her back. She pulls at the stretchy fabric, wondering how Isk always manages to look fresh when he arrives home in the evenings. It is rare to see him without his linen suits. His love of white going beyond the fact that it is the coolest colour to wear in the heat.

‘It’s so hot,’ Feng complains. ‘Why do people want to live here?’

Isk slows his pace to match hers. ‘Where would you go? If you could choose to go anywhere?’

‘England,’ Feng says without much thought. ‘Or maybe Europe? I guess that’s where everyone wants to go.’

Isk laughs. ‘Is that where you want to go?’

‘I don’t know,’ Feng says. ‘I’m not really sure what I want. What about you? Where would you go?’

‘You know,’ Isk says, stopping so he can inspect her face. ‘No one has ever asked me that. I always ask people what they want. What they need. And no one ever asks me in return.’

‘Maybe,’ Feng muses, ‘it’s because they think that you already have it. I wouldn’t blame them. I’ve never met anyone so self-assured. So content in just being.’

‘It’s a lie,’ Isk says, picking up his pace. ‘I'm probably the least content person on this planet. It suits me, though. If I were content, I wouldn't work for anything. Happiness is the enemy, after all. The happier we are, the less we do.’

‘You want to know something awful?’ Feng pauses, not sure whether to admit to him her secret truth. She wishes she felt like he did. All she ever aimed for was happiness. ‘I don’t want to do anything.’

Instead of being horrified Isk bursts into laughter. ‘Well, I want to do everything.’

As they make their way through the neighbourhood, Feng is surprised by how easy it is to talk to him. Isk isn't reserved like she first thought; he just has no desire to force himself on people. As they walk, she learns that he isn't here working for someone else and is in fact here for his own business. His world is focused on the manufacturing of rubber, his brother and him working together to run their two factories.

'We used to be in timber,' Isk explains, 'But that was before the war. We lost everything in those years. Our house, our business. When we returned I knew we needed something new but familiar.'

'The war touched us too,' Feng says, 'We don't talk about it much, but it's there at the back of our thoughts.'

Isk stops, taking her hand briefly in his own. 'We don't have to talk about it. We don't have to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable.'

Feng looks at him, committing his eager eyes and soft smile to memory. 'Ma says you'll be gone once you finish setting up here. That you've paid your last rent.'

'It's not that I don't like it here,' Isk replies, more to himself. 'It's just that I'm needed back home. My brother Kai and I, we balance each other out. And as it stands, I'm more suited for the factories, and he's more suited for administration.'

Feng is surprised by the sadness she feels at the thought of Isk leaving. She hasn't realized how much she likes having him around. 'Are you close,' she asks, 'you and your brother?'

'I'd do anything for him,' Isk replies, 'for anyone in my family. For anyone who deserves it.'

'I always imagined that successful people only thought of themselves,' Feng says. 'That people are just collateral.'

'If the Japanese taught me anything,' Isk says, stopping, 'it's that we are nothing by ourselves. Like the sum of our parts, only together do we have the strength to survive.'

Feng stops beside him. When they turn towards each other Feng expects her heart to race or for panic to set in. Instead, she feels calm, like she is floating in an endless ocean with no chance of drowning. There is something about Isk that makes her feel like everything is possible. His ambition and strict dedication are often intimidating, but he is sweet too. Isk isn't a man who wants everything—he wants everything so he can give.

‘Will you remember me?’ she asks, her voice steady. ‘When you leave?’

Isk smiles. ‘I think the better question is, will you remember me?’

*

As summer ends, Feng's and Isk's relationship begins to blossom. The changes that occur after their walk are gradual. One walk turns into two, then into a steady stream of evening respites that echo the natural progression of the season. Dinner has become a ritual affair, and Feng's mother starts to view Isk as the son she never had. Once their bowls are empty and they are headed for the door, Feng's mother will pick up the dishes and smile. It is impossible to miss the excitement in her mother's eyes while Isk waits for Feng to change from slippers into shoes. Feng is even granted a rare hug when she admits to her mother that she enjoys Isk's company.

Some nights Feng will pretend to go to bed before tiptoeing back towards the kitchen to listen to her mother and her friends. It is something she often did as a child, always intrigued by what was said between people when they thought no one else is around. It is a bad habit, one she developed from the hours she's spent learning to be invisible. *Quiet like a mouse*, her uncle explained, *quiet like you don’t exist*. The fact that she is alive and lauded as a neighbourhood hero for the harrowing adventures her family had burdened her with during the war means that she has learned a few things. One of these lessons is that no one is really themselves unless they are alone.

One night, after a long walk with Isk, Feng lingers in her usual spot, flushed against the dark corner of the hall, ready to eavesdrop on her mother. To a stranger, her mother might appear calm, but Feng can read her mother's excitement from across the room. Her mother's hands shake as she pours herself tea, her voice a light, straining whisper. The tea starts to pool around the bottom of her cup before she reaches for a rag to wipe it off. Their table is new, which means her mother spends more time fussing about potential surface-marring rings than she spends on her own appearance.

‘It’s working,’ her mother says to the women gathered at her table. ‘You guys were right. I brought Feng to visit Doctor Jiang and look at what's happened. Thank God I was prepared. If it was up to Feng, she'd just lie staring at the sky hoping a husband would trip over her on his way to work.’

The women laugh, but one of the younger ones remains serious. ‘You should know better than that. Remember Dolly? Her parents also gave her the pin and look at what happened to her. Pregnant and abandoned! Things might seem fine now, but what if you’ve doomed your daughter to a life of unhappiness?’

Feng’s mother scoffs, looking towards the open window. The spider who frequents their home has already begun its nightly journey up the ledge. ‘No, the pin will work.’ The spider’s legs are long and limber, each moving as slowly and carefully as the other. ‘Remember how he helped my arthritis? He's a good man; he knows what he's doing. Try to be happy for Feng. Thanks to Jiang, my daughter will live her life with a rich man.’

‘Do you think she knows?’ the serious one inquires. ‘About the pin?’

Feng's mother shakes her head. 'Of course not. We put it in when she was barely twelve. I don't think she can even feel it.'

The friends smile, delighted with Feng's mother's fortune. Scared of being found Feng shrinks from her spot by the wall, rushing to the bedroom she shares with her mother so that she won't be discovered. As she readies herself for bed Feng wonders what her mother meant by a charm. She knows whenever her mother would visit Dr Jiang, the neighbours whispered. When her father was still around, Dr Jiang was one of his primary complaints. He disliked the man, believing that he could just as easily bring misfortune into their lives as he could fortune. She had met him a few times by coincidence but couldn't remember visiting him with her mother. Feng doesn't know what she believes. She is superstitious by nature but carries her father's air of caution. Just because something is good doesn't mean it lacks the ability to be evil. The line is never clear-cut, especially when dealing with forces beyond the natural world.

Feng knows better than to ask her mother about the pin and thinks instead on the indication of her mother's words. Her life is destined to be with Isk. As Feng slips into bed, feet poking out of the thin covers to avoid sweating, she thinks of what a life with Isk can mean. Though she likes him, she isn't sure if he is the man she wants to spend the rest of her life with, even with his supposed wealth. Though not one for dramatics Feng always thought that when love came, it would claim her like an endless fever. But her dreams did not hold his face. She never lost focus to lurid fantasies of his long fingers cupping her cheek, or the soft flutter of his breath on her neck. She won’t describe the way she feels about him as desire—it feels more like

comfort. They are great friends, and she enjoys his company more than she ever thought she could. He knows her without judgement, without care for her most basic of flaws. With Isk, she never speaks out of turn or says the wrong thing. He appreciates honesty and is honest in return.

Feng worries that love is elusive, more a figment of the mind than reality. Sometimes she wonders if she will ever be tainted by its touch. When she asked her mother how she was supposed to know if she was in love, her mother replied: 'You don't. Love is for fairy tales and tragedies. Respect and well-being, that's what really matters.'

The day before Isk is to leave for Pontianak, he takes Feng to visit the office. It is a slim building that looks larger on the inside than out. There are two storeys with large windows, each detailed with intricate spiralling iron rods. The office has a bustle that Feng hadn't expected—more shuffling and clanging than the rigidness she thought would accompany something Isk managed.

As Isk moves through the rooms, he greets his staff by name. Feng marvels at his ease. It makes her hover by the entrance, her body rigid in the unfamiliar environment. Isk is halfway to the stairs when he notices her discomfort. Returning to her side, Isk places his hand on the small of Feng's back to guide her towards the second floor. As they make their way up, Feng can feel the curious eyes that follow. She tries her best to look forward, refusing to give in to the slew of gossip she knows is sure to follow. From Isk's office, the entirety of the ground floor is visible. There's no wood or cement to block him from the rest of the occupants, just crystal-clear glass that has been cleaned with evident commitment.

'My brother and I,' Isk says, moving towards the window, 'we run our business like a family. There may be divisions and titles, but, in the end, everyone is equal if they are willing to work.'

'It's a nice thought.' Feng smiles. 'One big family. Except, you don't owe these people anything, and they don't owe you in return. When work is done, they will go home to their real family and you to yours.'

'I don't believe that,' Isk counters, moving away from the glass. 'I believe that we are in here every day doing our best to support the people at home that we care about. But we also care about each other. Some of us are distant cousins and children of relatives. I've paid for the schooling of their children, for their homes. And in return, they work to continue this company.' Isk gestures to the seats by his desk,

waiting for Feng to sit down before continuing. 'You know, my great-grandfather started this business. Then when everything seemed lost after the war, I started it again. I didn't go back to school. I didn't indulge in fantasies. I worked. I worked so that my family could survive, so that they could have the opportunity to dream.'

Feng looks back towards the people on the ground floor. Do they realize how Isk feels? And if they do, do they care? It isn't that she is selfish, she's just never had anyone else to think of. Sure, she does things for her mother, and sometimes she does things because society expects her to, but thinking of others is a luxury she has never believed she's had. Feng has no siblings, and her friends are limited to a couple of girls she sometimes plays cards with. Most of her evenings, before Isk's arrival, were spent alone. It's not like she doesn't like people, she just doesn't enjoy the obligation friendship requires. So, she made herself scarce, tried to capture the privacy she lacked in a house that was always full of strangers. Feng both envies and pities Isk. For the burdens he places on himself and the selfish pleasure he must receive every time someone ends up indebted to him.

'Why did you bring me here?' she asks, suddenly wary of his motives. 'Shall I too be indebted to you?'

Isk reaches for her hand. 'If you like. But I'd rather the thought of us being indebted to each other.'

Feng allows her hand to be held, revelling in the smooth fingers she once acquainted with a comfortable life. How wrong she had been, how quick to judge. 'What are you trying to say?'

Isk smiles, curling her fingers with his own. 'I'm trying to say that this too can be yours. If you'd like it. I know we haven't known each other for very long, but I believe we work. We balance each other; we understand each other. What more could we want?'

Feng smiles, the doubt she has been feeling replaced with an overwhelming tide of reason. She knows at once that love is just a word that allows people to revel in their fear of taking a chance. That desire is a giddy fever that fades. 'So, does that mean you'll be coming back?'

Isk searches her eyes, his voice calm and serious. 'Would you like me to come back?'

For as long as she can remember, Feng hasn't been sure of anything. Everything she's accomplished has been out of necessity, each decision forced by a

power far beyond her own. But this, this is all hers. And for the first time in her life, she knows she has never wanted anything more.

'Yes,' she says, 'I'd like that very much.'

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A month into Isk's absence Feng realizes that she has more time than she knows what to do with. She dreads dinner and the nagging feeling that something is missing when it is over. It makes her anxious as if a black hole has opened in the pit of her stomach. Feng thinks of the book she's finally finished; of the women in the pages who are strong when it comes to their lives, but instantly change into moonstruck girls with quivering knees when faced with love. It makes her know that what she feels with Isk is right; that missing his conversation is far superior to missing the touch of his hands. The longer he is gone, the more their relationship morphs in her mind. By the second week, it has turned into something much larger than she first felt when he asked her to be a part of his life. His absence means she can exaggerate her burgeoning emotions. When she recalls their conversations, they are filled with more entendre than she realized. She makes herself faint with reworked memories, painting moments into picturesque films that she can replay in her head whenever she is feeling the sudden pressure of melancholy. It might not be love, but it is the closest she thinks she'll ever come to it.

Of course, the moment Feng is sure of anything in her life, something occurs to throw her. It is a hot, aching afternoon, even for the tropics, when Kai first knocks on her front door. Feng is knelt by the fan in the living room, her clumsy fingers trying their best to braid her long dark hair. The knock is loud, making the anxious pit that she's been learning to deal with swell. Her first thought is that Isk has returned earlier than he had planned. Perhaps he is so wrecked from being apart from her that he's rushed back to be by her side. Or perhaps he missed the bustle of the city. Things were changing now that they had independence, the city was growing, becoming something that both terrified and excited Feng.

When she manages to calm her breathing to open the door, she is greeted by someone much taller than Isk.

'Hello,' the man says calmly, 'I'm Kai.'

'Hello,' she repeats, 'I'm Feng.'

'Ah, great.' Kai smiles. 'You know, when Isk came storming home, all strung up on some girl he was going to marry I had to come and take a look for myself. Our

parents were furious, of course. You're a bit of a black sheep. So, I said to myself, you have to meet her. Perfect old Isk choosing someone they'll never approve of must mean you're something special.’

Feng resists the urge to gape. Though Kai only faintly resembles Isk, it seems they share more than blood, possessing the same uncanny ability to anger her as well. 'I see unblinking honesty runs in your family.’

Kai laughs, ‘I’m sorry, where are my manners? You must forgive me, it’s a terribly hot day. May I come in?’

The afternoon that proceeds does wonders for Feng’s anxiety. Making tea, drinking it at the table in the kitchen, it all feels natural. Feng enjoys hearing about Isk from an outside perspective. It seems he is the golden child, just as frustratingly out of reach as she has made him. Kai is different to his brother when he laughs; the room seems to shake with him, and when he smiles, it is as if you are the only person who can make him do so. Like Isk, Kai stands straight and firm, but unlike Isk, he lets a broad smile cover his thin face.

When her mother arrives later that afternoon, she is surprised and then jubilant, insisting on making him dinner, singing praise of Isk and pestering Kai on when he expects to return. After dinner Kai bids them farewell, promising to drop by again. When Feng helps her mother with the dishes, a small smile fights its way across her face.

‘What’s that look for?’ her mother asks, fighting a smile herself.

‘Ma, I’m just happy to hear news of Isk.’

‘Me too.’ Her mother laughs. ‘I was worried at first, that as soon as he returned he’d forget about us, but it’s a good sign that his family is coming to check up on you.’

As Feng settles into her cot for the night, her mother whispers close to her ear, 'I'm so proud of you.'

Isk being gone means that Kai is the one running the office. The business is divided equally between them, with Kai taking care of the office and Isk managing the factories. Feng can't imagine Isk tending to his factories. She tries to imagine him as gruff, edges worn from living in the jungle, but knowing Isk, the image can't be further from the truth. He probably ends his patrols with a speech about unity and the importance of hard work. It makes her laugh, seeing the self-righteous look she knows too well plastered across his face. Isk knew how to wear his suit, how to

smile, how to speak. She is impressed with the way he handles people, never rude, always listening. It isn't hard to listen, but he has a particular skill in making people feel heard.

A couple of days after her first encounter with Kai she's summoned to his office. It's lunchtime when she makes her way over. When she arrives, she finds the office devoid of the usual clamour of heeled shoes. As she makes her way up the stairs, she revels in how calm she feels now that there aren't eyes marking her path. When she reaches the office, Kai is sitting at his desk with a deck of cards splayed before him.

'My brother says you're good at cards.'

She shrugs, uninterested. 'I'm okay.'

He smiles as he gestures towards the chair in front of him. 'Would you care for a round?'

She's hesitant but decides it's best not to upset her future brother-in-law. When she goes to sit, he pulls the chair out for her. Their game goes quickly. He isn't practised, and she tries her very best not to win. It's almost embarrassing how hard it is to pretend to lose to someone of such little skill, in a way it was almost like winning.

'It's interesting,' he says, lips moving together as if to suppress a smile.

She shuffles the cards. 'What is?'

He looks at her, studying her quick hands. When their eyes meet, she looks away. 'When my brother told me that you were skilled at cards, he failed to mention that you were skilled at losing.'

Feng stops shuffling the cards. This time when their eyes meet, she doesn't look away. 'I'm not sure what you mean.'

'Of course, you don't,' Kai laughs, gathering the cards back up. 'But that's not why I asked you to come here. I wanted to tell you that Isk is coming back and he's intent on marrying you.'

His words don't ease Feng; there's something behind them, lurking. 'And why do you need to tell me that?'

'Well, like I said, my parents disapprove, but lucky for Isk our family depends on him. Isk can make decisions the rest of us can't.' Kai pauses. His eyes are fierce, filled with something Feng can't place. 'I'm telling you because I want to see what kind of person you are.'

When Feng smiles there's not a trace of the anxiety she's been collecting since Isk had left; instead there's excitement, a hint of a game. 'You've seen what kind of person I am,' she says. 'The question is, what kind of person are you?'

‘Why?’ Kai leans forward, grin breaking free. ‘What are you afraid of?’

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1942

The day that Feng becomes a boy, it's raining. Loud fat drops fall heavy on the cramped house, the solitary window pane blurring the world outside from the kitchen within. Feng imagines the drops into shapes when they smack on to the glass, trying her best to remain distracted while her mother takes scissors to her hair. If it wasn't monsoon season, Feng would say that the weather had been created for her mood. Her mother hums while she works as if her cheery composure could erase the heaviness filling their home.

The soldiers who crept into their neighbourhood—taking what they pleased—discarding who they deemed unfit for their new world—had become a permanent presence. Homes were looted, people disappeared, and still, her family trudged on. Feng was coming to realize the purpose in routine—walking to school, helping her mother with dinner, listening to her uncle's stories in the dead of night. It empowered her, giving her reason to rise each morning.

Feng’s uncle opposed her newfound doctrine, fearing normalization. He’d join them for dinner, filling her mind with bleak words. Feng was old enough to retain his message, but not old enough to argue. Her mother never chimed in, allowing her brother’s mutterings to fill the table. Feng liked to study her uncle while he spoke. She would watch the way his eyes twitched, the wrinkles at the side creasing with every sigh. His head was balding, but he did nothing to keep the frail hairs tidy. He reminded Feng of the madman she’d pass on the way to the market with her mother. Untidy and rambling, eyes wild and honest.

‘New order, same chaos,’ he’d spit before turning to stare at the wall, his face tense as if it were stuck between transitions; the twitch of his moustache a stark contrast to his unblinking eyes. Of all her uncle’s rambling opinions, Feng would come to believe this one the most. The Japanese said they came to liberate the islands from the Dutch, but the Chinese knew the tricks of war. They heard of what happened in Nanking, they knew what Japanese freedom meant. There would be rape and murder, trenches dug and filled by the same hands, scarce food, neighbour

betrayed by neighbour. The leaders would attempt to practise discipline, but their men would run wild with rage. The only thing the new order would do is prove that the old order could fall, that their Western masters weren't as impervious as they once thought. And so, freedom would come, but it would be with the price of their blood.

When Feng looks at the ceramic tiles that line her mother's kitchen, she imagines they are cracked with despair. Silently they watch her glossy locks fall to the floor like fading dreams. The black clusters coil when they hit the floor, scattering around the tiles like snakes. When her mother pauses to trade scissors for a razor, Feng leans down to grab a fistful of strands in an attempt to hide her tears. The discarded hair is rough between her fingers. What was once her pride and joy is now dull and lifeless. Feng wonders how something so beautiful could become so sad.

‘You can clean it up when I’m done,’ her mother scolds. ‘And for God's sake, don't cry.’

‘I’m not crying,’ Feng says, dropping the limp hair back on to the floor.

Settling back on to the stool Feng closes her eyes and tries to remember life before her uncle. Was she happy before they moved into his home? Feng and her mother had been living alone. Each taking up as little space as they could, floating past each other in the room they shared, filling mealtimes with the slow, deliberate sound of chewing. Feng's mother had always been a woman of few words, proud and fierce. She had much shame and little strength. When Feng's father abandoned them for his mistress, her mother decided he had never existed. There were no pictures or keepsakes, no spare words or feelings. Feng tried once to ask her mother where her father had gone. When her mother replied with a stony *elsewhere*, before dusting the already immaculate table, Feng knew that she wouldn’t be able to ask again.

At first, Feng blamed her mother for her father's leaving. It was the lines on her mother's face and her whip-sharp tongue. It was the countless fights Feng witnessed over money and the woman he refused to keep at bay. It was easy to see all of her parents’ faults without inserting herself as a factor. Her parents were something that she was both a part of and without, a relationship which she could come and go from as she pleased. Feng's father was quick to fault her mother. Every time Feng would go to sit on his lap or wait for him to finish smoking before bed, he would tell her of his latest complaints.

Your mother is always angry.

Everything I do is wrong.

Do you know how much it hurts me?

His words would make Feng feel angry and defensive. If only her mother had tried harder to be kind, to be beautiful and willing. Maybe Feng's father wouldn't have had to stray. Maybe he would've chosen to stay.

Feng had tried, twice, to bring her father back home before realizing he had discarded her as well. The first time she followed him home from work—winding busy streets filled with aunties selling family-made dishes and uncles squatting by doorsteps smoking cigarettes—she didn't even make it to the door, dashing back down the road before he knew she was there. The second time she made it all the way. From the window, Feng could spy into the interior of his house. It was simple, yet comfortable. Confused, Feng wondered when her father started to make enough money to support a home. The countless fights Feng witnessed over coins must have appeared trivial to him now that he was 'happy'.

Feng knocked on the door, a soft rap, committed, but not rude. She counted the seconds as they passed, reaching four before the door creaked open. Her father looked down at her, his familiar scent of tobacco and sweat enveloping Feng.

'What do you want?' he scoffed, eyes seeing and not seeing. 'Money, is it?'

Shock held Feng's tongue. It may have been her father who opened the door, but it wasn't her father who spoke to her. While he waited for Feng to reply, his mistress called from the back of the house.

'Who's there?'

Feng wanted to yell. It's the daughter your husband abandoned, she'd say. And all she wants is to understand. But she doesn't shout. She looks at her father instead. Unsmiling, unmoving, they lock eyes till he finally says, 'No one,' and shuts the door.

Though they never spoke of her father, her mother's eyes told her stories of their own. Her darkened gaze spoke of escape, of things done to distance oneself from the reality of pain. Her mother's mind distant as she spent afternoons staring into space, lids puffy from tears shed alone at night. Later, when Feng becomes a boy, her uncle will tell her that the eyes never lie. Her uncle had many tricks for routing out liars, tricks that Feng would use to become the greatest lie of all, a survivor.

Despite his strange words her uncle's frequent visits are what returns Feng's mother from the brink of madness. He managed to pick up the pieces that Feng was too young to comprehend. So when her uncle comes to her, with rare solemnity, asking if she will become his accomplice—*sidekick*, he said with an empty smile—she found that she couldn't refuse. If her uncle asked her to run, she would ask how far, and if he asked her to hide, she wouldn't ask why. This meant accepting a job she wouldn't understand till much later; playing a part in a game not meant for kids. But for now, Feng needs to remember the past. As each snip of hair whips her like a bullet, she must remember. This is her duty.

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When Feng accepts the mirror her mother hands her, she greets her reflection like a stranger. The razor reveals her scalp, smooth and small under the peach-skin fuzz of her remaining hair. Her full cheeks look thinner now that they are no longer hidden under heavy hair. Her eyes, shiny from tears, blink like dark globes under a pale, narrow forehead. Though it's not an improvement, it isn't horrible, just different. Another change to get used to; another memory to forget. Only when her tears finally dry and her salted bitter thoughts turn into patchy acceptance does Feng begin to relate her loss of hair with freedom. Gone are the days of wiping sticky black strands from her face and back. Now she greets the breeze that washes over her as she runs; it fills her with lightness, her neck welcoming the air after years of being heated and hidden. Like all changes, there are brushes of darkness, moments where she feels more like a pawn than a child, but like much in her life, Feng laughs it off. A deceiving sound void of meaning.

Now that Feng is a boy, she can no longer attend her previous school. She'd be lying if she said she misses it. Puberty is a distant goal that Feng has yet to reach. The older girls that roamed the halls did so with the blessing of long limbs and subtle curves. Girls like the sisters who lived next door, the ones who Feng spent afternoons watching as boys walked them home from class, helping with their homework, or offering to bring them out for ice cream. Feng felt awkward around boys. She was short and skinny, her nose small and round. She didn't feel like a winner, as someone who could be confident and proud. What made it worse was the sisters weren't only beautiful, but friendly. They focused hard on their lessons and helped their parents run their shop on the weekend. They were warm and smiling, always willing to shine their light, even on gloomy little Feng.

Feng remembers the Saturday they invited her to join them after school. How she lingered behind, frightened that it was all a sick joke, doubtful that they could want her company. She was sour throughout their walk, waiting for the moment when the sisters would turn to laugh in her face. But when they settled on a patch of dry grass and still hadn't run Feng realized they were being genuine. The older sister, her long hair plaited, cheekbones dusted with glitter, brandished spoons so that they could share an overflowing container of coconut ice cream and black beans. The ice cream was quick to melt in the heat, and the three girls scooped large chunks on to their waiting tongues. The sister who handed her a pink plastic spoon took a lock of Feng's hair between her fingers.

‘Feng,’ she cooed, ‘how do you get your hair to be so shiny?’

Feng wished she had a secret to share. Some type of oil or fruit the girls could use, afraid that the words, *It’s always been this way*, would sound more like bragging than the truth.

‘She’s just lucky.’ The younger sister smiled, sending a wink in Feng’s direction.

‘I’d trade my hair in a heartbeat if it meant looking like either of you,’ Feng said, pinching her cheeks in disgust.

The sisters laughed. ‘If we joined forces, we'd become the perfect girl.’

Feng let herself join in the laughter. The perfect girl would be as beautiful as she was smart. As dangerous as she was kind. She wouldn't marry a man like her father and wouldn't be broken like her mother. If Feng had a daughter, this is how she'd raise her, as sadness as her teacher and happiness as her reward.

The compliments Feng received that day from the sisters' bright faces gave her hope. If she couldn't find happiness in her family, perhaps she could find it elsewhere. There were millions of people in the world outside the ones she was born with. When they walked home that evening, the sisters didn't let Feng remain behind—their swinging arms pulled her alongside them, their sing-song voices filling her head with the elusive promise of friendship.

It wasn't long after that sun-glazed afternoon that Feng watched as the beautiful girls who lived next door were forced from their home. She had spent the past week sequestered in her room. She wasn't allowed to go to school any more; her mother had forbidden it. It wasn't the words that convinced her, it was her mother's fierce eyes and hushed voice that told Feng that she shouldn't question,

only follow. It's not like she minded skipping school; she had little care for her lessons and even less interest in her classmates. No school meant she could do with her day as she pleased, but the fact that she wasn't allowed to leave the house or go near the windows limited her activities. Her only amusement was her uncle's visits, but this too seemed to change. Instead of exciting adventures and strange tales, his strained voice would fill the room after dinner, his tone full of warning and worry.

The way her mother studied Feng after her uncle left made her feel like she was being placed under a magnifying glass. As if some grand plan was being realized and she was the key. But Feng's mother often told her she was self-centred, so she tried to see beyond her mother's actions and towards the world around her instead.

For Feng, this new perspective meant spying on her neighbour's house. Sometimes she would catch a glimpse of the sisters in the windows. She kept waiting for an opportunity where they would see her and wave, but there were only flashes of an arm or a head, gone as soon as they had come into view. The sisters had also stopped leaving their home. It wasn't long before the whole neighbourhood became engulfed in some dark secret. Neighbours stopped meeting outside their homes and doors remained closed. All that filled the streets was the sharp, anxious chirping of birds mixed in with the whirring of cicadas.

It was a rainy afternoon when the trucks pulled up outside the Koo's' gate. Feng had been getting ready to leave her perch by the window when the large vehicles rounded the corner. One of the trucks was open at the back, filled with sombre-faced boys. The other was closed with thick doors covering whatever lay inside. The men that left the trucks weren't all men; some were caught in-between, skinny and stark in their rigid uniforms. Others were older, their round faces severe and commanding. Old or young, bayonets rested on their shoulders, the sharp ends pointing towards the sky.

The polite knock one of the younger men placed on her neighbours' door seemed trivial in light of the chaos that ensued. Mr Koo was the one to open the door, his short arms pressed firmly to his sides, his face tired and gaunt. What occurred in the shadows of the house Feng could only guess.

'You're under arrest,' the soldier said, his voice loud enough for Feng to hear.

'For what?' Mrs Koo cried. 'My husband did nothing wrong!'

‘For being a conspirator,’ the soldier replied. ‘Helping your communist brothers.’

‘We did nothing of the kind!’ the woman continued to say.

‘Do you really know what your husband does?’ The soldier laughed before turning to Mr Koo. ‘How much money have you sent them?’

It took no time for arguing to turn into shouting. Inside the house, a sharp scream rang out as something fell to the floor with a thud. There were accusations and denials, something about communist intentions, and a debt owed. When the soldiers emerged from the home, they brought the sisters with them. The girls clung to one another as they were dragged across the floor, their knees scraping the muddy earth. Their shouts filled the street, each wracking sob becoming more terrified and hurried than the last.

‘Please. Don’t!’ they cried. ‘We didn’t do anything wrong.’

Feng was frozen, caught between fear and heart-pumping adrenaline. She pressed her face to the window, wondering where Mrs Koo went, noticing that men were missing from the line of soldiers that had come with the trucks. Another soldier came out of the house, kicking the limp body of a man down the small stairs. It looked like Mr Koo, but Feng couldn't be sure—his rag-doll stillness too jarring a contrast to the rigid man who had just opened the door. The soldier that strode out of the house signalled for his companions to lift the body into the truck. The truck doors were opened, but Feng couldn't see from her rain-slicked window into the darkness. She imagined the truck's open doors as a waiting mouth, ruthless and hungry, swallowing Mr Koo whole.

A sharp tug knocked Feng from her daze. Her mother’s hand wrapped around her hair. ‘Do you want to be next?’ she whispered, pulling on Feng's hair before crouching next to her on the floor. Feng shook her head, fear rushing in to replace shock. She felt the tears on her cheeks but was unsure of when she had started crying. Her stomach was wrapped in knots, caught between the need to puke or sleep. A million questions ran through her head, but she found no words to voice them.

Remaining close to the ground, Feng's mother signalled to the bedroom they shared. As her mother crawled towards the closet in the back of the room, Feng attempted to follow suit. Though the bedroom was close Feng's shaking knees made the journey feel like an eternity. Feng waited for her mother to settle herself in the

closet before climbing inside, positioning herself on her mother's lap. There were spare rags and the sheets her mother had washed earlier that week. Together they folded themselves beneath the laundry, holding each other close, their breath frantic, fighting the stale air.

‘Ma,’ Feng whispered. The forced muteness made Feng want to cough or clear her throat, anything to combat the distant sound of the rain.

‘Ma, please.’ Feng started to cry. ‘I’m scared. What’s going on?’

Her mother’s hands gripped bruises on to Feng’s arms.

‘Feng, please,’ her mother begged. ‘Be quiet.’

‘But the Koos…’ Feng started then stopped.

‘Be quiet,’ her mother cried, ‘and I promise I’ll explain everything.’

As they sat, Feng thought of the sisters, their faces, so sweet in her memories and so lost in reality. She wondered what happened to them once their father was taken. Were they left alone? Or were they stripped apart? Where were the soldiers who stayed behind? Were they now making their way to visit Feng and her mother?

Feng cried silent tears into her mother's shirt. Every creak of the ailing house made Feng tense; the old wooden floor, the leak that dripped near their bed, the sounds she usually ignored were now the prelude to their doom. She couldn’t guess the amount of time they spent hidden in the closet; fear had rocked her to sleep.

When she woke, it was to her uncle opening the door. As they tumbled out, he burst into tears, pulling them close to his chest into a long, rare hug. 'I thought I had lost you,’ he cried. ‘I thought I had lost you.’ The three of them sat huddled on the floor for what felt like hours, holding each other as they wept.

Later, when they manage to pick themselves up from the floor, it's to grab what they can. Feng's legs are stiff from the hours spent huddled on her mother's lap. They forget how to move as she stands. No one stays to help her up; her mother is busy arranging a bag, while her uncle keeps watch. Feng helps her mother stash cans of condensed milk, the little rice they have left, and some fermented vegetables and cloth. When they pack their clothes, Feng tries to take the shiny red dress she'd received the New Year before from one of the women her mother plays cards with, but her mother shakes her head.

‘You won’t need it,’ she says. ‘Nothing pretty, Feng, only practical.’

Despite the things Feng has seen that day leaving the dress hurts her the most. One day, she thinks, I will only own beautiful things. When they are done

gathering their belongings, they leave for her uncle's home. A week later, Feng becomes a boy.

*

If life had a deeper meaning, Feng could explain why the soldiers didn't come for them. Perhaps they saw no purpose. After securing a man they felt could give them what they wanted, what use were women who could not? Maybe when they saw the rotting wood, the unkempt grass, the puddle of water that bred mosquitos by the front door, they thought, what use is this? What could these people give us?

Feng and her mother were good at ignoring what was broken. Heavy rain meant a bucket for leaks, and the smell that festered by where they shat was where they grew an arrangement of small, colourful flowers. Feng may not have known why the soldiers didn't come for them, but she knew that it had something to do with luck. It's the first time she thinks of herself as lucky. For all the order people liked to have in their lives they would never be able to account for luck. Like the hair she didn't have to work for, like meeting the man she would eventually marry. There was no other way to explain how all the things that had been taken from her would be given back, as anything other than luck.

*

Now Feng is a boy, she spends a lot of her time running. The rooftops of her neighbourhood become both a maze and a playground. Her uncle stands in the shade of the porch as he watches her, his face a mixture of pride and worry. She is agile, much faster than her uncle could've guessed, and it is this quick grace that eases the fears that fill her mother's head as she tries to sleep at night. The roofs aren't always steady; some are damaged from heavy rain, others aren't built strong to begin with. It takes a few tumbles to learn where to step and where to leap, but the sense of accomplishment that comes when she makes the right step is greater than any bruise.

When Feng's uncle tells her to practise hiding, he means anywhere she can fit. It is something she's good at, games of hide-and-seek. Inside cupboards and beneath floorboards, anywhere her scrawny figure can access. Recess becomes another way to practise what her uncle teaches her. Tag is her main drill. At Feng's old school, she had always been the fastest. Now that she plays with boys, she is even faster. The boys may not be as competitive as the girls, but they are more persistent. At first, it's all a game. Something to distract from the never-ending

hunger and boredom. Something that makes her uncle proud and her mother affectionate. Then people get involved, and it stops being a game.

There's the elderly couple who live two houses down, the widow at the end of the street, and the mechanic next door. These are the people who she should trust. Her uncle introduces her to them one by one, but they never meet all together, and never in the same place. Her uncle explains to her that they are her sidekicks. That if the day comes when she needs to hide instead of run, it would be to one of their houses. When she asks about the other people on their street, her uncle is firm.

'We don't know them so we can't trust them.'

'How do we know we can trust the others?'

'We don't,' he shrugs, 'but we share the same cause, and for now, that's enough.'

Feng has always seen her uncle as a simple man, kind and honest with a penchant for storytelling, but now she wonders if she ever knew him at all.

As time passes, Feng's body continues to shrink. She's twelve, but she still hasn't had her period, and her body remains in stasis, allowing her to stay hidden. When evening comes, and Feng has lain down to sleep, she traces the edges of her bones with her fingertips. Sometimes she pushes down on her ribs in wonder, but the little bones are resilient. Stronger than you look, she laughs.

Her mother is horrified by the bruises Feng has begun to collect. 'All these bruises.' She sighs. 'How will you ever find a husband?'

At school, Feng is fed a small lunch. It is reason enough to stay in school, but at home her mother has run out of things to cook. The rice her mother packed the day they fled from their home has run out. The three of them live on a diet of sweet potato and tapioca. Her mother finds ways to make small cakes out of tapioca and the condensed milk she rations. Feng prefers the ones made of sweet potato, but the cakes aren't meant for home. Feng's mother spends her days selling her makeshift cakes on the street. The little money she makes is never spent but pocketed. *For rainy days*, her mother tells her. Feng stares at her mother and wonders, If these aren't rainy days then what are?

But Feng and her family do better than most, though lacking in much they have food, and Feng even manages to go to school, even if is for boys. At school Feng is taught Japanese songs—there are many—and hours are spent practising lining up and singing in tune. The boys at school have no idea of Feng's past as a

girl. She plays her part well and finds that she gets along better with her male classmates than she ever did with the girls. Feng is growing accustomed to her new life of hide-and-seek and tag, of lying and fear. And soon, like everything else, it too becomes routine.

*

It's not long before Feng's practice is put to the test. She's running now, just like before, but this time she has her uncle's radio in her hands. The radio makes it real. The men with guns that appear before her home make it more so. Her uncle spots them before they reach the house. There's the clamour of his chair as he races to his bedroom, removing the loose floorboard which hides the radio. Feng is doing her homework in the kitchen when he shakes her. His eyes are wide, his mouth silent. Then the radio is in her hands, and she's being rushed out the back window. 'Go,' he whispers, and she's gone.

Out the window and up the pipe on to the roof. Low, quiet, bare feet padding but strong, Feng tucks the radio in the little sling she wears beneath her shirt. The sling has remained empty in practice, but now the radio rests pressed to her heart. Her chance to leap on to the next roof will come when the men get to her front door. From the door, they won't be able to look up. They are slow to arrive. Banging on the door, they call to her uncle before he even opens it. She knows it is time to leave. She hesitates, fearing the worst, but she knows what will happen if they find his radio. So she's on to the next roof—knees tucked, head down, don't forget there's a weak spot—it's been raining so it's all a little slippery, but it's not her first time. She skids as she lands, but she's done it. She's tucked and rolled, and it's on to the next. No time to think of her mother, or her uncle, no time to think of herself. Just count the steps, spot them, take them, and don't fall. She's two houses down when the men come running out of her home. They must've found the loose floorboard, the open window. It's up to her now.

There's no time for fear as Feng makes it to the last roof. If she's able to climb down, she can hide in the widow's cupboard. It's small, but she's fit before. She's thinner than the last time too, so she should be faster. There's a shout on the street below. She's unsure if it's because she's been spotted, but she knows not to look. If she looks she could fall. If she looks she's dead. It doesn't matter. She's at the end now. She grabs the uneven edges of the wall to make her way down. The last part is more necessity than bravery. She loosens her fingertips and lets herself fall. Two

knocks on the widow's window and the woman is pulling her in. They rush to the kitchen. Feng opens the cupboard and climbs in as the widow shuts it behind her.

Feng tries to calm her breathing, her frantic heart beating against the machine they all have risked their lives for. A little bit of hope, a little bit of news, anything to help them get through the night, to believe that the next day could be something worth waking to. Feng knows that the widow is the last home she should've hidden in. Two women alone. Two women paying the price of men. There's a muffled knock on the door. Feng is hidden, but she hears it nonetheless. The widow opens the door.

'Are you alone?' a male voice asks.

'For now,' she says. 'My husband should be home soon.'

A lie. But it could work.

'Have you seen a little boy?'

'No,' the widow replies. 'We have no children.'

It doesn't work. Feng hears the men storm in., There's a soft thud. Sounds like—the widow has been pushed aside. Feng doesn't scream. Not a sound. There are footsteps. One. Two? Three? No. Two sets. The house isn't large, so it won't take long. Feng holds her breath, shushing her heart, the pounding in her ears. If she's caught, she'll blame her uncle, her mother, anything, anything to survive. Closer now. The footsteps are near. His movements clear. He's going to… No. A commotion. Something fast. Running. They are leaving now. The widow, she must've run. She's run, and now they are chasing her. Her panic, or bravery, has marked her guilty—and Feng? Feng is safe.

She stays there, counting the minutes, listening for sounds of their return. When she dares to move, night has fallen. The house is empty as she unfurls herself from the cupboard and makes her way to the entrance. The door has been left open. The widow never made it back. As Feng trudges home she sticks to the shadows, back to the roof, slower now, but not steadier. When she gets home, climbs back through the window, she's not sure what to find. If her uncle and mother are still there.

She walks towards the table where they eat and finds her mother crying. It takes her a while to notice Feng. Feng is silent as she sits and unhooks the radio from its sling. She tries to hand it to her mother. Her mother pushes her in return, her eyes flashing.

‘Get that away from me,’ she whispers.

Feng sits beside her mother, hooking the radio back into the sling. She doesn’t ask where her uncle is. She doesn’t have to.

‘The widow,’ Feng says quietly. ‘She’s gone.’

‘They will all go,’ her mother replies, ‘eventually.’

As they lay themselves to sleep that night, Feng looks up into the darkness and thinks about luck. It had to be luck. There was nothing else to it.

*

If the soldiers returned, Feng and her mother would never know. The next morning, they pack up the little they have and leave. They can’t wait for her uncle. Someone must’ve broken his trust, given him up. Feng never sees her uncle again. Never hears his blunt words and wild eyes. She remembers their last night together. The way he looked at her.

‘Thank you,’ he whispered, so her mother wouldn’t hear.

‘For what?’ she asked.

‘For being brave.’

*

It doesn't take long for Feng to forget the feel of the radio. To forget the fear laced with freedom. When she looks back at those days spent training with her uncle, she chooses to remember it as a game. For the following year, Feng continues to masquerade as a boy. In school, she sings songs praising the Japanese and gets scolded by her mother when she hums them at home. She stops playing tag during recess and chooses to sit quietly by the side. When her friends ask her to join, she shakes her head with a soft, empty smile. Sometimes when she thinks of the widow, she wonders if there was anything she could've done. If her life was worth more than hers. She thinks of her uncle during Japanese lessons and in history class when they try and teach her of the sins of her ancestors.

When Feng begins to grow breasts, small, yet visible, her mother helps her bind them. Feng has no interest in boys. No interest in games or reading. She's intelligent and strong but does nothing to prove it. She spends her days thinking of other lives, and other worlds, of places she could go, and if she'd ever return.

It takes two more years before the Japanese leave. It’s a slow progression. Things change, but not all together. There’s freedom now and apparently this time it’s real. Indonesia is left to govern itself, to make its own mistakes. When they leave

Feng returns to being a girl. It feels strange at first. As if the world suddenly realizes she exists. Eyes follow her as she walks, and her mother is always on her case about how she speaks and how she dresses.

When she bumps into a classmate from her previous life, he gawks at her grown hair. He takes a moment to study Feng, looking for the boy he'd spent afternoons running with.

'You're a girl?' he asks.

Feng shrugs. 'I guess.'

When he walks her home that afternoon, Feng is flattered by the attention, but when her mother sees them together, she is disappointed.

'Not him,' she says. Her voice firm, decisive. 'Not anyone you knew before.'

Her mother has a few suitors herself, but Feng chases them all away. It's selfish, but if Feng can't choose, then her mother shouldn't be able to either. They live like this for a while, two bitter, lonely women. When they begin renting the spare room in their new home life begins to trickle in, but it isn't theirs. Their house is filled with laughing families, with men making it on their own; day in and day out they watch the world around them like outsiders peering in.

*

1951

When Isk comes into Feng's life, he awakens the little girl that existed before she had to learn to be brave. The little girl with sweet dreams of being pretty and loved. When Kai comes into her life, the thrill that existed while bounding rooftops for her uncle comes rocketing back in. Yet Feng finds that she is neither of those girls. She is something in between.

With Kai in the picture, Feng feels wild, like she has no control of what may happen, and for once she doesn't care. It feels wrong to be meeting with Kai, to flirt and bring him homemade lunches, but Feng is good at excuses. She tells herself that it's only to be closer to Isk, to get to know the family he loves. She knows it won't last. Living on the edge while focusing on a lie. That's why she lets it go on as it does, knowing that it will end. After all, Kai is engaged to be married, and Feng is waiting on Isk's promise of return.

Feng has brought Kai lunch when he shows her a picture of his bride to be. The woman's dark hair is done in a thick, long plait. She's looking to the side, her

smile small and shy, but her almond eyes betray her smile; they stare straight into the lens. Feng hears her uncle's voice; *the eyes don't lie.*

'She's beautiful,' Feng says. 'Have you known her long?'

'Our parents are friends.' Kai shrugs.

Feng laughs. 'You don't sound like a man who wants to be married.'

'Can you blame me?' Kai sighs. 'Isk can do whatever he wants, but as soon as it comes to the rest of us, we have to fall in line.'

Feng thinks of Isk. Of the way he speaks of his family. 'It seems like Isk has done what he can,' she says. 'He's always had your best interests at heart.'

'You sound like my mother,' Kai laughs. 'Sure, he may seem selfless, but don't be fooled. From my experience, selfless people have the most self-interest.'

Feng wants to argue. From the little time she's known Isk, she's never known him to be selfish. His money is always for his family, his attention on his employees, he even dreamt of building a church. Still, Kai is his brother, and if he feels like Isk is a fraud then who is she to argue.

*

It's a rainy afternoon when Feng rejects Kai's advances. He's called her to meet him in his office, and she's obliged. Isk is coming back soon, and Kai wanted to plan a surprise, but when Feng arrives, Isk is the first and last thing on Kai's mind. When she shrugs him off, he encompasses her in his unhappiness.

'Just another follower,' he spits. 'That's all you'll ever be.'

Kai's cruelty makes Feng wonder if he was ever kind. Some nights she convinces herself that she deserves it. That if she had just stayed away like her mother had told her to she wouldn't be in this predicament. Other nights she lets herself be a victim; she thinks of when she used to masquerade as a boy and blames the reality of being a woman, but the part of her that feels like she deserves it is stronger. It enjoys the hurt. It welcomes it like an old friend. In the end, it is Isk that carries her through.

'Do you still want to get married?' he asks. They sit in front of her house. The air is still, but it makes Feng shiver. Isk doesn't touch her, knowing that she needs this moment.

'Are you crazy?' she laughs, messy tears staining her face. She moves her fingers to wipe them before deciding it's pointless. 'Of course I want to.'

When she turns her face to look away from him, Isk catches her chin in his hand.

'As do I,' he says, gentle yet sure.

Feng searches his face for a lie. She knows she'd be ruined if it wasn't for him. She hears Kai's voice. *Watch as he comes—good old Isk to the rescue.*

'But why?' she asks.

Isk laughs as if she's asked something childish.

'Because I like you,' he says. 'Isn't that enough?'

When Feng and Isk walk down the aisle, it is to a hundred disapproving eyes, but Feng doesn't care. Isk walks her in place of her father. Most of the guests are Isk's family. His mother is sombre, his father apathetic. Still, they are present. Kai and his new wife sit silently behind his parents. His sister Mei smiles at Feng while his brothers Jiang and Jun whisper to each other. Feng's mother beams from besides Isk's parents. Isk made sure they were seated together, ignoring his mother's protests.

Isk is striking in his signature white suit and black bow tie. His thin, round glasses frame his face. Feng is dressed in lace, her long, intricate veil braided on to her short-curled hair with pearls. A necklace dotted with diamonds that Isk gave her before the wedding dips into her ivory dress. The dress hugs her waist before coming loose at her feet. Feng holds a bouquet of small white flowers tied together with light pink ribbons in her right hand while the other holds on to Isk. Neither of them smile as they make their way down the aisle; they are both too focused on what waits ahead.

The procession is slow and religious. They stand before their family and take their vows like the good Christian couple Isk has set them up to be. After the war, his mother had found God. Isk respected it, nurturing whatever hope kept his mother together. They say no vows of their own, only joining hands when the ceremony ends before exiting the church.

When they stand outside waiting for the car to pull around Isk leans down to whisper in Feng's ear. 'I promise,' he says, tender and true, 'I'll always protect you.'

Feng looks into her husband's eyes. They are a unit now. Isk, though fond of Feng's quiet beauty, knows that she can be selfish and harsh. Feng sees through Isk's carefully painted mask, knowing that he is not as invincible as he wishes to

seem. In this moment they see each other as they are. Standing together with no illusions or grandeur. Just two people bound by their will to survive.

As they make their way to the car Feng questions Isk's promise, the words he so casually throws. When they are far enough from the church, they finally kiss. And though it's long and sweet and everything a kiss should be, all Feng can think is: who will protect you?

*

Mercy

America

2014

I'm in bed when my mother calls to say my grandfather is dying. I swipe to answer, prepared to chase her away with *I'm sleeping*, but the tone of her voice makes me stop. Our conversation is brief, rushed words with little information. When she passes the phone to Dad, I'm unsure of what to say. Words have never come easy for us. Now when they are meant to count the most, they seem impossible.

'Hey,' he says. 'Mom told you?'

'Yeah,' I say. 'Are you okay?'

'Yeah,' he says, more to himself than me. 'You should talk to Ah Ma.'

When the phone is passed to my grandmother, I am crying. I know I shouldn't. We aren't a family who cries.

'Hello?' my grandmother says.

'Hey, Ah Ma,' I say between tears. 'I'm so sorry about Ah Kong.'

'It's okay,' her broken English cracks through the phone. 'Don't be sad.' She pauses. 'No need to come home, okay? Too far. You should stay studying.'

'Okay,' I tell her, knowing it's not the time to argue.

'I put your Mom,' she responds before disappearing.

'Mom,' I say when she's back on the line. 'Should I come home?'

'There's no point.'

'But he's still alive.'

'Yeah,' Mom sighs. 'Look, Mercy I think, we all think, it's better if you stay. Best not to see him like this. Best to remember him as he was.'

But I barely remember him alive, I want to say. I barely remember him at all.

'It's going to be okay,' Mom says. 'Sorry for waking you.'

*

‘Again,’ Jay says, ‘again.’

It’s nine in the morning, but I’ve been up since six. Cleaning tack, watching Jay’s other students, taking Rowena out to graze. Business as usual.

‘Inside leg, outside leg,’ he tells me, ‘one, two, one, two.’

We are training the passage today. We are always training the passage. Now that I’m aiming to compete in the Grand Prix. Prix St George, Intermediate. These are levels of dressage that I’m barely scraping by, and still we aim higher.

‘Come on, Mercy,’ he yells into the headset, ‘More energy. More power.’

Dad pays a fortune so I can train with Jay, so my two horses can be stabled in Wellington, for the flights I take to and from Boston every weekend. Olympic bound, I once told my grandfather. Just wait and see.

Rowena, my chestnut mare, is not listening today. We aren’t in sync. Some weekends we are ready to compete, others we are drifting, barely able to get the movements, to communicate.

‘Are you even trying?’ Jay yells into the walkie-talkie. ‘Come on, Mercy. Where’s your head?’

It doesn’t help that I’m only here on weekends. Weekdays are meant for studying, for practical real-life goals. Weekends are for dreams. For chances of my own making. Trying to be worth something. Let me be worth something.

'Enough,' Jose says, fed up at watching nothing, 'Take her back to the stable. Come back at four. We will try it again.'

Exiting the arena, I pass a girl and her mother. They compete for Canada. The daughter rides the mother’s horses. The mother gives her lessons, knowing when to give advice, and when to give space.

Dad doesn’t want to pay the bills any more. I don’t blame him. There’s been no results, no proof that it’s going to work out.

Back at the stables I dismount. Disappointed and frustrated, my shoulders slumped, trying my best to appear calm. The stables in Wellington are done up in rows. Row after row of horses—polo ones, dressage ones, show jumping too. When we first moved into the barn I was given the grand tour. That’s what happens when you’re Jay’s student. Jay’s competed in two Olympics. His seventeen-year-old son is bound for the next. His daughter is not far behind. A legacy. Jay created it all on his own. With barely a cent in his pocket he went to work under the best trainers in Europe, building an enterprise of breeding and selling on his own.

After untacking and washing I spend the next couple of hours seated in front of Rowena's stable. Every so often, she comes to knock me with her nose. I play games on my phone to pass the time. It seems that everything is one endless sweep. Day in, day out: school, ride, repeat. What would I rather be doing? By twenty my grandfather had built an empire. At twenty-two I can barely make it through one lesson.

When my watch hits four Rowena and I make our way back to the arena. Down the long side we go, giving her a nice loose walk to stretch her legs before setting off once more into a trot.

I count the beat off in my head, then count the beat off with my legs. Over and over we go. Searching, always searching for that one perfect moment where everything finally comes together.

*

Back in class, I try to sketch my grandfather, but no matter the angle, I can't seem to recall his face. I settle on sketching a landscape of Singapore instead, the marina offset by the shophouses, but that too comes out wrong. My professor passes my canvas and tells me that I'm trying too hard. So I try again, painting nothing instead. Just thick, swirling bits of colour applied with violent bursts of my brush.

On the walk home, my boots drag through slush, the blue salt used to melt the ice turning the roads into a muddied mess. Cars peek out from under their snow blankets like sleeping animals. I listen as snow crunches under my boots as I make my way through Fenway Park. The geese that fly down from Canada during the winter honk as I pass. A lone goose twists his head a hundred and eighty degrees to scratch his back. It stares—I shudder.

At home I spend the evening looking at pictures of past Christmases and beach holidays, of birthdays, and ex-boyfriends, and I think—where is he? All the events of a life and barely a picture of my grandfather. I'm fourteen in the ones I find, daubed with thick eyeliner, staring at the camera with empty eyes—just a ghost of a person, trying her best to be anywhere else. At least Ah Kong is smiling; it's almost enough.

Later, Ari and I sit on our couch and smoke. We talk about our families. I envy her connection to Indonesia. She's mixed too, half-American, but she knows more about the culture, tries harder. Ari goes back every Christmas. She knows all of her

relatives, speaks the language too. During the semester she cooks us beef rendang and makes textiles that reflect her heritage.

‘You know I’ve never been to Borneo. To the factories, the house. Dad’s always asked me to go with him, but I never wanted to.’

‘I go back to Jogja every year,’ Ari says. ‘Maybe you should go this summer.’

I shake my head, unsure of how much I really believe my words. One thing is grief, another is what happens after it’s passed. It’s strange to realize how little I actually know of my grandfather outside of the fairy tale. The myths I was told as a child. The legacy I was raised on. He might be my grandfather, but the man is a stranger, construed from other people's memories, from the very few memories I can retain.

‘Hey,’ Ari leans in to hug me, ‘it’s going to be okay, you know?’

I laugh through the tears. ‘I know.’

That night as I lay myself to sleep, I think about what Ari said. I've never shown an interest in my dad’s family. All those proud people trying to reel me in, filling my head with stories, with expectations. I can’t picture where my dad grew up, or where he's spent two weeks out of every month since I was a baby. This lack of knowing makes me cry. And though the tears are genuine, I'm not sure if they are more for my loss or for his.

*

Happiness is pressure. It’s knowing I have a chance to be all the things I’ve said I’d be. That’s how it feels as I get Rowena ready for the trot-up. I spend the morning plaiting her tawny mane, listening to music from the phone in my pocket. Rowena likes the music, at least she seems to, relaxing as the lo-fi beats fill the stable.

Rowena and I have practised the trot-up over and over and it shows. Together we jog our way past the judges and back again. When the vet nods his head in approval we make our way for a spur and bit check. Having shown no signs of being mistreated Rowena is cleared for competition. Leaving the arena, I smile, the only hint of exertion in the sweat that graces my powdered brow.

I'll be fourth in the ring. Which is good. It means the heavyweights, the previous Olympic competitors from the US and Canada, won't have gone in yet. I'll be fairly judged as a first-time pan-American contender. Jay walks with me to the ring once we are saddled and ready. He’s proud. All of our work has put us here. A

step before the Olympics. The people competing here have earned it. No amount of privilege can get you here. Only hard work and talent.

The warm-up happens in a blur. Getting Rowena in the right frame, high but round, a perfect curve of her thick muscled neck. The reins froth white foam against her chestnut coat, her mouth an equal concoction where it meets with the bit. Rowena's long, lean legs count a rhythm with my own. They reach impossibly high, as if we are floating. One being, one purpose. When the steward beckons us to the ring, I feel pressure sit heavy on my chest. Mom smiles at me from afar, knowing that I need space. Jay takes the walkie-talkie from my belt as a round of last-minute advice falls from his lips. Dad isn't here.

Rowena and I make our way into the ring. Though I've been competing since I was seven, I've never been in anything this big. A deep breath, a steady body, giving Rowena every sign that she too should feel at ease. This is it—my chance. Something that is me, all me, and none of them.

I smile as I make my way past each of the five judges, the gesture plastered on my red-painted lips as I ease into a canter. My nerves fade into practised focus as Rowena and I pass the potted plants and watching crowd. When the bell rings we make our way to letter A, ready to take the centre line. One of the stewards removes the small white barrier, and we begin.

This is it.

No time to think.

A: down the centre line.

X: halt, salute.

And we're off.

The next six to seven minutes happen faster than I can retain. It all goes as it should. Each movement done, not to perfection, but close enough. It's going to be okay. Maybe I'll even score high enough to make it to the second day. There's no time to smile, no time to register anything other than the movements that correspond with each letter. I've practised this test a million times, but all that matters is now, this moment.

When we exit the arena, it's somewhere between a laugh and a sob. I'm shaking with adrenaline, a jumble of sweat and nerves when I reach Jay.

'His tongue was above the bit,' Jay says with a frown.

'What?'

‘When you halted on the centre line, his tongue immediately came over,’ Jay explains. He places his hand on my leg. ‘It’s okay, Mercy. It happens. But you know what it means.’

‘You mean,’ I stutter, unable to accept what has happened, ‘it was like that for the whole test?’

Mom looks at me, ready to comfort me if needed. Jay sighs. ‘Yeah. It’s going to lower all of your scores. Let’s wait and see, but I think that’s it. I’m sorry, Mercy. It’s a real shame.’

Jay goes to help a woman on my team to get ready for her test. I wish her luck before walking Rowena back to the stables. The walk back feels like an eternity spent avoiding the eyes of the people I pass. When my groom comes to help, he asks how it went. I mumble something unintelligible, untacking Rowena as quickly as I can. The tears slip, betraying the composure I’m trying to maintain. When my groom brings Rowena for a shower, I bolt to the tack room. Shutting the door behind me, I sink into the hay. Rowena doesn't know what we did wrong. For her, it's just another day, another ride responding to what I ask. I must've pulled too hard, must've given the wrong aid. How could something so unfortunate happen? No. It's not unfortunate. It's my fault.

Mom knocks on the door. ‘Can I come in?’

‘No!’ I yell. Embarrassment. Shame. Failure. Normal things. Normal feelings.

‘Mercy…’ The door begins to open.

‘Can you just give me a second?’ My tone is softer this time.

‘Sure.’

Once I'm sure the door is shut; I let the tears come. Never again. I cry. Never again.

*

There’s a bat outside my window. It swoops through the night, creating shadows on my wall. In the dim light of the moon it resembles a body swinging by a noose. I lie still, the covers drawn to my chin, watching his shadow sway. Back and forth, a hypnotic melody of fear.

The walls shake as my neighbour comes home, their baby letting out a sharp cry as something heavy thuds on the floor above. I hear my grandfather’s voice. I can almost capture what it sounds like, but when I try to surround myself with it, it disappears.

*

I don't ride any more. The thought makes its way through my head each morning. I've sold my horse. Dad his company. I didn't say goodbye to Rowena, just like I didn't say goodbye to Ah Kong. Burying things inside, burying my goodbyes.

There's a song I used to listen to in high school, it said: *the past is only the future with the lights on*. What have I done with my past? I'm done with America, with moving to England. Moving forward by looking behind.

In the bathroom I splash water on my face, brush my teeth. When I put in my contacts, I look at my face. It's the same, but I feel him, see him. The arch of my eyebrows, the slant of my eyes, the parts of my grandfather I got without trying, the parts I'm still trying to be.

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Part Three
The Reckoning

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Ernest and Feng

Singapore

2014

The day his dad dies lightning strikes throughout the island. The piercing light bounces across the hospital windows of Mount Elizabeth as Ernest's family stands huddled together. A torrid mix of feelings electrifies the air—apprehension, shame, sadness and relief.

The thunder comes a heartbeat later. Its splintering crack makes Ernest jump. He'd spent the afternoon wanting to place his head in his hands, to find the grief he's supposed to feel. The grief waits—a dull sensation lost in the back of his mind. Ernest looks at his father's body in the hospital bed and wonders if the thunder is his father consuming one final moment before shooting up towards the heavens.

'Bye, Pa,' he whispers, turning from his father and towards the window.

Outside the sky mourns as evening sets in. Rain rocks against the glass, loud and fast. The trees that line the road below the hospital shake, fighting the winds' embrace. He'd paid good money so his father could have this view, this room. His

mother wanted to ensure that his father was comfortable. Ernest lets out a sigh. What does it matter now?

*

On the other side of the room, Feng looks towards her youngest son. He's turned away from them, his body curling inwards as he stares out the window. The gesture reminds her of when he was a little boy. Scared but smiling, spoiled and soft. Feng doesn't move from her place beside her husband. She had sat all afternoon in the waiting room, considering the path forward and the decisions she'd have to make if Isk didn't survive. She'd forgotten how good she is at waiting. How easy it is to occupy a singular space and stare out into the distance. She'd survived once without Isk, but it felt so long ago, so removed from the woman that she's become. How can I go back? she wonders. Is it possible?

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Ernest continues to watch the storm as it fades. It's normal for clouds to rage over the island, forming a tempest before transitioning into a sun-filled day. But Ernest chooses to believe that the storm is reserved for his father. That even as his father lies in the hospital, crippled by the long-term effects of a faulty blood transfusion, he's managed to secure one last moment. A final goodbye.

Thinking of his father makes him feel the weight of all that they have left unsaid. All of his hate, his anger and insecurity, feels stupid now, so hollow in the face of this moment. But even if he could go back, Ernest wouldn't know where to start.

He looks to his son. He wonders if he and Alex will end up the same, a mirror image of him and his father, unable to communicate when it counts, to bridge the gaps that time only widens. The family gather around the bed. None of them shed a tear. All are unsure of what should happen next. Ernest has always prided himself on being different to them, but now, he worries that he is just the same. There are no tears—there will never be any—not for his father.

What will he do now? he wonders. The pieces of his family that his father worked so hard to mend, the company he spent his life slaving over, does it all fall to him? Or will Henry take over, caring for the family like the eldest son should? When Ernest looks over at his brother and sees Lara staring over his shoulder, he realizes the brother he once knew is just a fantasy. It's been a long time since Henry has looked out for anyone other than himself.

Ernest's mother calls to him from the other side of the room. It shakes him from his thoughts, making him wish that life could stand still, just this once. Ernest grunts in response—he doesn't want to speak to her. He's afraid that if he lets the pain show, it won't stop. It's why he's spent the afternoon avoiding his wife. If he looks at her he might break. He can't have that. He feels Alex's hand on his shoulder—the only thing that keeps him present.

His mother calls to him once more before turning towards the door. 'It's time to go,' she says to the room. The steps she takes are small. Ernest knows that she wants to take one last look, say one final word, but she doesn't.

When his mother leaves the rest of the family follows suit. Henry rushes out the door, his face empty, stoic. Lara hangs on to Jo's arm, whispering in her ear as Dina trails behind. Eddie remains close to Feng, his hand on the small of her back as he guides her out.

For a moment, Ernest feels the hate bubble under his skin. It hurts watching them, knowing how good they are at pretending, but his anger softens at the image of his father. Now that he's alone, Ernest feels brave enough to approach the bed, but when he leans down to see the man before him, it isn't his father who looks back.

Pale and dull skin, eyelids closed, the body still, quiet. No, the man before him is no longer his father, just a copy, something left at the end of a long road. His father spent his whole life frightened of dying, frightened of not having lived. Ernest thinks it started as a teenager, when his father first learned of death's touch, saw how easily life could be taken. It didn't matter how much his father tried to deny it, how hard he fought so he could be something greater. Still, death came in the end.

*

The day they put Isk to sea it's raining. A mild drizzle, the kind that hits the ground before fading like smoke. The water that surrounds the marina softly rocks the boat Ernest has hired to take his family out to sea. The captain, dressed in shorts and a navy polo, stands ready at the back, even if his customers are not.

Feng and Eddie are the first to arrive at the marina. She rushed Eddie from the apartment, stopping only to take Isk's ashes from his spot on the dining table. Eddie hated having Isk on the table. He tried to move him whenever they sat down to eat, but Feng refused. She couldn't imagine Isk anywhere else in the apartment. The dining table was the one place they could come together, a reason to bring the family

over, if only for a single meal. And now she would be letting him go, discarding his ashes to the ocean.

‘*It’s what Pa wanted*,’ they said.

‘*I know*,’ she whispered. But what about what she wanted?

Feng looks at the water that surrounds the dock as Eddie leads the way. The water is murky, a reflection of the miserable sky. Eddie holds her arm with one of his hands, steadying her as they make their way towards the boat. The other hand holds a large black umbrella in an attempt to shield them from the weather. When they get to the end of the dock, Eddie lets go of her arm so that he can pull a shawl from her handbag. The shawl is dark and feather-soft. He wraps it around her shoulders.

‘It’s too tight,’ she says.

He loosens it and looks at her. ‘Better?’

Feng sighs, handing him the stark obsidian box that houses Isk's remains. She wanted to be the one that carried it from the car, but now that they've made it to the boat, it feels too heavy.

‘Hold it,’ she says, before letting out a soft, ‘I’m tired.’

Eddie takes the box.

They stand in silence till the minister appears from aboard the boat. Even though they aren’t practising Christians, Ernest insisted on hiring one, remembering the long nights when his father made him sit by the bed and pray. Though the dedication faded as he got older, Isk always tried his best to keep face, donating to various churches, even going as far as erecting one in his hometown. Feng laughs thinking of the church. It had been more a trade-off than an act of good will. Something to give so that Isk could get something in return. It made sense that they should perpetuate the farce, at least for one more day.

When the minister moves to talk with Feng, Eddie remains by her side with a smile. It's impossible to tell what takes place behind the smile, so manicured, so fitting between his sagging cheeks and round nose. He stands there, belly carpeted in a printed button-down like the image of a buddha gone wrong. The thought makes Feng smile fondly; Eddie so out of place, yet so constant. Never refusing a request, always willing to work a little harder, a little smarter. He may look ridiculous, but his heart is still in the right place.

Ernest, Sylvia, and Alex are the next to arrive. Ernest looks down at his feet as he drags them across the floor. When Alex gets to the boat, he kisses his grandmother on the cheek before fixing Eddie with a glare.

‘Maybe my father should hold him.’

Eddie hands Ernest his father's ashes along with a meaningless condolence. Ernest takes his father from Eddie and says nothing in response.

Sylvia goes to Feng. ‘Hi, Mother,’ she says, ‘how are you feeling?’

Feng looks at her with wide, empty eyes and shrugs.

Another group arrive: Henry, Jo, Lara and Dina. Dina stands beside Feng. The look they give each other is a look that speaks of years, of having had nothing and no one else. Jo kisses Feng on the cheek and waits for her father. Once Feng and Eddie have boarded the boat, Henry gives a slight nod. With his approval, the rest of his family board the boat.

Ernest is hesitant as he makes his way on board, almost losing his balance as Lara makes her way past him. He steadies himself, avoiding his brother’s eyes as he makes his way to sit beside him. Henry says nothing as Ernest sits down. It doesn’t bother Ernest; he wouldn’t know what to say even if they spoke.

Wendy, Mei and her two children are the next to arrive. Mei is the only sibling that bothers to fly over from Australia. With Kai long dead, and his remaining brothers Jun and Jiang absent, the people that Isk called family are nowhere to be seen. Throughout his life, Isk tried his best to keep his family together, wanting to remind them that they were strongest as a unit, but his scattered siblings never called, never visited. Hearing of his death, Jiang, Isk’s youngest brother, will laugh as he sits hobbled in his rattan chair, *the old crow is finally gone*.

The rest of the funeral party is comprised of Feng's cronies. They line the back of the boat. There's a husband and wife Feng met on a cruise from Malaysia. The couple is all smiles as they make their way on board, dressed in their most appropriate attire, aggression glimmering beneath the surface. As they push their way to their seats, the wife elbows Ernest to the side so that she may sit beside Feng. Feng smiles at the woman, then turns to look out towards the distance. Ernest says nothing as he moves to the side. The day should be about his father.

As the boat sets sail from the harbour, Ernest looks out towards the horizon. It's hard to believe his father is gone. After a lifetime of wishing to be as far from him as possible, Ernest finds himself alone. When his father was alive, he never spent

time thinking about the good times—trips to Shanghai and Vienna, that time their train broke down in Thailand. Now that he's gone, they are the only things Ernest can recall.

On the way to the funeral, Sylvia said that his father often spoke of him as the only hope for their family. Instead of comforting him, it made him angry, wishing that his father had taken the time to tell him, to let him know there was more to his thoughts than fierce words.

The rain stops when they get far enough out to sea. The water is calm. The boats that surround them are shipping vessels—large, intimidating structures transporting wood or cars. They dot the ocean like giant metal beasts, quiet and hungry. It makes Ernest think of his ancestors long ago, making their way across this same ocean, transported to a frightening new world, bellies full not with food but with hope.

There's a ferry on its way to Batam that upsets the water as it moves past them. The boat rocks from one side of a wave to the other before settling. Not long after a catamaran hosting a party of cheering red-faced expats and slender bikini-clad locals goes by blasting Top Forty hits. The people on the catamaran wave to Ernest and his family. Unaware of the weight of the moment, a girl in oversized sunglasses and a floppy straw hat blows a kiss. The funeral party stares in silence as the catamaran continues to make its way towards St John, waiting for the calm to return.

When they reach their destination—far enough from the long islet where trash is sent to burn, from the oil refinery and party-goers, but close enough that the skyscrapers from downtown still dot the edge of the island—the minister begins to read his sermon. He reads a verse or two from the Bible and makes divine platitudes about life and family. For once Feng's cronies and family members are able to come together, bound in respectable silence.

The minister ends his sermon with a blessing and turns to Ernest. Ernest takes a deep breath before making his way to the bow. He knows that whatever he will say won't be enough. That no matter how his words may sound, they will always fall short of their meaning. He will never be able to find the perfect words to describe the misunderstandings between parent and child. But he has to say something, anything that feels a little real, a little worthwhile of the man whose legacy shaped him.

‘My father,’ Ernest starts, ‘believed in a higher power. In the power of doing good. For my father doing good was giving back to the community that raised him. That's how he spent his final years. Returning to his island, donating to hospitals and schools. His city was not rich, nor very known, but it was his.’

Ernest stops to look at his family before him. ‘This made people angry, but it didn't discourage him. My father was someone who recognized his fortune and wanted to share it. It took me a long time to accept his generosity. To understand why he spent more time giving to others than being with his family.’

When Ernest looks to his mother, she looks back, waiting. This moment is much hers as it his. ‘I’ve learned from my father that strength and wisdom alienate people. That we don’t want to be reminded of our shadows, of our lack of success or perseverance. It’s easy to question the people we love; it’s much harder to try and understand them.’

He's not crying. He wishes he could cry. That he could release some of the emotion he's kept pent inside for way too long, but he can’t.

‘I’ve come to understand that though my father was not a perfect man, he did his best to do good. And it’s those ideals I wish to walk away with,’ Ernest ends, opening the box before him. ‘That’s the man I want to remember.’

When Ernest finishes, he looks towards the sea. The black box is empty now. He waits a moment before throwing a white rose into the water, Sylvia follows a little after, and then Alex. Everyone takes their turn; a white flower and a prayer.

As they make their way back to shore Ernest remembers the day when he first returned from boarding school, how he sat in the car on the way from the airport and wished that his father would just leave him be. Despite all of their differences, despite the numbing pressure, and listless expectations, he only has one thought: what do you do when the man who built you—who broke you—no longer exists?

*

Ernest

Somewhere in the Jungle

2002

‘The train hasn’t moved in the last hour,’ Isk says, looking towards his son.

The train had come to a screeching halt two hours into their journey. The stop was jarring, sending them flying from their seats.

'Well, not much we can do.’ Ernest shrugs. ‘Guess we just have to wait.’

The two men attempt to relax, their bodies mirror images without reflection. The green expanse of unclaimed jungle blinks at them from the train's window. An endless sea of tree and possibility, the reason why they came to this land.

'I don't feel comfortable meeting with these people,' Ernest sighs, thinking of their last journey, the men in camo, rifles slung at their sides. 'We shouldn't get involved with something so political.'

'It's the only way if we want to expand,' Isk replies, 'We aren't taking sides, only using what we can to get the land we need. Besides, there's no other way.'

'Is this really what we need?' Ernest contemplates. 'We've been in rubber forever. Why change now?'

'Don't think of it as change,' Isk notes. 'Think of it as growth.'

As far back as Ernest can remember, the family business has been in commodities. His grandfather's father worked with timber, his grandfather too, but once his dad took over, it changed to rubber. Now they were looking at a return to timber, perhaps cocoa as well.

Ernest isn't sure about the expansion. He's away enough as it is. The weeks when he returns to Singapore, to a daughter who looks at him like a stranger, are more demanding than he realizes. His daughter doesn't listen to him, only waits for the sound of his suitcase, disappearing around the corner as if he were never there to begin with. His wife doesn't mind. Not one for being idle, she throws parties and meets new friends, making connections he has trouble making himself.

'I know you don't like being away,' his father says as if reading his mind. 'I never liked it either.'

Ernest looks at his father. 'You still did it though.'

'Of course.' Isk sighs. 'As I'm sure you're coming to realize, it's necessary. We stand strong so that others have the chance to break.'

His father's words make Ernest laugh. Even after all these years, Isk still believes in all that he did. That night in the kitchen, so far back in time, flashes before his eyes—all that pain. Was it justified?

'You made Ma leave,' Ernest says finally.

Isk looks at him, confusion evident in his dark eyes. 'What do you mean?'

'Ma left. She knew what you were doing. Couldn't stand what we were.'

'And what were we?'

‘A broken family,’ Ernest says, feeling relief. It feels good to speak the words that haunt him. All the *what if’s* and *could be’s* of people who never spoke, who moved slowly towards the inevitable darkness of those caught in the past.

‘She didn’t leave, Ernest,’ Isk says softly. ‘I sent her away.’

‘What?’ Ernest’s mind goes back to the night spent waiting for his mother by the gate. The knowledge that he had been left behind. The silent dinners that pursued. The confusion and denial.

‘She wasn’t well. You knew that. You were young, but you must’ve seen it. That night in the kitchen. She was a danger to you. So, I sent her to get some help.’

Ernest is silent. Words were never their strong suit, but they were out in the open now. They couldn’t go back.

‘You never told me,’ Ernest mumbles, caught between shock and rage. ‘How was I supposed to know?’

‘I don’t know,’ Isk says honestly. ‘I thought it was better that you didn’t. Then I thought maybe you could guess. I mean, it’s the whole reason we invited Dina.’

'Dina?' Ernest asks, confused, 'What does she have to do with it?'

‘Her parents sent her as a companion to your mother. To make sure she had someone when things got rough.’

What about you? Ernest wants to say, what about me? Why weren’t we enough?

‘Ernest…’

A man in uniform comes by their carriage. He looks into the window before opening the door. ‘Afraid we’re stuck,’ he says simply, ‘Probably won’t be moving till morning.’

Ernest and Isk compose themselves for the stranger before nodding.

'Okay,' Isk says, 'thank you for letting us know.' When the man leaves, he turns to Ernest. 'I'm going to see if I can find us something to eat. Perhaps even find someone that can get us off this train.'

‘Okay,’ Ernest says. ‘I think the carriage up from here has refreshments.’

When Isk leaves, Ernest is left with his thoughts. Memories of his childhood had never felt fragmented. They made sense to him, each event a reason for the next. He tried not to spend too much time mulling over the past. But now he isn’t sure how to feel.

When Isk returns it is empty-handed. 'Nothing yet,' he says. ‘They're still organizing themselves.'

Ernest laughs. ‘Figures.’

Isk’s quick departure has left a gap in their conversation. Now that he’s returned Ernest is left with a choice. They can either resume the conversation or go on pretending.

‘So,’ Ernest starts. ‘Were you really having an affair?’

Isk sighs. ‘Of course not. I love your mother. I always have.’

'Then, why the rumours? Why did you never deny them?'

'Because denying something only gives it credit. What was the point, Ernest? People are always going to believe what they want. I know who I am. I know what I've done.'

Though the words sound strong, Ernest knows they aren't enough.

‘I’ve always cared for my family,’ Isk says.

‘I know.’

'Ever since I was a kid. First, out of necessity. Then out of desire.'

'Okay, Pa,' Ernest says. It feels good to get things out, but he knows that they won’t change. They are different people, raised under different circumstances. The past and the present looking at each other in the eye.

‘So,’ Isk says, changing the subject. ‘How do you think we should approach the meeting?’

Ernest looks to his dad, recognizing the olive branch. ‘Well, to understand their company we need to look at its history.’

‘Exactly.’ Isk nods. ‘One step at a time.’

*

Indonesia

2018

The wind that shakes through the plantation makes Ernest shiver. From a distance, the trees that cover the green hills appear quiet, but up close their limbs sway noisily, dancing in greeting as Ernest makes his way towards the river. He’s nervous, the sweat on his brow a product of anxiety and heat. Everything is the same, he thinks, remembering the first time he came to visit the factory. This factory was his father’s first. Ernest has grown with this land. Back then they were filled with wonder, the

land was a burgeoning business and he was a child of promise. Then they grew, warped into something beyond his father's control.

Ernest tries not to think of his father, of his ashes spread through the sea, but it's impossible while he's surrounded by everything that made him. His father lives in the trees, in the water, in the very air that surrounds them. It's why after the funeral, Ernest found his will to visit Indonesia weaken. As he shrank Lara began to grow; taking over his duties in secret, and showing up for inspections in his place. She placed rules that verged on the edge of tyrannical. She took over his father's old apartment, making Henry wait outside as she and her lover spent hours hidden from view.

'We have to do something,' the company's director says as they make their way down the river. 'This situation isn't something your father would've wanted.'

When Ernest was a child, he used to watch as the directors stood by the boats made way for his father. After boarding, they would each wait their turn before filling him in on the comings and goings of the factory. Ernest would follow his father on board, impressed by the command his father inspired. Now the faces turn his way, nodding in respect, telling him what they once told his father. These moments take him out of his body; watching as an imposter disguised in his father's face and posture speaks to the men around him.

'I'd like to settle with my brother if I can,' Ernest says, extending his hand to help Sylvia on to the boat. He may not show it but he's glad she's here. He needs her strength, her resolution.

Once, long ago, Ernest tried to make it on his own. After college, he was a contractor in Los Angeles, his wife and new-born daughter by his side. They were happy in California, a new family, living in a townhouse, wandering the malls as if they were any other American family. Then his mother called him home.

'Your father is sick,' she said.

Those four words made him bring his family halfway across the world. But it was his father's words, thrown from a hospital bed, that reminded him why he'd left in the first place.

'You're back,' he said. 'I knew you wouldn't be able to make it without me.'

Ernest had wanted to run, but duty made him stay. Duty bound him to a home he felt he would never escape. No. Ernest stops himself. To think that, and only that,

is selfish. There were moments, sparks of a family, sparks of togetherness. They weren't perfect, but neither were their circumstances.

'Settling might not be an option, Ernest.' The director sighs. 'Lara will be there.'

'Then selling might be the only option,' Ernest replies. 'I've found a buyer, one who promised you'd all keep your jobs.'

The director nods, understanding the subtext. Ernest wouldn't sell otherwise.

When the boat docks at the edge of the property, Ernest takes a deep breath. His director grips him by the shoulder. It's now or never, he thinks.

The factory looms in the distance, taunting him, makes him realize how unprepared he is for this moment. When Ernest makes his way inside, Lara and Henry are already in the boardroom. Ernest locks eyes with his brother as he makes his way to the opposite end of the large table. It's only when the rest of the directors have trickled into the room that he begins.

Ernest wants it to be quick. For there to be as little confrontation as possible. He thinks that if they get the legality out in the open Lara will back down.

But Lara is determined, her fire spreading from Ernest to Henry, even to Isk. She speaks of shame and honour, of family.

Ernest lets her. He doesn't spit back. Doesn't try to push her. He's spent a lifetime dealing with bullies. A lifetime of being thought of as inferior, as something that people can live without. Lara thinks she can break him with unkind words, but if she knew him, she'd realize that she wouldn't even be able to start.

'I don't want to sell,' his brother says. It's the only thing he's said so far, happy to let Lara be the negotiator. 'At least leave me one.'

'Henry, you know as well as I do, it's not just Lara,' Ernest says pointedly. 'It's not a good time for this business. Hasn't been for a while. This isn't the world Pa lived in. Things are changing. The family-run factories are disappearing. It is time to move on. Time for something new.'

The brothers stand apart; Ernest tall and broad, Henry lanky and lean. Ernest has a head of thick dark hair, Henry is bald. The only thing in common is the way they stand, the way their eyes dart everywhere but to each other. Henry was once his companion. His friend. When they were children Henry was the only one to look out for him. Who else but a brother could understand the troubles of a family?

‘I’ll be the one to run it,’ Henry says, ignoring Ernest’s reasoning. ‘Come on, Ernest, you can sell the others. All I’m asking for is one.’

Ernest sighs and looks down at the table. Selling his family’s business is not a decision he takes lightly. His eyes pass stacks of paper, glasses of half-drunk water. He’s about to speak when he notices a butterfly that’s landed on the table’s centre. Though the butterfly is still, its wings slowly flap. It appears patient, as if there’s no fear, no need to leave the crowded room. Ernest thinks of his father. Of how he’s never felt more understanding, more closeness to the man than in this moment.

In an instant the butterfly flutters towards Ernest. Its brown wings are a subtle pattern of spotted black dots set against a single white stripe. It is steady in its path, unwavering. A monarch.

*

Walking out of the meeting room makes Ernest feel older than his fifty-seven years. Lara and Henry are the first to leave. Lara, head held high, walks out first, not caring whether or not Henry will follow. He does, of course, but not before giving Ernest one last look. The directors, all twelve of them, wait for Ernest before leaving themselves.

The boat that took Ernest and Sylvia to the factory waits by the river. But Ernest isn’t ready to leave. In the meeting room things had felt clear. But now, back amongst the trees it feels wrong. Before the inevitable ‘meeting’ Ernest had spent the week visiting the people who made up the factories. Distant cousins, employees’ children—old faces, lost faces—traced back to his childhood. Everyone he encountered filled his head with stories of his father, of a life that was made better because of the business. It made the sale seem impossible; the factories were intertwined with his past. One could not exist without the other.

Ernest isn’t sure what he’s looking for as they retrace the steps he used to take as a child—past the sweat-slicked men, piles of cut rubber and whirring machines—until they reach a small clearing overlooking the looping river. As a child the river terrified him. Its murky waters unknowable. Ernest laughs. Decades later, it still feels the same.

*

It's after midnight when Ernest decides to call his brother. He’s spent many months obsessing over the facts. Knowing that no matter what he decides, he'll be letting his father down. Ernest uses the numbers to convince himself that it’s the right

idea. He can live on the money he'll make. Perhaps he'll create something that is his own, unburdened by the sins of the past. He's had so little to himself: no moments or accomplishments, no feelings that weren't fuelled by the business. By something that started almost a century ago, deep beneath the earth, a tool for survival in a now ancient world.

His cigar has turned to ash. The bedroom he shares with Sylvia is dark. When he looks to the trees that line their garden, he thinks he sees something. A motion, an outline of a figure. When he blinks, it's gone. He laughs to himself. When the phone rings, he half expects his brother to ignore it, but when he picks up, Ernest knows that he too has been waiting.

'I'll give you what you want,' Ernest says.

His brother is silent, but Ernest knows he's listening.

'One factory, Henry,' Ernest sighs. 'That's all you get.'

*

Singapore

2019

April fourth at four o' four, was the day his father died. Ernest counts the numbers of his father's death; four fours strung together like a strand of blinking lights. In Hokkien four signifies death, while eight is meant to be auspicious. He does the maths in his head and laughs at his wavering superstition. It might be a coincidence that April is the month he sells his father's company, but the older he gets, the less he believes in coincidence. It's been four years of trying to make things work with Henry, of keeping his mother happy, of providing for his drifting children. His daughter is in London, his son in his final year of the army. Ernest expects them to find their own way. Now that they won't be able to rely on his father's legacy. Still, he's sad about how things have come to an end. Nostalgic for a time when everything seemed endless and life still felt like it could change.

The documents that are spread out across the table have been read many times over. Now it's just the formality, the final stroke of a pen to seal a fate written over many years. Ernest reads the small black words, hoping something will jump out at him, something that will make him stop. He won't sell his father's legacy if things don't look right, but the conglomerate he's selling to has a million lawyers with endless documents and perfect smiles. He knows he won't find anything wrong. The selling price was debated for a while. Ernest knows the value of the factories, of the

land, but how could he put a price on the heart, on the soul of his father's dreams. This business had saved his family, brought them from the brink of death into a life very few could even dream of. It had brought Ernest hope and fear, and it had both made and broke him as a person and a son. How could he put a price on the past? On years he'd never get back, on a relationship he still couldn't figure out.

'Look,' one of the directors says to Ernest, breaking him out of his thoughts. 'Isn't that the butterfly we saw in the factory?'

Ernest looks to where he's pointing. His eyes dart over the open window, the lined wooden shelves under its frame, and then, to the butterfly that rests in between. The butterfly is a mirror image of the one that landed on the boardroom table when the wheels of this moment began to turn. Ernest knows this from its appearance alone. Dark brown with a single white stripe running down each paper-thin wing. The bottom edges of its wings are light before going dark again with white alternating inserts. It flutters near Ernest, landing close to his left hand, pen in hand, poised and ready. The men in the room stop to watch it. One of them goes to take a picture before whispering to himself.

Ernest can't explain it—he won't for some time, fearful that it'll come out wrong. He knows that his father is here, watching him, speaking to him for one final moment. When he finishes the last curve of his signature, the butterfly leaves, floating towards the window in a fluid flutter. With his signature drawn, pictures are taken. They are an informal bunch, short-sleeved dress shirts and khakis, nothing ominous for a day of new beginnings.

Ernest wonders if his smile looks real as he lines for a photo. Usually the gesture is more movement than a feeling. An autopilot that accompanies the shake of hands and stiff suits. But when the pictures are taken, and the men begin to trail out of the room, Ernest pauses by the window. The butterfly blinks at him, its wings slow and thoughtful. And when Ernest smiles, he knows that it is real.

*

Feng

Singapore

2015

Feng can't sleep in her room. Not with his presence. The suffocating madness that clings to every surface Isk has ever touched. When she sits for breakfast, he is there, dancing on the edge of the window's reflection. When she goes to sleep at

night, he is there, trailing the edges of their bed. Isk never used to watch her. He'd sit with his nose buried in the paper or stare at the meticulous notes he kept hidden in his desk. He'd spend hours clicking away on his black-and-gold typewriter, stopping only to push his thin glasses back up his face. But now his eyes are everywhere, in every motion, every sigh that escapes Feng's lips.

In the course of a few months, Feng forgets how to sleep. The hours seem to muddle together, becoming a strange concoction of fantasy and fear. Her only knowledge of time comes in the handful of pills Eddie feeds her. A handful to mark the morning and another to bring in the evening. Sometimes she feels like the pills are the only thing that keeps her going. Blue ones, red ones, yellow ones. Anything to keep her alive, to keep her far from death's grasp. She's not sure why she clings so hard to this life, to a family who has abandoned her, who only call when they feel guilty.

Sometimes when the fear of death gets too pressing, she will call Ernest. She'll try to explain her pain. Try to get him to sympathize.

'It hurts,' she says.

'Call the doctor,' Ernest replies.

Other times an overwhelming fear of bankruptcy will trump her fear of death. Flashes of a childhood spent in a rundown hut—glimmers of a scared little girl with no feelings but the seizing pain of hunger—will grip her mind.

'I need money,' she says.

'You have money,' Ernest replies.

Sometimes Jo and her husband take her out for dinner before dropping her at the casino at night. Alex comes when his social life allows, and Mercy comes on holidays. When Mercy and Alex do come, it's for awkward-smiling meals, the language barrier breaking any form of real connection. Her friends from a life before Eddie visit often, but Feng is no fool—she's played the long game before; she knows what they want. They may never ask straight out, but Feng can see it in their eyes, hear it through their carefully placed words.

With Isk gone, Feng begins to fill her stomach in the hopes of creating a distraction for her mind. She sends Eddie to fetch chicken rice from the Mandarin Oriental and *ayam goreng* from the mall. When they have fish-head curry, she blinks at the dead creature's face before pushing it down with her spoon. The distraction

works, and it shows. The flesh fills around the edges of her skin, puffing her cheeks in a smile.

When Feng looks in the mirror at night, she wonders who is the ghost. Her dead husband who haunts her, or the dead eyes that stare back from the glass. She wishes she found Isk's ghost comforting, something to turn to in the lonely night. A companion for old age and distant children. Instead, his ghost mocks her. It's just like Isk, she thinks, rising from the dead, proving to the world that his will is stronger than death itself. She thinks of their last words together, how trivial it all seems now that they can no longer speak to each other. But what could she have said?

In Pontianak there is a church built in her name, but not by her hands. In Singapore, she has the deed to his office, but not his company. Feng can't help but feel like she spent much of her adult life learning to fade into the background—mocked by her children, his friends, scolded for the way she spent the allowance he gave her. Even after his death, she has no control of her wealth, waiting for that same monthly allowance—now from the hands of her son. She comforts herself with the ownership of multiple apartments throughout the island, but when dreams of her childhood take over, she sells the office that once housed Isk's employees, the condo in St Regis too. Her sons believe that it's Eddie's influence, but the truth is she fears the lack of financial security, the lack of Isk. She feels safe with cash in the bank by seeing those zeros roll.

Her family hates Eddie, just like Isk hated him, but what do they know? They've spent their lives trying to rid the little comforts Feng manages to find. Though they are never vocal about it, they rebuff Eddie's presence. Feng pretends not to see the looks they give him, the way Mercy mouths harsh words under her breath, but what does she know? Her granddaughter will never understand the happiness Feng has sacrificed, all the decisions she's made, just so Isk could be great. One day she will learn: youth is fleeting, and everyone fails.

Ernest visits every weekend, but it does little to comfort her. Sometimes she would rather he didn't. Not if it means watching him sit there, phone out, angered by everything she says. Feng knows her sons think she's old and crazy. They've built their different versions of her past, different versions of her now.

'Just go to the casino, Ma,' Ernest tells her. 'Pa hated the casino; he won't fallow you there.'

His eyes dart up and down in disbelief when she speaks of his father's ghost. The awkward laugh that follows as he says, 'At least you're not alone,' makes her want to cry. She doesn't know when she and Ernest got so far apart. She feels lost, caught in a fog, unable to cross the bridge from the past.

Dina is her only link. Dina who comforts her, and never judges her for her lack of tears. She remains even when Feng banishes Henry. Lara and Henry tried to get rid of Eddie. They thought they could use force, could fire him on their own. She stops picking up the phone when they call, doesn't let them in the apartment when they visit, and soon they stop trying at all.

Feng knows she should feel ashamed at how easy it is to cut the cord with her son, but she feels like her actions are justified. Henry represents too many of her failings, resembles the darkness of a past she's almost forgotten.

'Your brother is no good,' she tells Ernest.

'Ma,' Ernest protests. 'We can't blame Henry for Lara. She's bewitched him.'

Feng laughs. 'Bewitched? I thought you didn't believe in black magic.'

'I hear the rumours,' Ernest explains. 'They say Lara has been meeting with a *dukun* back in Indonesia.

'Don't make excuses for your brother,' Feng says. 'It isn't magic.'

'But, Ma—' he begins.

'If you were a stronger person,' she says, cutting him off, 'he wouldn't be taking the company away from you.'

'He's not taking it away,' Ernest argues, 'Pa gave it to both of us.'

When Ernest leaves Feng turns to Eddie and sighs. 'Sometimes I worry that he's too much like his father.'

One night after dinner, Feng shuffles to the bathroom to wash her hands. As she turns the handle on the tap, she hears Isk groan through a crack on the floor. 'Isk,' she whispers, waiting for him to respond. When he doesn't, she places her hands into the water, pushing down her fear. But when she shuts the tap, she hears him again.

'Isk,' she cries. 'Please, stop.' Fear floods her senses, making her stumble out of the bathroom and into Eddie's worried hands. 'He's after me,' she says. 'Eddie, you have to help me.' The next day Eddie hires someone to repair the crack, but once it is fixed, it only makes her more afraid.

The next few nights Feng hears nothing but Isk. He's there in the bathroom taps' groan. He's the whistle in the steel pipes, an echo of his muffled screams. She begins to panic. She had always felt like she had tricked Isk, imprisoned him in an unhappy marriage, burdened by his horrible sense of duty.

What if it is finally true? What if she's trapped him?

The next morning Feng takes his cane and smashes through the plaster. When the crack grins up at her, she sinks to the floor, arms shaking from the force, her cheeks stained with wet relief.

*

Despite the many years they've lived in Singapore, Feng and Dina, two old ladies, still marvel at the lights as they cross the bridge to Sentosa. Before Resorts World and Eddie gambling was illegal, so if they wanted to fulfil the desire, they would dart across the ocean, laughing as they sat with strangers, not thinking of home or what waited for their return. When they did return, it would be to regale their children with stories of the money they made, of the people they met. It made Feng feel brave, venturing into the beyond without fear of where it might lead her.

Now Resorts World looms on the horizon. The pointed towers of Shrek's castle wink from Universal Studios and spiralling green pillars construct the domes of what was for a while the world's largest aquarium. Tonight, Feng and Dina are going to eat at the members-only restaurant at the bottom of the casino. Its menu is traditionally Chinese and one of the only places Feng still manages to enjoy. She likes taking her relatives there when they come to visit, likes telling them that everything is for free even though they know it just means her gambling covers the bill.

Feng watches as women dressed in tight, dark uniforms with red lining serve the different tables tea. The waiter who serves them is always the same, a young man with kind eyes and a wide smile. When he gets to their table, he asks if anyone else will be joining them.

'Yes,' Feng says. 'My son is just late.'

A while later, Ernest walks through the door. He spots Feng but takes his time to come over, walking with his hands behind his back, the same ambling pace that reminds Feng of his father. Feng had wanted him to come alone, hoping he understood from the context of her words. The fact that he did makes her feel a little braver, and when he finally sits down, Feng doesn't waste time with pleasantries.

‘I want to sell the apartment,’ she says.

‘But, Ma,’ he sighs, ‘Bayshore is your home.’

Home. The word makes Feng want to laugh. Did she ever understand the meaning of the word? Her home was never made of walls; it was made of Isk. It was afternoons spent by the window, observing as the broad expanse of green thinned as the highway took over. It was the years spent watching as the water that surrounded their island turned from blue to grey. Home was an evening drive through the ever-evolving skyline and the dirt that began to line the white tiles of their balcony. Bayshore isn't her home any more.

For a moment, Feng wishes her relationship with her son was different. She wishes she could explain all the workings of her mind and he could listen. But that isn't who they are, and they are both too old to change.

‘It was *his* home,’ she says finally.

She thinks: everything was always his.

*

2018

It takes longer than she’d like, but by the time Feng sells her apartment, the only property that remains in her possession is the flat in Orchard. Eddie and her move in long before the papers are finalized. By the time she's bid farewell to Isk's ghost, Eddie has moved into her bedroom. ‘It’s better this way,’ he says. ‘Now you won’t have to be scared.’

When Isk was alive, he had wanted to move to the flat in Orchard. He even hired someone to remodel it, hoping the warm furniture and dark wood floors would entice Feng to move. Feng had refused. She loved their apartment overlooking the ocean. Loved how it was far from the parts people were coming to know as Singapore and close to the parts she could call her own. But now that she and Eddie live in the city centre she can see its appeal. It doesn’t matter when or why she wants something, all Eddie has to do is walk from the lobby, and she'll get it.

Feng wishes her children could see Eddie’s kindness. How at her request he stocks their storeroom with toiletries and canned food. A lifetime’s supply of bottled water, crackers, condensed milk, toilet paper and rice. He stays by her side as she plays cards at the casino at night. He helps her read and sign her cheques when her eyes fail.

Her family doesn't know his past, his heart, the desires that make him a person beyond what they wish to see. In that way, Eddie is a kindred spirit. Both of them dictated by what others believe, by what they need, instead of who they wish to be.

'He has you scared of your own shadow,' Ernest tells her one afternoon. Eddie is in Malaysia for the weekend.

'He's looking out for my health,' she replies. 'I don't feel so well these days.'

'You're ninety, Ma,' Ernest laughs. 'Some days I think you'll live longer than me.'

*

When Dina ends up in a coma, Feng knows the final piece of her old life has departed. It happens during lunch. One second Dina is there talking and the next she's writhing on the floor. Feng doesn't have time to react. Food hangs from the tip of her trembling chopsticks as she watches her oldest companion lose consciousness.

'Come!' she cries to Eddie in the kitchen. 'Quickly! Do something!'

It is not Eddie, but Feng's maid, who flies in with phone in hand with an ambulance already on its way.

When the paramedics arrive, Eddie stands blinking at Feng's side. For once he has no answers, no words of comfort.

*

Feng visits Dina every day. She sits by her side and recalls the years Dina kept her company. Isk and Dina were the two people who kept Feng stable, kept her alive. Now she is in danger of losing it all.

'Remember those nights?' Feng says, before turning on the television. 'The ones where it was just the two of us? Side by side at the table placing bets, fuelled by the thrill of the game?'

Feng changes the channel till she finds a Hong Kong drama they used to watch, seeing if the familiar sound can reawaken a part of her lost friend.

'Those Star cruises to Malaysia, where no one knew who we were or told us what to do.' Feng laughs, 'We were really alive then. Weren't we?'

As the months pass Feng pays the bills as they arrive, knowing Jo won't be able to afford them and knowing Henry will refuse. In a scare, the rest of the family rush to get health insurance. Ernest and his wife stay by Jo's side, bringing her for

dinner, buying her little gifts in an attempt to lighten her mood. Sometimes they'll catch Dina dreaming, a twitch of an eyelid, a crinkle of a nose. Sometimes that's enough hope, a gesture to combat the days when it seems like Dina is forever lost.

When Christmas rolls around, Ernest and his wife come to visit with their daughter. Silence sits heavily in the room, filling the cracks the family refuses to look at. A soap plays in the background—something with amnesiac boyfriends and diabolical mothers. The noise of a police siren blares from the television. All eyes turn to the television, knowing it's easier to see than it is to say.

*

Now that Dina no longer lives in the apartment most of Feng's days end the same. Eddie and her sit together after dinner. Eddie doesn't use his phone to distract himself from her company, but to fill the moment instead. He shows her pictures from the internet and articles he finds funny. His boyfriend lives with them now, but he mostly stays in his room. She tries not to think about how his room used to be Dina's. After all, what isn't the past these days?

Eddie and Feng are drinking from a large plastic bottle of oolong when he asks if she wants to go to the casino. She shakes her head no as she puts her cup down.

'Not tonight,' she tells him. 'Tonight, I just want to rest.'

'You think you can sleep tonight?' he asks as he pours her more tea.

'Maybe,' she says. 'Maybe not.'

She feels like she wants to say more, but she knows that with Eddie, there's always more time. He's not going home at the end of the night to disappear into his own life. Feng thinks about Ernest, about how he lives nothing more than a fifteen-minute drive away, yet she only sees him once a week.

'Has Ernest called today?' she asks.

'No,' Eddie says, 'I'm sure he will call tomorrow.'

'Okay,' Feng replies, reaching for her tea.

Dina lives in a care home in Jakarta now. Feng wonders if it is better this way, to be fully present with no one there to remind her of who she used to be. She feels tired. It seems to be the one thing she can count on. She's tired of her body, of her mind. Most days she feels like a shell of her former self, like someone has chiselled out all the parts that used to make her feel alive.

'Let's go on the balcony,' she says, turning towards Eddie.

‘It’s too hot,’ he replies.

‘We can bring the fan.’

Eddie complies, moving to take the fan from its position in the corner of the dining room to the edge of the small balcony. Feng knows her children have grown past looking to her for guidance or courage. She should feel sad that she lacks their companionship. That the people she spent her entire life caring for are now distant strangers. Sometimes life feels like a dream, like all her memories are things that happened to someone else.

In her life she has been many things—a boy, a spy, a wife and a mother. She lived in a time that required action instead of thought, becoming what history and then her family dictated. But now, with Isk gone, her sons gone, she can be what she chooses.

Eddie comes to move Feng to the veranda, pushing her wheelchair by the railing before pulling a chair for himself. When he reaches out to touch her hand, she lets him. Together they watch as the sun dips below the high rises in the distance.

‘It’s a nice night,’ she says.

‘Yeah,’ he smiles. ‘It is.’

*

Mercy

Singapore

2021

Ah Ma is sick. Or so her body tells her. Her mind is there, but it no longer holds interest. The things that used to thrill her, like gambling and fancy meals, stop mattering. All she wants is *mee goreng* and luncheon meat, things from a past she’s tried so hard to forget.

Or at least that’s how I see it. What she actually wants is beyond me. Sitting in an apartment that smells of mothballs, freezing under an air-conditioning that has been taped in sections to control its flow, all I know is that I am glad to be here.

‘What do you eat?’ Ah Ma asks me.

‘Everything,’ I tell her.

Earlier I tried to explain why I don’t eat meat, about farming practices, and carbon emission, but how do you explain fear for the future to a person who is so close to becoming the past? For Ah Ma eating meat is a privilege, not a choice.

‘For breakfast, what you eat?’

When I tell her that I don't eat breakfast she rolls to the side with concentrated effort. I watch as she watches me. I crack a smile. She smiles back. We wait. I wish I had learned Mandarin. Wish I had the words to talk to her. *Wo pu ce tao.* I don't know. *Wo ai ni.* I love you. They aren't enough.

Ah Ma turns to my dad. Their conversation makes Dad wring his hands.

'She wants you guys to try the safe,' Dad explains, gesturing to the wooden closets behind him. 'Do you remember the code?'

'No,' I say, quickly looking to Alex.

Alex shrugs. 'I don't remember…'

Dad looks to Ah Ma for guidance. She pauses for a moment before chiming in with the code. Alex and I make our way over to key the numbers for our respective safes. When they open I take a peek inside—jewellery, envelopes, a wallet, some binders. Ashamed to be looking, I quickly shut the door again before clicking the lock button. When we sit down I write the combination on my phone. The text blinks at me. *For when she dies.* The thought hurts. I squeeze my eyes in an attempt not to cry.

When Eddie comes in it's to tell us that dinner is ready. Ah Ma stops him with more words I don't understand. He goes to one of the safes, pulling out a red cloth bag, before handing it to me. I pull out a gold watch, simple in design with a blue face.

'I wore it for sixty years,' Ah Ma explains suddenly. 'Now it's yours.'

Dad looks at me. I look back. The week before she'd given me a ring. Now a watch. We know what these gifts mean.

Eddie goes to pick Ah Ma off her chair. We leave the room before he seats her, knowing that she doesn't like us to watch. After the fall she had in the shower her back hurts too much to move on her own. Once her back went everything else began to deteriorate.

There's a feast waiting for us when we reach the table. All of Dad's favourites—Indonesian delights like *tahu telor* and avocado juice with *gula melaka*. We wait for Ah Ma before beginning to eat. When Eddie pushes her into the room he waves his hand towards the food before running into the kitchen.

'I have peaches too,' he calls to us.

Ah Ma speaks.

'And *emping*.'

Ah Ma points.

'Let me pack you some stuff for home.'

When Eddie finally sits again it's to feed Ah Ma. As she eats she watches the table around her. I imagine it's the liveliest part of her day and a break from the oxygen tank she requests, the ceiling she spends hours looking at.

I want to say something, but I'm not sure what. I feel guilty. It's so easy to point fingers at other women. To be consumed with thoughts of anger instead of compassion. How long have I spent blaming her? Why didn't I make more of an effort to understand?

When Eddie sees I've stopped eating he gestures towards the table.

'Eat, eat, eat,' he says.

I comply.

*

It's a Sunday when Ah Ma is rushed to the hospital. Mom and I are playing Chinese chequers when Dad comes home with the news. In the car ride over I think of how the Sunday before I had a nasty cough, so we didn't go to visit. Now the lost meal sits in my stomach.

When Mount Elizabeth beckons it makes me think of my grandfather. How he too was rushed through its doors; how I wasn't there for any of it.

Ah Ma is already settled in her room when we arrive. Eddie is explaining the tests the doctor conducted when he shows us her feet. I try not to gape as he pulls each foot from beneath the cover. The masses are pink and swollen, gelatinous sacks of meat with barely filed nails.

'Her eyelids were too swollen this morning for her to open and she hasn't passed a motion in two days.'

As he explains this to my parents I lean over her bed.

'Hi, Ah Ma,' I say. 'How are you feeling?'

'Okay,' she replies. Her voice is soft, but it's her eyes that give her away. The usual intensity is lacklustre, replaced by a faraway look that's settled like a cloud.

Once Eddie has finished talking, we sit, Alex and I positioning ourselves on the leather couch Eddie is using as a bed. A nurse comes in to give Ah Ma pills and lunch.

When the nurse leaves Ah Ma begins to pull on her bangle, a jade bracelet that she's worn for as long as I've known her. The bracelet is tight, as jade should be, and she has trouble sliding it off her wrist.

'When I die I want you to have this.' She keeps pulling but the bangle is stuck.

I don't say anything, horrified by the moment. Not yet, I think, not yet.

Eddie pats her arm. 'Keep it on for luck.'

She pulls once more then stops, her eyes turning towards the ceiling. 'Ah Ma is tired.'

We stand, knowing it's the signal for us to leave.

As we walk out of the room I think of my dad, of how horrible this must all feel, but when I look at him there's nothing to see.

'Let's go shopping,' Dad says.

*

Every morning for the next week begins in the hospital. We go as soon as we wake up. A routine of visiting Ah Ma, then making our way to the mall next door for shopping and dumplings ensues and I can't help but like it.

One morning, there's a bird chirping by Ah Ma's window. Though crows are commonplace in Singapore the fact that there is one sitting by her window excites the room.

'Look, Ah Ma!' I say crossing to the window. 'It's so close!'

I think briefly of my grandfather. A butterfly for my dad—a crow perhaps? Ah Ma tries to look but moving proves difficult. I take a picture so she doesn't have to get up.

'When you going back?' Ah Ma asks once I've sat back down.

'To London?' I pause. 'Um. Soon.'

'Before New Year?'

I look at Dad. He nods.

'No. No. After. I'll change my flight.'

Now that I'll be in Singapore to celebrate a lengthy discussion on where to order from ensues. I'm keying in our order when Eddie comes in with the doctor in tow.

They want to keep Ah Ma for another day. Her heartbeat is irregular. She's old. Ah Ma nods as Dad translates in Hokkien; the doctor, noticing, switches over as

well. I look towards the window. The bird that was nestled in the corner turns its head once before stretching its wings.

When the doctor leaves we turn to Ah Ma. She's resigned in the way people are when they know what's coming. It scares me. I've never been able to accept things as they are. That's when Dad tells her that I cried by the elevator the other day.

'Don't cry,' she says simply. 'Ah Ma is old.'

*

The week before Ah Ma returned from the hospital she told me that I should find a job in Singapore. Come back, she beckons. I'm leaving in two days I think.

New Year is spent in her apartment. Ah Ma doesn't want us to wait in her room while Eddie sets up the table, so Alex and I take pictures with Jo instead. Lunch is roast pork and frog-spit soup, sweet-and-sour impossible meat for the vegetarians, abalone, noodles, and pineapple tarts for dessert. When Ah Ma is rolled to the table we pick up our chopsticks, positioning ourselves by the *Lo Hei*. While we toss Eddie takes a video.

Happiness. Knowledge. Love. Health, we repeat, tossing the food as high as it can go; understanding, courage, wisdom. Rewatching it I see that Ah Ma's chopsticks are perfectly poised to look like she's participating even though they don't move. I think about how we were so wrapped up in our own movements we failed to notice.

*

I guess this is a story of returning. Isn't that what memory is? Returning to the scene of the crime—changing bodies and shapes—till it no longer looks like the landscape you once traversed but just the hazy echo of a feeling. This is how I retrace my steps around Ann Siang Hill during lunchtime. It looks just like it did when I used to work here. When I'd walk from the office, nestled in an Easter blue shophouse, past all the bars that had yet to open, first to 7-Eleven to buy cigarettes, then back towards the vine-covered trellis that leads to Maxwell Food Court. It hasn't changed much in the past three years. I've changed a little.

As I make my way down the stairs, past the rows of burning incense, I walk with my memories. Past the CrossFit gym I used to eat lunch by; past the disarray of shoes in front of the mosque I'd skip over. The hipster coffee shop, the noodle bar, a sleek new Italian trattoria. I follow a man as he goes to burn an offering at the temple

down the road. Red lanterns hang outside the ageing structure, ignoring the gleam of the glass buildings across the street. Signboards that detail the history and dealings of the temple cheapen the structure as if needing to explain why it still exists.

The city calls to me as I walk.

Don't be afraid, it says. *Past, future, it's all the same.*

When I get to Maxwell, Dad is already there. While I spent my morning sleeping, he spent his fishing. I wave as I make my way to the table.

'Hey,' he says, 'I already ordered for us.'

The feel of the seat is cool against my legs. As I chase the chocolate powder down the glass with my straw I take the moment to capture Dad's face. His deeply tanned skin, the way his hair is thinning at the top even though there's not a speck of grey. He's freshly shaven, his skin oddly wrinkle-free for a man nearing sixty.

He looks good, happier than I'm used to seeing him. It's clear that retirement suits him. That selling the factories has done wonders for his disposition.

'How was fishing?' I ask.

'Okay,' he shrugs. 'We didn't catch anything.'

'Next time, I'll come,' I say, smiling.

'We can go tomorrow,' he says before taking a sip of his *teh tarik*. 'Do you still want to go to the harbour after lunch?'

'Yeah,' I reply.

Dad nods. 'Alright. Might be boring though, there's nothing there.'

I shrug. 'He's there.'

'Yeah,' he says softly. 'He is.'

After lunch we head to the marina. I turn on the radio, skipping past the stations that are on commercial break. Some Top Forty nonsense dribbles in, the pop synth beats blurring into the background. As we approach, I wonder what I'm expecting to find. It's Dad who answers first.

'Sometimes when I visit I speak to him,' Dad says suddenly. 'Other times, we just sit in silence. It's strange how easy it is to talk to him now that he's gone.'

I think of all the stories my mother weaves of my father's past, the nights of loneliness, the rejection, the selfishness of people who feel like they deserve the right to be selfish. It makes me wonder, is my sadness inherited or learned? The ghosts I see at night, the lies I admit and the ones I keep close to my chest. When I

wake up, thirty years from now, will I feel like him? Will I look across the ocean and feel the same burdens, the same regrets?

Dad and I walk towards the ocean. Two bodies stuck in time, wishing to be something more, never knowing what that actually means. The dock isn't empty when we arrive. There are couples pushing strollers, maids walking the family dog, bright sticky joggers weaving their way through the crowd. They say big cities disconnect people, that as things grow, they lose their connection to the past.

'I'm sorry I'm not very talkative,' Dad says suddenly.

'It's okay, Dad.' I smile. 'I talk enough for the both of us.'

He laughs. 'You really do.'

The lights from the ships that trail just beyond the harbour glow in the coming dusk. Dad's scent of burnt earth and soft cologne wafts through the slight breeze. The oil refinery blazes in the distance, its flame large and disconcerting.

I close my eyes and try to imagine the lives of the people that were here before, their journey, their feelings. I try to imagine my grandfather's face. I can almost see it, almost grasp his likeness, but imagination invents kindness and memories change the contours of a face. Family can break you, I think. But it can also build you.

Dad turns to me. 'Why did you want to come?'

I shrug, looking to the ocean stretching before us. I think of my grandmother, alone in her room waiting for her moment to arrive. Of the absorption of my family's business into a conglomerate. Of the people that make my history, that I turn to when I think of the future. There are a million answers, each laced with notions of home. Of return. Of a family's past, inescapable and all-encompassing.

Somehow none of those answers seems right.

'I just want to understand,' I say, looking towards the ocean.

'Understand what?' he says, following my gaze.

The lies we've told to keep us together, the truths that have kept us apart. The ghosts I've inherited from his memories—the ones he's shared, the ones he never will. The memories that warp my imagination, the violence I'll never be able to understand. All of it, pushing and pulling me in like the ocean before us.

'Why,' I finally say. 'How.'

I wait—I know, I'm always waiting. Wishing there to be more, wanting things to have a greater meaning, a reason. Together we look towards the ocean. There

are ships as far as the eye can see. A thousand blinking lights set out against the sea.

'You know,' Dad says, placing his hand on my shoulder. 'I used to wonder too. Used to need answers. But maybe that's our problem. Maybe there are no answers.'

*

Epilogue

*

First Brother

Xiamen

1842

I know this land, First Brother thought, looking to the sea before him. The great tide, ashen as the colourless sky, beat a ragged rhythm against the shore. But it does not know me.

Whenever First Brother was feeling desperate, he would come to watch the sea. It was reassuring, knowing that despite all the ruin, nature could prevail. The most recent misfortune to befall his village was famine. First Brother was no stranger to hunger. Born into an impoverished family of eight meant that food was always scarce. But this was different. This was everyone—neighbours, friends, strangers, all struck by the same hand.

These days it seemed like nothing could go right. The Lees were a family of farmers. Generations of farmers with nothing left to farm. His home—a thatched roof held by sticks and mud—fell victim to frequent floods. And then there was the war—a fierce battle upon his beloved sea. The villagers whispered that it was the beginning of the end, but First Brother wasn't disheartened. He was an islander—he was of earth and sea; he was the raging tide and the humbled sand coming together in unison.

It was hard for First Brother to feel discouraged, not when he had faith. His faith didn't come in the form of a god, but in the belief that order was born from chaos. If you asked him, he would tell you that he was born on the island because he was built for it. That wasn't to say that First Brother believed in destiny. No, order was different than destiny. It was purpose. An ability to make the most of life's seeming randomness.

Which is why when the treaties ended the war and trade on his island had once again resumed, First Brother looked to order, watching as the harbour took shape. The West was hungry for their goods. Silk, tea, porcelain. The ports that were once closed now allowed foreign vessels. The world First Brother knew had changed.

In First Brother's opinion, the treaties meant that one country would reap more benefits than the other, but for First Brother all that mattered was that trade with the British meant there was a way to leave. Steamships were headed for the south-eastern colonies. Ships that could help him make his life anew. First Brother had heard that a majority of the colonies to the south were islands. Lurid lands ripe with potential, doused in a glow of possibility that only something unexplored could give. With fresh earth beneath his feet, First Brother knew he would finally become the man he was meant to be.

Sometimes First Brother found it challenging to accept the world for what it was. He was told that a farmer's son could never be more than a farmer's son. He was told that the poor stayed poor and that to be hungry was to be Chinese. But he believed otherwise. He thought that if you were to walk your entire life with your eyes to the floor, then that's what your life would be, but if you were to look up, if you dared to see beyond your reach, then life could be what you made it.

These were First Brother's thoughts as he gazed at the water, watching the ships bellow thick black smoke in the port before him. It had been agreed on by Father and Mother that First and Second Brother were to leave for the Dutch East Indies on the next ship out. It made sense. With no prospects on the island, the brothers would have to go elsewhere to earn money for their family.

When the ships were ready to leave, First and Second Brother stepped aboard. Bidding farewell to his family was easy for First Brother. While he had some affection for his sisters and a rare understanding of his father, the feelings were not more potent than his desire to leave. It was his mother who he respected, who made him want to stay. For First Brother, the place in his mind reserved for warm memories would always be occupied by his mother. You must go, she said, you must try, you must fail, and eventually, you must succeed.

That night, as they set out across the sea, First and Second Brother looked out towards the horizon. Second Brother was worried.

'We are doomed before we've even begun, brother. We won't know the land, no one will know our name, will speak our words. All the money our family has was spent on these tickets. Besides the clothes on our back we own no possessions, what can we do? We have been sent across the world to fail.'

First Brother sighed as he placed his hand on his brother's shoulder. 'Brother, do you remember the legend of the egrets?'

Second Brother laughed, shaking his brother's hand off. 'This is no time for childhood fantasies.'

First Brother moved closer. His voice was soft, but his words were strong, like the overwhelming pull of a current. 'Long before we had come to the island, long before our ancestors were echoes in the universe, our island was a desert. No life could be found upon the land; it was lonely, desolate, a place where nothing lived or died. The island spent many years in isolation, fated to be forgotten, till one day a flock of migrating egrets flew to rest upon its shores.'

'The leader of the egrets, a mighty bird with bone-white feathers and a long sharp beak, was worried for his flock. They were tired from weeks of flying. Every place they had come to rest upon was filled with predators. But here, on this deserted island, the leader saw that there were no hunters to be found, and upon closer inspection, he could see that the lack of inhabitants meant the waters were teeming with life. The leader was delighted. The abandoned land meant that the sea had been forgotten, allowing life to flourish beneath its depths.'

'The next few days on the island brought life back to his flock. The fatty fish had revived their spirits, and in their hearts, they knew what their leader had already discovered—this was to be their new home. The tasks were split evenly. The birds with sharper beaks and claws were tasked with digging through the dirt in search of water. The birds with faster wings were sent to fetch flowers and grass seeds to fertilize the land. The remaining birds were to plant the seeds in the pockets of earth that promised the most growth. Together the birds worked till the island became an explosion of colour. The once desert land was now transformed into a dream. With whisperings of paradise, birds of all shapes and colours came to make this once-forgotten land home.'

'But like any utopia, the island could not remain one forever. News of this paradise had reached the Snake King. The Snake King was sceptical of the stories, but curiosity about an island whose beauty went beyond his wildest fantasies was

too much to bear. When the Snake King reached the island, he saw a force of colour, a dizzying spectacle of life that he knew had to be his. With his servants in tow, the Snake King began to seize the land. When war broke out, bird turned against bird in a race for their lives. And though the egrets fought hard to protect their home, the battle was long, and the island was beginning to suffer.'

'The leader of the egrets knew that his flock would not be able to withstand much more. Brave and unrelenting, the leader swooped upon the Snake King, his mighty wings spread wide as he raced through the sky. With his long beak flashing, the leader stabbed the Snake King. The Snake King, fearing for his life, fled, but not before landing a fierce blow on the leader. As the leader fell, his blood struck out across the land. And though the leader did not survive, the blood of his sacrifice was now one with the land. As the years passed, the egret's blood fertilized the island, giving birth to the flame tree. A tree we still know of today.'

As First Brother finished his story, Second Brother grew quiet, remaining so as they made their way below deck. The cramped space allotted to passengers of their fare meant that the brothers had to sleep with their bodies pressed against each other.

'Mother used to tell us that story when we were sick,' First Brother said as he settled himself for the long night ahead.

Second Brother rolled to his side, staring at the wall next to him as if it held the answers he sought. 'I remember. Whenever I used to tell her I was scared of death, she'd tell me this story. Death is never the end, she'd say.'

'Like the egret,' First Brother continued, 'you will bring new life in your death, but only if you were brave enough to have searched for it.'

'Like the egret,' Second Brother echoed, 'we will find it.'

Why do you want to know?

Writing a Memoir in the Face of Intergenerational Trauma

A Reflective Thesis

Preface

On the 4th of April 2018, my father sold his family's business. With his board of directors, he signed over his factories to a conglomerate that was slowly buying up businesses much like our own. My father was fed up, finished with the internal fighting, burdened by the weight of his father's shadow. When his signature touched the page, a butterfly landed on the table before him. My father swore it was his father re-incarnated, coming to give his final blessing to the decision. Five rubber factories spread across Indonesia, eight generations of a life in commodities, six decades focused on rubber, banished with the stroke of a pen. It was more than just a company, it was a story, wrought with violence and survival, with sadness and betrayal. By signing those papers my father had done more than sell a business, he had ended his family's legacy.

A year before the papers were signed I decided to write a memoir. A dinner conversation with my father over a steaming bowl of porridge was its impetus. While it wasn't my company, I had grown up with it, the stories and decisions that surrounded it shaped much of my childhood and my future. It had been a stressful year, full of awkward family meetings with people I had never known as family. Pledges were made to stand by my father instead of his brother. Stories were told to me about my grandfather's exploits, of witch doctors, and rumoured affairs that ended with illegitimate children. By ending his legacy my father had unearthed a million pieces of a story I could no longer put away.

Of course, the 'actual' story is something in between, a mixture of the child who grew up with the stories and the father who lived them. Which is how I ended up writing *The Pretenders*, a memoir that is part child, part father, part grandparent. As Thomas G. Couser writes, 'in life, and therefore in life writing, we are always characters in others' narratives, and our own narratives always involve other people' (20). While *The Pretenders* works to explain the family mythos that has evolved through the three generations, this essay works as its accompaniment, reasoning the processes that went into shaping the memoir.

The most difficult notion I had to grapple when writing *The Pretenders* was reconciling with memoir as a genre. As a genre memoir 'sits—often uneasily—between public and private, individual and collective, testimony and storytelling, literature and history' (Goldsworthy 10). With every chapter I wrote I would ask myself why was I taking something private, filled with my family's experiences—all

the secrets, the lies, the unfathomable terror and indistinct rules of survival—and turning it into a story told from my perspective alone? What was I trying to achieve by re-telling our history? Who was I writing for?

These questions have pushed me to explore the ways in which second and third generation children of survivors write about their identity in relation to their family's traumatic backgrounds. In the first chapter of this essay I examine relational memoirs that were written in response to trauma, and how that trauma can reverberate through generations of a family. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory focuses on 'the generation after' speaking 'to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before' through 'means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up' (2012:4). By being raised with this knowledge of suffering, these memoirists, like myself, have their own stories 'displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors' (Hirsch 2012: 4). In *The Pretenders* I focus on my grandparents' experiences during the Japanese Occupation and how the war shaped them not only as people, but as parents. The notion that their trauma was passed down through their parenting to my father, and then in turn through their stories to myself, is a concept I explore throughout the memoir.

The Japanese occupation, which took place in Indonesia from March 1942 to September 1945, was a dark chapter in South East Asian history[1]. A history I learned from the stories relayed to me as a child, stories repeated to me over the course of my memoir's creation. As the stories were told, I found that they changed, sometimes more information came to light, sometimes less. The problem with relaying history is that it will never be told exactly as it happened. The details will change depending on the narrator's perspective, influenced by their own background and experiences. As Diane Barthel-Bouchier describes, there is a 'distinction between social memories, which are shared by those who directly experience them, and historical memories, which are mediated by education, the mass media, or even hearsay' (222). My memoir is a combination of both social and historical memories. It is written with the memories I was raised with and the history I have had to consult in order to fill in the gaps.

[1] For further information, specifically on what occurred in Borneo where my grandparents resided, see *The Japanese Occupation of Borneo, 1941-45*, by Ooi Keat Gin, especially chapter 4, 'The Japanese invasion and occupation of Borneo'.

The convoluted relationship between recording my grandparents' memories, while trying to remain historically and culturally sensitive to the period they lived in, required a focused approach. It was clear that I couldn't simply write about an event as painful as the occupation without doing extensive research of my own. While it is one thing to come to terms with the stories I had been raised on, it is another to try and fasten them to the experience of others. As Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Caroline Kyungah Hong state, 'Life writing maintains its attachment to evidentiary experience, including experiences that blur the known and unknowable and those which are blurred in the writing, because writing is memory that is revisable' (5). By writing my family's experiences, I would be altering them, revising their memories to fit into a narrative. The alterations I needed to make while writing my grandparents experiences had to be done in honour of others who have shared similar accounts. After all, I wasn't just writing about a family feud over lunch (which I do), but about victims of violence, of fear, and politics.

The problem I encountered was, the more research I conducted, the more gaps I found in my grandparents' stories. While my grandmother remembers going to school every day disguised as a boy, she doesn't remember what she learned or how it made her feel. While my grandfather told harrowing stories of surviving in the jungle with his family he couldn't tell me how long they were there or when they decided to go back home. It wasn't that they were lying or telling me half-baked tales, it was more that the pitfalls of memory seemed to trump the experiences themselves. If, as Michael Pearson writes, 'memory is an archive like any other and can be used as such' (46), then I had to find other archives of memory, or testimonies, of the time. While I was surprised by how many stories I encountered that were similar to my grandmother's, I found that most were told through fiction, and others that were relayed as testimony were told with such frighteningly clear detail it verged on fiction itself. For example, while reading Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* (1995) I was impressed by how vividly she could recount every detail of her childhood, even those that were traumatic. But the more I read, and wrote, the more I found myself becoming sceptical—how did she remember it all? How much of it was memory and how much was added in to flesh out fragmented moments?

In her book *The Art of Memoir* (2015), Karr writes that between 'a vague memory and a clear one…It's the clear ones that matter most…because they're the ones you've nursed and worried over and talked through and wondered about your

whole life' (17). But even within the memories we think we know there's still unknowable elements: people's unexpressed reactions, the accuracy of time surrounding the event, where/why the event happened. Even after countless revisions I am unsure whether the details I have added or the words I have changed have made the memories clearer or less accurate to the moment of their conception. Which is why my memoir combines my grandparents' memories with the accounts of others who lived through the war. By filling in the gaps of my grandparents' stories with accounts of similar experiences I am attempting to write a story that remains faithful to those who lived through the occupation. A story that is more than just my opinion, shaped by what different people may remember in order to make my recounting of my grandparents' memories 'more cogent, probably more specific and more complex, as well' (Pearson 46).

Most of the research that has stemmed from Hirsch's concept of postmemory has been written and discussed through a very euro-centric lens. When you look at the memoirs discussed in relation to postmemory, names such as Eva Hoffman, will always be in circulation. In this essay I look at postmemory from a South East Asian and colonial perspective. This changes the parameters of questions that accompany the postmemorial journey. Approaching postmemory from an Eastern instead of Western perspective engages with ideas such as the power of silence and the transference of secrets. When looking at postmemory in relation to Puerto Rico the countries position as an American territory comes into play. In this view, the trauma is not only transferred between parent and child, but through the land itself. By placing the notion of postmemory in a different global and cultural context a part of my own intersectionality comes to surface. As someone who has been raised with both Eastern and Western notions the cross-roads between the two cultures are highlighted within my memoir and explored within the questions posed in this essay.

There is no singular way to write about one's family. It changes between author to author, depending on the cultural context and the family itself. What I have found to work in my memoir might not work in someone else's. But there are general connections, narrative techniques one chooses to reflect their situation. The often confusing disconnect between my two cultures is why I've chosen the three narratives I discuss in relation to postmemory. For not only are these authors steeped in their own cultural crossroads, but they too must come to terms with their backgrounds in a Western setting.

The canon of life writing is ever-expanding, as the world changes, as it becomes more diverse, more mixed, so will its stories. Pung, Vuong, even myself are a reflection of that change. As we cross borders both physical and mental we widen the history, the culture, and the experiences we bring to our new homes. What I bring is more than just the experience as a person of mixed-race. My identity is my ethnical background but it's also my cultural one as well, it's the politics of my social class as well as my gender. My aim through this memoir, and this is essay is to add to the canon, to continue pushing it forward. Eventually stories like *The Pretenders*, one's of mixed heritage, will move from the periphery to the mainstream. My investigation of the past, my foray into my inherited memories, are proof of such and will add to the ever-growing canon of life stories.

Case Studies

The first memoir I look at is *Her Father's Daughter* (2011) by Alice Pung. Pung's father, a survivor of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime, forms the crux of her narrative. His survival, as well as her life as a burgeoning adult in Australia, are documented in tandem throughout the memoir. Alternating chapters of her search for love and direction, with her father's lack of choice in his quest for survival, Pung shows that her identity could not be formed without his. As Couser points out, 'although there is an important conceptual distinction between writing about yourself and writing about another person, memoirs do not always do one *or* the other' (20). In Pung's memoir her father's narrative cannot exist without her own, as hers cannot exist without his, each relying on one another to form a narrative whole.

The filial narrative, *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), is written as a letter from the author, Ocean Vuong, to his mother. Vuong's mother, born to a Vietnamese woman and an unknown American soldier, sits at the heart of his memoir. A schizophrenic grandmother, and a first love, linger closely by, intertwining amongst the shadows of the Vietnam War and the drug ridden America they now reside in. 'What do we mean when we say survivor?' he asks, 'Maybe a survivor is the last one to come home, the final monarch that lands on a branch already weighted with ghosts' (Vuong *On Earth* 12). Blossoming with lines of delicate prose that explore the hurt of a country and its people, Vuong, like Pung, focuses on how war has shaped his parents and in turn has shaped him. Unlike Pung, Vuong does

not label his novel as a memoir, despite how closely it may resemble his own life and history.

Irene Vilar's, *The Ladies Gallery* (2009), first published as *A Message from God in the Atomic Age: A memoir* (1996), is the final memoir I consider in relation to postmemory. Comparing her mother, herself, and her grandmother, to sirens, Vilar weaves a narrative that flits between her days at a mental hospital, her mother's suicide, and her grandmother's imprisonment after firing a gun in the United States House of Representatives in the name of freedom for Puerto Rico. Like Pung, and Vuong, Vilar's memoir is filled with moments of interconnectivity between the different generations, using her grandmother's political outcry as the backdrop of her mother's and eventually her own depression. 'My inheritance?', Vilar explains at the start of her memoir, 'In School, a story that became a metaphor for me, a mask magnified by nostalgia. Granddaughter of a Puerto Rican nationalist, a woman who spent twenty-seven years of her life in the women's prison at Alderson, West Virginia' (2).

In Vilar's memoir as in Vuong's, and Pung's, the country itself is a metaphor for the trauma. Puerto Rico, now a territory, once a colony, is a country that has been historically ravaged by outsiders[2]. For Vilar, her country is at the forefront of her trauma, this shows in lines in which she writes the land and herself as mirrors for each other's pain. For all three authors the choice of genre, and the conduit between parent, child, and land, is deliberate. Exploring the idea of how trauma can pass from the land onto the parent and then the child themselves despite not being raised in the land where the trauma originated.

Looking at these texts I question how the author's I've examined write about their experiences with postmemory and how these narrative choices reflect the experiences themselves. The common link I have found when examining these texts is the importance of their structure. Their chosen structure determines the balance between the writer and their family. While Pung chooses to write in the third person for both her characters and alternates between the two perspectives Vilar chooses to write her memoir in the first person. Vuong chooses to write his family experiences

[2] José Trías Monge labels Puerto Rico 'the oldest colony in the world' (pp. 161), in *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World* (1997). Nelson A. Denis makes similar claims in *War Against All Puerto Ricans: Revolution and Terror in America's Colony* (2015).

but labels the end result as a novel. Each writer displays how they have dealt with their family's trauma in the way they've chosen to write about it.

In Chapter Two, I compare the myths that are constructed in order to build a nation with those needed to build a family legacy. My main concern is how myths can help sustain a family's legacy, therefore grounding an otherwise rootless sense of identity. I begin with discussing Singapore as a mythic nation and briefly cover the myths which surround Singapore's founding and its rise from a third to first world country within a generation. I chose to explore Singapore as the nation whose myths I focus on for two reasons: one, it is the nation my father is from and the nation which I have spent my most formative years residing in, and two, Singapore's positioning of its Prime Minister's memoir as a symbol for its success works similarly to how I have used my grandfather's stories.

Singapore is important not only in terms of physically locating my memoir but also in mirroring the myths which have built our family mythos. This mythos is something I examine in two parts. The first is through the myth of my ancestors sailing from China to Indonesia after the Second Opium War, and the second is through the myth of my grandfather burying the family jewels in the jungle only to retrieve them after the war in order to rebuild the family business. These myths are compared to the myths which are required in maintaining a family business and function not only in keeping the family united against outsiders, but also instil pride in the legacy which they are working to uphold.

The final myth I examine is what I would like to describe as the myth of 'Chineseness'[3]. As Chinse immigrants the importance of asserting ourselves as, or even feeling, Chinese, after decades of migration, is integral to my family's identity. Chapter Two ends with a discussion on Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's notion of *phantoms*, and how my memoir's supernatural elements function as a metaphor for the trauma that continues to haunt my family.

This leads to Chapter Three, where I contemplate the balance required between presenting a memoirist's truth and the privacy of their family. This is done by going over the ethical issues that arise when writing about one's family. The first

[3] I first encountered the term 'Chineseness' in Wang Gungwu's 'The Dilemmas of Place and Practice' (1999). In the essay Gungwu implies that 'Chineseness' is 'not absolute' and that 'One could be more or less Chinese at any one point in time' (119). Furthermore, Gungwu specifically compares Overseas Chinese like Singapore and San Francisco's Bay Area with Chinese from Shanghai and Hong Kong.

section of the chapter discusses concerns surrounding privacy and permission, while the following section transitions into the ethical challenges of memoir and how they can impact the creative process of writing from its inception all the way to its eventual reception by the public. As Vesna Goldsworthy remarks, 'even the most loving autobiography involves betrayals, and they do not necessarily end with the moment of publication. An obvious implication of writing a story with real-life characters is that their privacy remains an ongoing concern' (8). Privacy is usually the first concern anyone—even those with only a mild sense of obligation to the people they are writing about—thinks of when writing a memoir. Goldsworthy continues, 'there is no private sphere on the printed page… my "life" was being sent out into the world and ceasing to feel my own' (7). Once a memoir is out there, the lives the writer has recorded are no longer private, they can be scrutinized, empathized with, or even ridiculed. While it is one thing to put my life on to the printed page for people to judge, it is quite another if my family has given me permission (or hasn't) to use theirs. After all, no matter how much I consult with them, it is still my hand weaving the tale, my words.

When I first approached my father and asked his permission to use his story I don't think he quite understood what I meant. 'My life is very boring', he would say, 'I haven't really done anything.' It wasn't until I started showing him chapters of my memoir that he began to see what I was doing. 'Oh', he remarked one evening, 'Is that how you see it?' Despite our constant dialogue I still felt guilty, as though I was using his life for my own benefit. While he seemed satisfied with his identity being fictionalized, I felt that it was never quite fictional enough. Changing family members' names, writing difficult moments as fantasy, and using phrases like, 'I imagine', or 'Perhaps', are some of the ways I've attempted to handle these issues. Still I wonder, is it enough?

Of course, if we are discussing privacy, a discussion on ethics should follow. Concerns over the ethical issues of writing about my family were something I grappled with long before the first words of *The Pretenders* were written. While my father was relinquishing a company, I was reconstructing a legacy. While he saw it as an inheritance that could no longer survive amongst a splintered family, I saw it as an opportunity to put our history into writing. I wanted to memorialize what we were losing, but in doing so I was in danger of destroying the very thing I wanted to preserve. As Couser remarks, 'memoirists assume two distinct kinds of

responsibilities: first, to the biographical and historical record; second, to people they collaborate with or represent in their memoirs' (79).

Throughout the process of writing my memoir I have found that while privacy is ensuring what is meant to be secret is kept safe, ethics is what happens when the writer decides to air those secrets. The fact that I was scared to show my family what I had written spoke volumes about the weight I felt by adapting their identities into characters. It didn't help that the further I got into my memoir the more secrets I began to uncover. Some, casually thrown to me during conversations over dinner, and others told for purposes not related to the memoir. The division of what I was told in confidence, and told for the sake of my memoir became harder to differentiate.

When speaking of ethics in a memoir like *The Pretenders*, my responsibility as a writer doesn't stop with writing about my family. Pages written about my grandparents' history are also pages written about their history with war. Q.S. Tong and Ruth Hung suggest that Chinese memoirs which combine the personal with the historical, 'collectively and discursively form a textual space in which authors, publishers, and readers support, comfort, complement, and complete one another, and in which a community of sympathy is imagined and created' (66). This means as a memoirist I have an ethical responsibility not only to my grandparents' story, but to the history I am choosing to depict. If a memoirist's identity can be viewed in relation to the community they stem from then misinformation on a community's identity can be just as easily formed through a memoir.

Describing the danger of what she calls the subgenre of 'the Chinese *Gone with Wind*' Sau-ling Wong explains that these narratives all 'involve a multigenerational family saga interwoven with violent historical events… as well as a culminating personal odyssey across the ocean to the West' (73). For Wong these texts 'about China in turmoil' provide American readers with the 'concomitant satisfaction of self-congratulation and limited self-flagellation' (73). Or as Rocio G. Davis puts it 'an uncritically articulated superiority of the West over Asia' (36). As only half Chinese and raised with a Western mentality am I in danger of presenting my beliefs as more favourable than my grandparents' or even my father's desire to keep things inside? By placing my westernized views on their life stories am I not changing the lens of their stories and speaking for a community I only partly represent? The notion that a memoir is not only responsible for your family's

memories but to the memories that are experienced by the communities you belong to means that while it is important to pursue a self-investigation it is equally as important to see how the words you write represent those communities.

Even after completing the current version of my memoir I wonder if I have done my family and their history justice. If memory itself is unreliable then how can a memoirist be expected to present their readers with chapter after chapter of un-altered or un-revised memories? How can we balance the art of writing with our reality? Throughout this thesis I argue, that while research is always necessary, it is how that research is handled in the narrative's structure, voice, and choices in style, that determine the way issues of ethics and privacy are handled. As Rousseau discerns, 'Thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I' (622). I counter, if only it were that simple.

Chapter One: Structuring Postmemory through Memoir

‘It won't be tonight, but now I have an opening—a chance to ask Dad about his childhood, about the order of events that befell his parents, about how it affected his most turbulent years.’

(Liauw 20)

When I first started writing *The Pretenders*, I envisioned it as a relational memoir surrounding me and my father. In memoir, the term relational, is ‘used to refer to narrative that arises from, and is primarily concerned with, an intimate relationship’ (Couser 20). But when I started writing—slow, stiff, chapters—I realized that there was something missing. After all, there would be no company, no father, no story, without my grandparents. The intimacy was not as enclosed as I had first thought, it extended to the roots of a past that my father and I would be nothing without.

Maxine Hong Kingston, in her memoir, *The Woman Warrior* (1976), writes, ‘night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began’ (23). Like Kingston, I found that I could not separate my grandparents’ stories from my imagination. As a child I was told their stories of survival as plainly as if it were my every-day. Hearing stories of my grandmother running across rooftops and my grandfather burying the family jewels made my grandparents feel more like mythic heroes than the well-dressed and quiet people I visited every Sunday.

When I first started writing about my grandparents’ past I was filled with pride. Here was a story of children who witnessed unspeakable violence, who never used their pain as an excuse. Writing their chapters felt easy, I had historical research to help me and a thirst to see their stories told. What stopped me was not their story but my own. By writing their memories, I was as Marianne Hirsch describes, ‘dominated by narratives that preceded [my] birth,’ having my life stories ‘evacuated by the stories’ of my ancestors (1997: 22).

Before reading Marianne Hirsch’s *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997) I had no terminology for the feeling I was trying to record. For Hirsch, the term postmemory ‘characterizes the experience of those… [who are] shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated’ (1997: 22). To put it plainly, my story felt dominated by that of my grandparents. Chapters that focused on my privileged childhood, my loving parents and warm home seemed

empty in comparison to the reasons why my grandmother needed to disguise herself as a boy. Or, of my grandfather hidden in the jungle, dealing with the family members he lost and the ones he now had to care for. I felt that by writing about their experiences I was appropriating their pain in order to give my own existence meaning. I was humbled by their stories, but at the same time I felt displaced, as if my story could not be written on the same page. There was sadness in my words as I wrote the everyday life of my character, but unlike the sadness that haunted my grandparents, mine was unexplainable.

In her memoir, *Her Father's Daughter*, Alice Pung presents us with a similar feeling of displacement in the face of her father's history. When writing of her search to find love, Pung has trouble removing herself from the dangerous landscape her parents' love story begins in. She writes, 'her parents had spent their honeymoon in the jungles along the Thai-Cambodian border, fleeing from the Khmer Rouge. For true intensity of experience, you could not beat that' (2011: 37). In her own life, Pung writes about the trouble she has making connections, and her fear of investing in a sustainable relationship. Throughout her memoir, she refers to her heart as a 'deformed dumpling' (2011: 28) and a 'rotting fruit' (2011: 32). For Pung, her parents' love is given validity through the pain they had to endure in order to be together, while any love she experiences herself feels lacklustre in comparison.

In *The Ladies Gallery*, Irene Vilar writes about her battle with depression alongside the story of her mother's suicide, and her grandmother's imprisonment after firing a gun in the United States House of Representatives. Though her grandmother, Lolita Lebrón, was considered a hero for Puerto Rican nationalists for Vilar she was an absent figure, a looming shadow that haunted her every move[4]. For Vilar, the process of recording her family's secret history is a mediating force for her depression, a way to explore her trauma as she attempts to find the point where her memories end and her present emerges. Vilar writes:

> All those familiar (or unfamiliar) witnesses swirl about you, as you think or write: memory enlarged or diminished by whatever happened or could have happened. And just as those voices eventually become you as you write, you,

[4] On March 1, 1954, Lolita Lebrón, accompanied by three fellow nationalists and wrapped in the Puerto Rican flag, fired on five congressmen in the visitors' gallery of the U.S. Congress. Though no one was killed Lebrón was sentenced to fifty-seven years in prison. Twenty-seven of those were served before she received a pardon from President Jimmy Carter. (Carlin Romano, Foreword of the Ladies Gallery)

in turn, to make your story meaningful become part of those voices, a closing of the circle that is endurable only as you write. (17)

Though the authors of these memoirs stem from different backgrounds they both focus on the author's relationship with a family member that has been impacted by violence. Because of the trauma their family has experienced these authors go out in search of their history in order to understand how their past affects their present. What interests me about these texts are the narrative choices the authors employ in recounting their violent history and how these choices help them come to terms with their own identity. These choices are examined in three parts. First, in how structure and perspective can mediate the imbalance in power between memoirist (child) and subject (parent). Second, in how these devices are used in order to write about violence one has not witnessed. Finally, how the diaspora of the author's family comes into play when a memoirist wants to reconcile their parents' traumatic past with their own 'peaceful' upbringing. These themes are reflected in my own writing where I've employed similar narrative choices in order to present both my story and my family's as being a vital part of one another's tale.

Like Pung and Vilar I found that in order to understand my present I needed to look to my past. What followed was a questioning of which parts of my family history were necessary for my memoir. Phillip Lopate states that 'Ethnicity, gender, class, geography…are all strong determinants in the development of character' but can become 'the worst sort of 'identity politics'' (41). While Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Caroline Kyungah Hong posit that the aforementioned 'quadrants of identity writing—have proven both un-evadable and unsatisfactory' (4). In my own writing and research, I have found that when it comes to relational memoirs that deal with intergenerational trauma, this need to understand, to categorize our history is often unavoidable. When a struggle to understand a disrupted past exists, especially in the face of a family's silence, we often need these categories in order to help us understand what is not being said. Often it is not what we have inherited from these quadrants that shape our identity but what we no longer share with them.

A memoir that charts a family's migration often has two parts, the first being where the family has come from and the second where their children now reside. Memoirs like Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991) and Xiaolu Guo's *Once Upon a Time in the East* (2017) begin with their family's history in China before ending with the author's migration to England. As Guo describes in the

end of her memoir, 'surrounded by boxes in a London flat, the narrative of my past had been brought to a close. The beginning and end echoed each other' (316). For my family the fact that my father is Chinese, male, and raised in Indonesia says as much about ourselves as the fact that I am female, half-Chinese, and raised with an American passport. Though this gap in identifiers can create a further divide when it comes to understanding my family's trauma, perhaps by piecing the past and the present together a better understanding of the trauma's place in my history can be made. Salman Rushdie compares this reconstruction of the past to archaeology, and how 'The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects' (2017:35). Still, by being tethered to the 'identity quadrants' that form my family, and, in turn, myself I often find myself caught between a need for independence and the trauma that continues to haunt my family.

Considering the cycle of trauma between parent and child, Hirsch wonders if we were to, '*adopt* the traumatic experiences of others as experiences we might ourselves have lived through, if we inscribe them into our own life story, can we do so without imitating or unduly appropriating them?' (2016: 114). If a relational memoir is based on the traumatic experiences of the memoirist's family, is it possible for the memoirist and their family to be presented on equal terms? In my own memoir I am forced to consider whether my grandparents' memories have been written to justify my own, or whether they are necessary in shaping the story of who I am? By writing their experiences, I am in constant danger of altering them, of revising their words and memories to the point at which they cease to be theirs. The answer, I have realized, is as complex as the question: this story isn't just my family's, it is my story too.

In Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's short story, 'In a Grove' (1922), a crime is relayed three times, each narrated by a different character. As each version is told the facts from the previous account are obscured, creating a narrative which not only questions how the characters present the truth, but people's inability to do so. My memoir follows a similar structure. The narrative begins with my grandfather going to bury the family jewels in the jungle, an event which is alluded to by each family member as their own story takes place. For each family member this story represents a point in history which they look back on, but varies in how it impacts their present-day life. This structure of a present event being a direct correlation to

one in the past is used again to mirror a lunch with my grandmother with her loneliness as a child. The extravagance and attention my grandmother demands from her family during lunch is softened by the image of a child who has no family or possessions. By interlacing these separate narratives I've attempted to devise a path that makes the placement of each chapter what Robin Hemley calls 'a silent commentary on the other through their juxtaposition' (64). By composing the structure of my memoir in this format I am questioning the way each family member perceives the other while attempting to show how their past impacts their version of the truth.

In her text *Relating Narratives* (1997), Italian philosopher, Adriana Cavarero states that an identity is, 'from beginning to end, intertwined with other lives—with reciprocal exposures and innumerable gazes—and needs the other's tale' (88). If one cannot live without the other, then as much as my grandfather—digging through the dirt for buried heirlooms after the war to re-start what would become our family's business—builds the story of how I came to be, the story of me—living a full and happy life thanks to his struggles—is the story of where his life has come to end. In *The Pretenders*, I have attempted to demonstrate this 'need for the others tale' by intertwining my narrative with that of my grandparents. When a chapter recounting my grandmother's childhood ends, a chapter focusing on my struggles as a teenager begins, each chapter building off one another in order to convey the idea that each narrative is as important as the other. This structure of weaving perspectives is also employed in *Her Father's Daughter and The Ladies Gallery.* By conveying the duality of parent and child the structure of both Pung and Vilar's memoirs mirror their search for their identity amongst their family's traumatic backgrounds.

In *Her Father's Daughter*, Alice Pung presents us with two accounts: the first, her family's experiences in Cambodia during and after Pol Pot's regime; the second, Pung's adult life in Australia as she searches for independence and love. Labelling Pung's memoir as a 'postmemoir' Anne Brewster theorizes that 'If her father represents those who lived through the Cambodian Killing Fields, Pung is a member of the second-generation who internalise through…postmemory, the bodily and psychic after-effects of the trauma their parents experienced' (315-16). Written as what Pung sees as a 'conversation between a father and a daughter,' (2012: 44) the memoir's alternating chapters narrate a story that both begins and ends on the Cambodian killing fields. This structure of mirroring a traumatic past with an

otherwise mundane present is apparent throughout her memoir as she blends her search for love and happiness with chapters of her father's experiences with death and destruction. Speaking of the thought process behind this decision, Pung states that she wanted to, 'combine the everyday Anne-Tyler-type events of my father's current life in suburban Australia with the blinding flashes of unimaginable apocalyptic hell, to create a new kind of art that says quietly but clearly—this is how survivors live and love: slowly, patiently, and doggedly' (2012: 47).

By creating a structure built through alternating chapters titled 'Father' and 'Daughter', Pung ends up producing two stories that can be read individually but are more powerful when combined. Brewster suggests that it is through the shifting perspectives that 'we see the emergence of a second-generation diasporic imaginary' (315). For example, in a chapter titled 'The Knife' her father warns her of a knife her mother has recently purchased. Pung writes, 'it wasn't enough for him to hide all the knives in the kitchen drawers every evening before bed. Her father took the new knife into the garage and started to saw off the pointy tip with another knife' (2011:94). In another chapter her father yells at her when she doesn't pick up her phone. In her father's perspective Pung writes, 'He didn't have the words to explain to his daughter why he needed to know. If you don't know where your children are, anything could happen to them, even in daylight' (2011:108). Though seemingly innocent in their nature these moments have direct connotations to her father's experiences with the Black Bandits. By presenting her father's traumatic past and their family's 'every-day' styled present Pung shows that her father's past is something that is indispensable to her present.

Another narrative choice Pung makes is presenting both her and her father's narratives in the third-person. Through the usage of third-person Pung is able to create equal distance from herself and her father as characters allowing the reader to feel as if both characters are speaking on equal terms. In an essay discussing the conception of her memoir Pung writes, 'to write about myself in first person while leaving my father in third is to try and own a significantly larger portion of the story than I was due: a reader would probably then read the book as me *telling a story about my father, from my perspective*' (2012: 44). By having both characters in the third person, along with a structure that alternates between the father and daughter's perspectives, Pung attempts to give both narratives equal weight without claiming her father's story as her own.

While Pung's memoir focuses on her relationship with her father, Vilar's is about the women in her life. Trapped under the powerful force of the women who came before her Vilar attempts to form an identity separate from her family. Yet the further she tries to distance herself from their past, the more she cycles back to their beginning. This loop is something Vilar's structure imitates. From the very beginning of her memoir Vilar informs us that she believes she is a product of her mother and grandmother's suffering. She writes:

> Repetition informs my life. A teacher of mine once told me not to fear repetition, "Just don't be blacklisted by it." Well, I am the product of repetitions. Of family secrets. Every family has its own; usually it is the untold family story a child is destined unwittingly to repress, or to repeat. We inherit these secrets the way we inherit shame, guilt, desire. And we repeat. (2)

This repetition is mirrored through her memoir as she seamlessly weaves her time at a mental hospital with the lives of her mother and grandmother. With the questions she asks herself, and the questions posed by her doctor, Vilar creates narrative links to a past she believes holds the answers. This tactic is shown in Chapter Seven when her father wonders how she ended up in the hospital. When he asks if it is her time in college that has her burnt out she is unsure of what to tell him. She writes, 'How can I tell him? We'd have to go back to the beginning. But to what beginning?' (76). In the following chapter Vilar goes through a list of important moments in Puerto Rican nationalist history before focusing on the day where her grandmother walks into the United States House of Representatives. By placing chapters focused on her stay at the mental hospital before chapters focused on her grandmother's imprisonment and her mother's suicide Vilar questions how much of her inner struggle comes from her own experiences and how much stems from her family's history.

Unlike Pung, Vilar does not use the third person to narrate her perspective. When speaking of her decision to write in the first person Vilar writes, 'Maybe it's true that by shifting to the third person or the impersonal you can achieve distance. As far as I'm concerned, that makes me feel like I'm partner to a basically hostile world' (35). By employing the first person the reader gets a more in-depth view of Vilar's struggles but less distance from the events themselves. There is not a single event described in the memoir that isn't coated with emotion and subjectivity, leaving the reader with a weighted version of events. Perhaps the difference between Pung's

choice of third person and Vilar's choice of first lies in the fact that Vilar has directly witnessed violence herself, watching as her mother threw herself from a moving car. The fact that the violence has been witnessed first-hand is reflected in the voice itself. It is Vilar's experience with trauma, therefore it is told in her voice. Yet the story Vilar weaves is not only her own, but her mother's, and grandmother's, Lolita Lebrón, as well. Brandishing Vilar's words into the realm of fiction Lebrón has stated that she doesn't care to read her granddaughter's memoir for she is sure it is 'full of lies' (Ojito).

In *The Pretenders* I wanted the structure to mirror the concept of postmemory, to convey the idea that, even though I was living a life independent of my grandparents' past, I was still influenced by it. This meant that my character-self and my actual-self needed to get past the idea that my life is something lacklustre in comparison to that of my family's. It meant accepting that their story is as much my story as my story is theirs; that one story cannot survive without the other. By creating an intertwining structure of parent and child instead of having my stories 'evacuated' as Hirsch suggests, by those of my grandparents, their stories have given meaning to my own.

Like Vilar, I realize that in using my family's stories I am claiming them, changing their truths into my own by the act of writing them. This is why I have employed the first-person when speaking in my character's voice and third-person when recounting my family's stories. By writing in first-person I want the reader to know that I am taking agency in my truth, presenting the events as best as I can recall. When I write in third-person I want the reader to realize I am recording events with a brush of fiction, meaning skewed by my perspective and not exactly as my family members might've written themselves. This blending of first and third person is meant to create a more balanced feel of narrative ownership. I may write what I think my family feels but it is the characters I have created for them that are speaking these emotions, not my family themselves.

A memoir's structure determines how the story develops in the reader's mind. It can point out different versions of the 'truth' without blatantly contradicting them, using its structure as both metaphor and plot. Postmemory doesn't have to be detrimental to one's writing, it can be an exemplification of past and present coming to terms with one another. As Linda Anderson writes, identity is, 'ever shifting and changing—since like memory it forgets, selects and re-arranges—the story once

crystallized is inevitably the story of an ‘exposure’ to the world, of our relations with others.’ (118). This can be seen in the relationship between the authors I have examined and their texts. How the authors write about their trauma relates to how they’ve experienced the trauma themselves. Vilar was a first-hand witness to her mother’s suicide, hence the first-person. Pung is speaking about her father’s memories, and how those memories leak into her present, hence the third-person. The memories of my grandparents are still present, having worked their way through my father and now, through my memoir. This is reflected in *The Pretender’s* structure and its choice of slipping between first and third person. By blending chapters of the past with the present, between family members and myself, the memoir’s structure serves as a metaphor for my identity. As much as my memoir is a story of ‘what we have been’ it is also a story of what we have become. Just as I am a spring board for our family’s future I am also a conduit to our past.

The Repetition of Violence

In my memoir the effect the occupation has on the decisions my grandparents make is a repeated notion, one used to reason the more self-preserving and self-destructive traits that they fashioned during the war. My grandmother’s need for expensive food, the array of canned goods and toilet paper that she keeps well-stocked, my grandfather’s desire to rebuild his home town and his obsessive need to make decisions for his family, are all attributed to the occupation. Inversely, it also works as a way for the characters who exist post-occupation, my father and myself, to reason our failures and inability to be happy. Constantly comparing our lives and actions to those of a time we never lived in, we are caught in a history whose impact is in danger of lessening the more it is repeated.

In her collection of essays, *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag argues that, ‘while an event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been had one never seen the photographs, after repeated exposure it also becomes less real’ (2003:94). Writing about the occupation has had a similar effect, the more I wrote about these events the less real they seemed, becoming more plot points in my mind than actual events that happened.

As I wrote about my grandparents’ experiences during the occupation their stories began to transform from real-life events into carefully constructed narratives,

changing each time I had to adjust a sentence or subtract a word to fit the plot. I feared that by repeating my grandparents' narrative of survival I not only lessoned the importance of their experience but desensitized the reader to the violence by using it as an explanation. The fact that I would be writing a story that didn't solely belong to my grandparents, but to a generation of survivors that are either dead or entering their nineties filled me with a lingering panic that I was recounting their experiences incorrectly. After all, how could I write about violence I was never witness to?

Cathy Caruth proposes that it is, 'in the equally widespread and bewildering encounter with trauma—both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it—that we can recognize the possibility of a history which is no longer straightforwardly referential' (182). In other words, my grandparents' experience with trauma was something that could change, morphing with the passage of time. The way they recalled their past depended on a variety of fluctuating factors, such as time, location, intention or audience—the details told would never be exactly the same. Furthermore, their memories would transform with my recording of them. By turning spoken experiences into written ones their very nature could change through whatever omission, or added detail, I've inserted to complete the picture that memory cannot. Even if I wanted to remain as faithful as possible, the barrier of my understanding versus my grandparents' experience is something I would not be able to replicate.

While there are various strategies that memoirists might employ to tackle the faultiness of memory, my memoir's structure is what balances my lack of personal experience with my attempt to understand the violence my grandparents have witnessed. It is through the careful positioning of my memoir's chapters that my imagination and my family's history are able to come together. Sociologist Robin Wagner-Pacifi states that, 'memories are understood to occupy a meaningful distance… from actual events that have, essentially, ended. This distance can come in several forms: temporal, spatial, cognitive, emotional and experiential' (22). In my memoir I do not relay the entire lives of my family to the reader, instead I weave moments that feed off each other despite their location in time. By skipping through time, from my present experiences to my father's childhood in the 1960s, from the near present to the 1940s, I attempt to give space to the events that formed my family's legacy allowing past experiences to feed their emotions into present ones.

This is done to mirror the working of memory itself in attempt to say that though these events have ended they continue to resonate, effecting both the emotional and physical space of the present.

Take the prologue for example, though written in a hopeful tone it clarifies the perils of the occupation, alluding briefly to the death of my grandfather's brother. The prologue speaks of the violence without going into gory detail, following my grandfather's thoughts as he makes his way through the jungle in order to recount the violence he has witnessed since the occupation began. I chose the scene of my grandfather burying the family jewels as the prologue because it presents the reader with the themes that continue to affect my family throughout the memoir. The rubber business, my grandparents, the occupation, they are my family's roots, the ones we turn to when there is uncertainty or when we are looking for something to blame**.** The determination and planning that my grandfather shows in the face of violence is something that the rest of the family holds themselves against when faced with their own decisions long after the war has ended.

When writing about my grandmother's experiences during the occupation I try to write in a manner that mimics her age at the time. Her obsession as an adult with games of chance is something I compare to her time spent as a child passing her uncle's radio throughout the neighbourhood. By turning the experience of running and hiding into a game of tag and hide and seek I attempt to balance the fear she must have felt as a child with the way she would tell me her stories as an adult. If she felt fear, if she felt the weight of her childhood, she never spoke of it. Her stories did not change when I became an adult, nor did they change when told to my father. When writing my grandmother's experiences as a child I found myself relying on testimonies by other women who were children during the occupation. This meant looking at recorded interviews from The National Archives of Singapore, or reading novels like Jing-Jing Lee's *How We Disappeared* (2019), and Meira Chand's *A Different Sky* (2010), to get a sense of the child my grandmother was. Kwok Kian-Woon and Roxana Waterson argue that 'there are many ways in which narratives can fade or fail, or be maintained or sustained through generations, for transmission requires also an effort of imagination by the recipients to enter into an experience which is not their own.' (330). The fictional and actual women I read and studied soon became a part of Feng, my grandmother's character, allowing an understanding to my grandmother's history that she kept behind closed lips.

As a child I never questioned what my grandmother chose to share. Family dinners were spent discussing what I planned to do with my future not what had happened in the past. My grandparents and I had a ‘traditionally hierarchical relationship’, one that Kwok and Waterson suggest ‘hinders transmission and inhibits children from asking questions’ (337). In a Chinese family it is not a child’s place to push for answers, respecting the fact that silence is ‘regarded as resilience [and] empowerment’ (337). This way of thinking deeply contrasted my Puerto Rican upbringing, one in which my mom encouraged communication as an avenue for healing.

For writers like Alice Pung and I, growing up in a country that encourages speaking out as an avenue for healing rather than the silence our South East Asian origins encourage, resonates in the way we write about our parents. While her father believes that action is what allows a person to move on, Pung believes it is words. Pung conveys this urge to speak out against her father’s silence multiple times throughout her memoir. Channelling his perspective, she writes:

> After his daughter returned from her first trip to China, pallid-faced and sunken cheeked, she kept asking him questions. Tactful ones, because of course she’d probably read up on books about post-traumatic stress disorder or whatever rubbish Western psychologists had made up to stop a person from moving on in life, to extract exorbitant sums by sitting them down and making them talk. Talk led to nothing and nowhere. It was action that got a man places, that pulled him up and out of the quagmire and into a new country, out of the factories and into the glory of self-sufficiency in his own business. (197)

The fact that memoirists like Pung are raised in a country removed from where their family’s trauma originated means there is a disconnect between what they wish to write about and what their parents rather keep close to their chest. This duality is something I attempt to express in my own memoir. My character Mercy finds herself weighed down by this ‘silence’ as she attempts to understand a past that leaks into the everyday moments of her present[5]. Take for example the scene where Mercy goes to eat porridge with her father. Trapped under the weight of the words they’ve never shared she tells him that she wants to learn about his past,

[5] By silence I am referring to the purposeful absence of sound. According to Jay Winter, silence ‘is a socially constructed space in which and about which subjects and words normally used in everyday life are not spoken’ (3). Winter maintains that silence is the ‘difference between the sayable and the unsayable’ (3).

asking him to recount the violence his family has witnessed. Instead of delving into what he shares with Mercy that evening the chapter ends, transitioning into her father's childhood from a third-person perspective. This is done to show that while my father has witnessed violence it is not him which wishes to speak, but rather myself. The reason I have written the scene in this way is an attempt to speak on the silence. To show that my father's lack of sharing has led to the need of imagination on my part in order to fill in the gaps. To quote R.F. Kuang, 'Our parents would have us forget. But we had to go digging' (Uncanny Magazine). By imagining what has happened instead of being told I am writing myself into my family's memories. This form of postmemory, one mediated through fiction, can be seen as just as powerful, 'because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation' (Hirsch 1996: 662).

Another way I structure the recounting of violence in my memoir is by placing the events of the occupation in the second half of the narrative. It is through my grandfather's eyes that the reader witnesses the destruction of his home and the death of his brother. Even then I write the event as a dream, echoing the position my grandfather holds in my mind. Using the idea of an absent loved one to discuss Jean Paul Sartre's line between the imagined and the real Albert Fowler writes:

> The love felt for the person present in flesh and blood is not at all the same as that felt for the remembered image. The beloved person is an inexhaustible source of wonder and surprise, constantly revealing more than can be anticipated, more than can be imagined. But the image of the absent lover is poor by comparison, barely able to fill the remembered form, much less overflowing its definitions or exceeding its limits, and the love it evokes has lost richness and depth and spontaneity. In both instances the imaginary feeling struggles to produce the object of the real feeling, but nothing will fill in that annoying impression of emptiness which lies at the root of the imaginary process. (267)

A memoir is much like a dream in this sense, walking the hazy border between fact and fiction, blending moments of reality with imagination. The image I create of my grandfather is more a remembered image than the actual man himself. What I write him as is what he becomes since there is no longer a real grandfather to subvert the imaginary grandfather. Meaning my grandfather will always hold a position of wonder in my mind, one that cannot be dispelled since he is no longer

alive. By taking what I remember of his memories and turning it into a dream I am admitting that what I write is imagined and not reality. Discussing the relationship between memory and imagination Sartre theorizes that when a person imagines their brain creates an image, scenario, or experience that defies reality and logic (2010). Through the process of imagination, a person can create different possibilities and futures. In Fowler's words 'The dreamer is spellbound, haunted by adventures, by events, by characters he cannot watch with reflection, with discernment or perspective, but only with a sense of fatality' (268). I will never be able to fathom the violence my grandfather witnessed nor can I speak to him of his experiences. All that I have left are his memories transformed by my imagination. By writing my grandfather's past as a dream I am recreating his memories, changing them from the real to the imagined. In a way it echoes the position my grandfather holds in my mind. A dream reconstructed through memoir. If memory, like Sartre surmises, is your brain creating an image, or experience that is rooted in, or a copy of, reality (2010), then my memoir is that copy. A recreation, or representation, of an event that only exists in the past.

For Alice Pung the notion of violence was something that she grew up with. In an interview discussing the themes of *Her Father's Daughter* Pung states, that 'for children of ''survivor' parents… growing up means that you have a more deeply ingrained sense of mortality. I remember knowing about death at four years old, because the adults around me talked about it so matter-of-factly to each other' (Bond). Though much of *Her Father's Daughter* focuses on the experience of her family members during Pol Pot's regime, these events do not come into play until halfway through the memoir. By delaying the violence her father experienced in Cambodia with stories of his life in Australia, Pung transforms the trauma into the likeness of the 'everyday' mirroring the 'matter-of-fact' way she heard it relayed as a child.

The 'everyday' or 'everyday life' is what Phillip Wander describes as the 'dull routine, the ongoing go-to-work, pay-the-bills, homeward trudge of daily existence' (vii). The 'everyday' is experienced 'in relation to the society in which we live' and is the 'product of a number of decisions in which we do not participate and about which we may or may not be aware' (viii). For Pung the violence her father witnessed is shown in these moments of routine. In the day to day activities which are disrupted

by the anxieties of his past. Pung shows this in the way she reflects on her father's actions. She writes:

> There was Dismemory in his trying to cut off the sharp tip of a knife with another knife, and Dismemory in the way he wrapped an unpeeled banana in cling wrap so it would not be contaminated in his children's school bags. Dismemory in the way he surrounded himself with a kaleidoscope of ever-evolving electronics. There was Dismemory when he took walks near the Maribyrnong River and feared drowning, and Dismemory in the way he plotted that she would either move back home or stay inside the college. (2011:191-92)

By reflecting on her father's trauma in this manner the violence can be even more jarring than presenting it from the beginning of the memoir because it disrupts what Pung calls 'the refugee-turned-success narrative' (2012:45). For the trauma doesn't stop when her father leaves Cambodia, nor does it subside once he's settled in his life in Australia. Instead it permeates throughout his 'everyday' actions. Maurice Halbwachs theorizes that 'it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories.' (38) In other words, it is when the anxiety, the overwhelming reminders of the past, leak into the everyday that the violence is re-lived. The violence once experienced continues to be experienced even as the event subsides and routine takes place.

Though Pung's descriptions of violence do not hold back any horrors, the visuals she presents us with describe the strangeness she feels towards how her father has internalized the events. For example, during a trip to Cambodia Pung is surprised at how 'calmly and casually' her father and uncle spoke with an 'old man who had once headed the children's army in their collective' as if he 'were some ordinary neighbour with whom they had shared a street' (2011:216). Pung labels this reaction to the past as 'goldfish memory spans' (2011:216), or an act of 'Dismemory', a term Pung creates to describe 'a memory that you had deliberately forgotten to remember' (2011:191). For Pung the violence her family experienced in Cambodia and their life in Australia are not removed, they are a part of each other, apparent in their day to day actions. Which is why Pung doesn't write the violence as something separate from her struggle in understanding her father—a struggle that she describes as universal (2012).

The intermingling of anxieties learned from the war with the routine of my grandparents' current lives, such as moments spent shopping, or quiet meals as a family is something I posit throughout my memoir. For example, in a section which recounts my grandmother's experience during the occupation I write, 'Feng helps her mother stash cans of condensed milk, the little rice they have left, and some fermented vegetables and cloth. When they pack their clothes, Feng tries to take the shiny red dress she'd received the New Year before from one of the women her mother plays cards with, but her mother shakes her head' (100). Later in the memoir when the reader encounters my grandmother as an older woman I mention her need for a stocked cupboard. I write, 'Feng wishes her children could see Eddie's kindness. How at her request he stocks their storeroom with toiletries and canned food. A lifetime's supply of bottled water, crackers, condensed milk, toilet paper and rice.' (133). This shows that even though the violence has ended, it is in the everyday moments that it becomes most poignant, continuing to permeate throughout my family long past the event.

Postmemory and Diaspora

The biographical works I have mentioned in this chapter are discussed not only because they relate to *The Pretenders* in terms of postmemory, but because of the concepts of identity they cover as well. As writers that grew up in the cross-sections of culture we find disconnects between what our family has learned from the lands they've left and what we've learned from the environments we've been placed in. What I'm suggesting is that postmemory is not exclusive between parent and child, but between the parent's birth country and child as well. Alessandro Fasulo writes that, 'places are not separate from autobiographical events, but inevitably always part of the memories themselves, whether or not they feature explicitly in the recollection' (311). This link between country and identity is something I allude to often, frequently comparing my growth to that of Singapore. Early on in the memoir I write:

> My garden city—always growing, learning what to keep, what to throw out. This city with its clean streets, hiding CCTV in every corner of every shop, every alley. Me with my girlish demeanour, an easy smile, wide-eyed and easy to deceive. What do we work so hard to hide? (16)

This scene compares what it means to be a nation recently (fifty-six years) independent with a person learning to be independent from their family, and how in their discovery both nation and person find that it is not so easy to separate themselves from their past. Even when I leave Singapore this comparison to my home country remains when people question where I am from. The fact that the writers I have discussed are removed from the countries in which their parent's trauma originated furthers their need to reconcile their parent's past. By writing about these countries they attempt to not only understand their parents but the parts of themselves that are reflected in the land. Historian Thum Ping Tjin writes:

> Even when we have found our independence, we can remain fundamentally colonial in nature—suggesting that, though we may be physically independent, the decolonization of our intellectual and psychological spheres may never take place, binding us to a past we may struggle to relinquish. (27)

Though Tjin is discussing Singapore, and its transformation from a colony to an independent nation, the same thought can be applied to a child leaving a parent. The fusing of one's individual nature with the environment one's parents have nurtured are essential in developing the cornerstones of one's selfhood. The fact that these writers no longer live in the country where their parents' trauma originated propels their need for reconciliation with the land and the memories they've inherited.

Both Vuong and Pung are the first generation in America and Australia respectively—Vuong's family immigrated from Vietnam, and Pung's from Cambodia— meaning they bring not only a generational separation from their family's trauma but a cultural one as well. For Vilar the migration is reversed. Raised in Puerto Rico she moves to America for university, returning to the country which her family's trauma originated, the land her grandmother fought to be free from. In *The Pretenders* my family is constantly displaced. Due to the changing political climate after the Second World War anti-Chinese sentiments began to rise forcing my family to leave Indonesia for London[6]. After only a few years in London my father returned to South East Asia now a cultural foreigner to his Chinese classmates. Like Singapore itself, living in London had changed him. Just as Singapore's past as a

[6] This sentiment is debated throughout my memoir, whether or not my family left for London for reasons which were political, economic, or personal, is still up for debate. My family has never mentioned the events which are recorded in Geoffrey B. Robinson's *The Killing Season* (2018) and so anything I write is postulation.

British colony is reflected in its modern identity so is my father's time spent there reflected in his.

Questions such as, 'where are you from?', might appear simple for some, but for children of diaspora it is one that can be accompanied with sweat-slicked anxiety. Writing about her confusion on what to fill out on her university forms, Vilar remarks on how easy it is for a fellow student she meets at registration to claim to be American. She writes:

> Naturally, I didn't consider myself American, although I didn't really know what to consider myself. Hispanic female? Margarita and I both came from the island, we had more or less the same color of skin, we were both educated girls, middle class. But one of us must be lying about her nationality. (42)

Labelled by Jose Trías Monge as the 'world's oldest colony' (161), Puerto Rico has been passed from its original inhabitants, the Taíno, to the Spanish, and finally the United States after the Spanish-American War. For Puerto Ricans like Vilar, their identity is convoluted by the fact that though they were raised with a different background than other Americans they are American through passport. Even then the 'Spanishness' that Puerto Rican's like Vilar might feel is ingrained in their culture is not wholly Spanish either. Vilar remarks on this difference while visiting her relatives in Spain.

> Suddenly we had more family, people with the same last name and the same eyes who sat at the table, drank wine with sardines, olives, olive oil, conversed in shouts at mealtime, mingling Castilian and Valencian words. (209)

Ocean Vuong expresses similar confusion when trying to describe his mother. He writes, 'I'm breaking us apart again so that I might carry us somewhere else—where, exactly, I'm not sure. Just as I don't know what to call you—White, Asian, orphan, American, mother?' (2019:62). As his mother leaves Vietnam behind for America she must reconcile the effects the war has had on her psyche in her new home, inversely as Vuong grows up in America he needs to understand the trauma he's inherited from the war in Vietnam. Both mother and son have been cast adrift, displaced by their countries they must find a way to help each other in their shared yet individual trauma. If a 'country's fiction' can indeed 'provide an important site of memory from which to renegotiate the meaning of the past in order to imagine a future' (Berry and Cole 6), then Vuong's immigration from Vietnam to America, and

the ideals he has come to covet growing up in America in contrast to the ones formed in his mother's Vietnam, are important in understanding the transference of memories from mother to son.

Looking at Vuong's novel, history appears not only like a form of collective memory but cultural as well, mediated through 'an art of memory' (Olick) as it passes from mother to son through the lens of their migration. Vuong writes, 'I am writing to you from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son' (2019:10). If we are to see his mother and the Vietnam War as landscapes from which Vuong has emerged, then these landscapes have embedded a history within him, simply through the fact that he was born from his mother, just like his mother was born from war. These landscapes, geographical, and relational, are key in understanding how his inherited memories are reasoned in his novel. This comparison of the countries which are a part of him can be seen in the way he writes about his mother's life in Vietnam and his own life in Connecticut. Passages that recount Vietnam are shrouded in a sort of mythical-mystery while Hartford is seen in a blunter, matter of fact lens.

Lily Cho argues that 'no one is born diasporic. Rather, one *becomes* diasporic' (21). By longing to return to the place where their parent's trauma began the memoirist engages with the diaspora, the loss, related to the country their parents were forced to leave. This desire to understand their parent's country is amplified by their parent's inability to return. Take Alice Pung for example, though she returns to both China and Cambodia, the land itself feels empty. At the start of her memoir Pung makes her way to China for a writer's residency in search of an 'authentic feeling to bring back home' (2011:21). When she gets there, she finds 'no such luck', for 'Things would go in, but not much came out' (2011:21). The mythologized homeland, the 'Middle Kingdom' (2011:5) her father speaks of is just that. A memory, a feeling of loss, rather than something that can be gained from the country itself. When Pung finally returns to Cambodia with her father she feels the same loss describing it as a 'country she would never understand, but that had shaped her father and made him who he was' (2011:217). This expectation for an epiphany a sense of closure in the lost land is created from the unknown, from the silences that create an overwhelming desire to understand the land her parents had to leave.

In Cambodia, Pung not only returns with her father but also visits the site of his trauma. Together they make their way to the killing fields, the place where Pung begins recounting her father's tale in *Her Father's Daughter,* and ends her own narrative upon. Speaking of this visit she writes:

> The field left her exposed, as no other place in the world had, left her standing there with her loved ones, realising how little she knew about anything or anyone, even how very little she knew about herself. (2011:214)

In this passage Pung is hinting that she expected to find resolution in the land where her father's trauma originated. Brewster remarks that this 'foregrounds her positionality as a second-generation Asian-Australian of Chinese-Cambodian descent who identifies not with the originary trauma of the Killing Fields but with its diasporic inter-generational and transnational after-effects' (320). Instead of giving her answers the field makes her feel empty, making her realize that perhaps it is not the land itself which holds the answers but the idea of the land.

Though she may have physically left the location of her trauma behind, we follow Vilar as she spends her adolescence in a boarding school in New Hampshire, then in a convent, and later in Spain as a teenager, watching as her past haunts her no matter where she goes. 'Memory', Vilar writes, 'works on its own, it invents, draws circles that never end' (26). Though Vilar may no longer live physically in Puerto Rico, her emotional ties to her mother and grandmother and the country that shaped them keep her from moving on, leaving both body and mind displaced. As Eugenio María de Hostos once wrote, 'How sad and overwhelming and shameful it is to see [Puerto Rico] go from owner to owner without ever having been her own master, and to see her pass from sovereignty to sovereignty without ever ruling herself' (qtd. Denis 18). Vilar, like her country, feels as though she has no stake in her identity, that it will always be ruled by the women fighting inside of her. She writes, 'Sometimes I'd grow stiff and then I'd leave the book and go out into the street in order to breathe. Body and intellect. I was my mother's daughter, and Lolita's granddaughter too, and those two women in me couldn't reach any agreement' (239).

In *The Pretenders* it is not one country but many that answer the question of how environment has shaped my father's family and in turn, my memoir. The countries which my memoir touches on range from China in the late 1800s, Indonesia from the 1930s to the 1960s, and modern-day Singapore. These countries

and the migrations that occurred between them, due to conflicts both political and personal, are vital in understanding the decisions and interactions between the characters in *The Pretenders*. The fact that each generation begins in a new country creates a disconnect from the previous one. We will never return to being wholly Chinese nor will we be entirely Indonesian or Singaporean. This further amplifies the need to understand the past since the trauma has been relocated, meaning it has to be (and has been) processed in a different cultural climate than where it began.

Salman Rushdie has famously written, ‘it may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity… but it suggests that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form’ (1992:12). By no longer residing in the country where the family’s trauma originated the memoirist struggles to understand the trauma in relation to the cultural experiences of those who suffered. Though my family has remained living in South East Asia I am only half-Chinese meaning that no matter how I may try to understand our past the way I choose to deal with our present will never be in line with tradition. For as we shift through these cultural landscapes and languages it is inevitable that we change, losing parts of ourselves while gaining others from the countries we choose to call home.

Chapter Two: The Family Legacy

'Like the egret,' First Brother continued, 'you will bring new life in your death, but only if you were brave enough to have searched for it.' 'Like the egret,' Second Brother echoed, 'we will find it.'

(Liauw 146)

There is a story, told when questions of our history in China arise, that a golden anklet inscribed with a faded character gifted to my brother at his birth, belonged to an ancestor who was a poet. According to my grandmother, the poet was responsible for much in our family. Tasked with putting our history together he wrote of valiant cousins, of brothers who braved and betrayed, and children who knew when to speak and when to keep silent. Apparently, this poet was more than just a historian, he was also a decider of fates. Thus, all of our names were chosen by him, and all of our children's' names too. That is why my Chinese name is Pei Ching. For this poet had seen the future, he knew that I would be loved by my relatives and therefore live up to my name. Or, that is what we are supposed to believe, for that is how the myth goes. There are many myths like this that colour my family history. Passed down from generation to generation they have filled our minds with wonder while simultaneously propelling us to live up to their words. Though like many myths, when pushed for the truth beyond the tale—like the whereabouts of this recorded history—the facts blur with fiction.

Discussing the function of myths, Roland Barthes, in his text *Mythologies*, argues that, 'mythical speech is made of a material that has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication' (133). Take for example, my ancestor who wrote poetry. The purpose of his myth is for the members of my family to respect the fact that our history in China is structured and complex. It teaches us to honour those who came before us by reminding us that our ancestors have much to do with who we are now. For my family this idea of honouring our ancestors in order to preserve our legacy is reflected in my decision to write a memoir.

Nowadays, the word myth is loaded with negative connotations and is used mainly to describe things that are widely believed but are actually false. Claude Levi-Strauss points out that historically myths have served two functions. The first, as a way to convey feelings which humans experience universally, such as love, hate, or revenge. The second, as a way to explain phenomena which we cannot otherwise

comprehend (429). When I speak of myths it is with this definition in mind, referring to the function of myths as ancient stories, used to explain the origins of a culture or people, laden with supernatural or fantastic elements in order to understand a past that remains out of reach. A memoir, in the act of its writing, is similar to the construction of a myth. By editing and re-structuring our life stories memoirists create a focused version of their history in order to present a message that says—these events have made me who I am, this is where I come from.

Myths exist in all levels of society, they are told by government institutions, the media, they are read in school, and shared within families. In Singapore there are many myths embedded in the nation's history. There is the myth behind its name, where a shipwrecked Sumatran prince in the thirteenth-century thought he saw a lion (which was apparently a tiger, although neither seem to have existed in Singapore), and decided to name the island Singapura, or 'Lion City' (Heng and Khairudin 11). There is the creation of the Merlion, our national symbol, which begins in the fishing village of Temasek (Singapore's first name), where villagers braving a fierce storm saw a half lion, half fish, who fought the storm and saved the villagers (Gosling viii). Finally, there is the way we read Singapore's history. A history that follows its founding and eventual rise from third world to first in the span of a generation. While all of these events are undeniably a part of Singapore's history the way the narratives are presented leans more towards myth. Of course, Singapore is not the only nation to do so, many countries promote their myths in the classroom to justify their current administration or explain the darker chapters of their history, myths are even used to promote tourism. For better or worse these myths work in conjunction with history in order to write a nation's legacy. A well-crafted story for future generations to turn to.

The *Singapore Story* (1998), a memoir written by Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, is a driving force behind Singapore's founding myth. As a memoir it not only recounts his life, but the history of Singapore from the Japanese occupation to its independence. The memoir presents Singapore and the Prime Minister as analogous beings, shaping and influencing one another as they grow. Some scholars, like the authors of *Living with Myths in Singapore* (2017), find this to be problematic noting, that 'there is an important difference between a historical account of [a] nation and [the] mythic narration that fortifies the moral authority of the state' (Seng et al. 4). For Seng et al., the myth and the state (or in this case Lee

Kuan Yew's memoir) should be separated, not working together to influence its people.

While I do not disagree with the dangers of promoting a political leader in the classroom I find that because *The Singapore Story* is a memoir it cannot avoid becoming mythical in its retelling of history. As Barthes states, a myth is not necessarily made of fabrications, but constructed in order to enforce an ideological perspective. *The Singapore Story* can be seen as a myth because it was written as a memoir. As Vivian Gornick notes:

> A memoir is a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom. Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to *make* of what happened. (91)

In the case of *The Singapore Story*, the importance of the narrative is that Lee Kuan Yew not only survived the occupation, but he fought for Singapore's right to independence. The reader accompanies him on his heroic rise from law student, to rebel, to Prime Minister, while learning how his own life eventually shaped Singapore into what it is today. Even if it is a history from only his perspective, as Gornick says, it is not a 'recital of actual events' that matters, it is that there is 'wisdom' and courage in his words. This is the power of myth in memoir, by promoting its story as a standard of Singaporean capability it imposes on its citizens a form of moral culpability and will to achieve. If Lee Kuan Yew was able to survive the countless hardships thrown his way by the values he inscribes in his memoir then Singapore's current and future citizens can do so as well. Seng and others state, *The Singapore Story* is a myth because it does 'not merely narrate [Singapore's] history, but also signposts [its] future' (3). It does so by attempting to '[shape] the values, decisions, and actions of Singaporeans' (3) by displaying the need for these values in its history.

I mention *The Singapore Story* not because I am interested in debating its narrative, but because its utilisation of myth works similarly to how myth functions in *The Pretenders*. The prologue of my memoir follows my grandfather, or as he's known in the memoir, Isk, as he journeys to the jungle in the middle of the night to

bury his family's jewels. The impetus for the memoir rests on this moment. By recording my grandfather's history in my memoir, I am mythologizing his childhood in order to explain the effect of his past on my family's present. Embedded in mystery, Isk is someone the characters in my memoir attempt to understand while dealing with how his life stories effect their own. Like a mythic hero my grandfather's character is a metaphor for our family legacy. Used in the right context his story not only inspires my family with its moral, but works to bring them together. This is done by filling in the gaps of his story with my own perspective and research. It might be the history that makes the narrative real, but it is the utilisation of memoir that makes it mythical.

My grandfather is a variety of men depending on who speaks of him. While some family members have prospered because of his actions during the war, others hold it against him. Jealousy, resentment, and feelings of inferiority, are all emotions which can be tied to him. Having spent my childhood listening to his stories I saw my grandfather as someone larger than life. Alison Light writes that, 'family detectives in search of lost ancestors need to be democrats; their forebears are far more likely to be dustman than noblemen, labourers than landowners' (xxii). By positioning my grandfather as a mythical hero, I am doing exactly the opposite of what Light has described. There is no democracy in my perspective of him. Which is why I attempt to humanize him through the other character's in my memoir. For my father he is the distant and overbearing father, for my grandmother he is both her saviour and her enemy, for my character he's more myth than man, someone I constantly compare myself to. My grandfather might appear as heroic or villainous depending on who speaks of him. Yet our feelings cannot strip him of his past. If one thing lives on after his death, it is not the man himself, but the story of the family jewels, making the story as vital to the narrative as the man.

Arguably, the fact that my grandfather died when I was twenty-one means he occupies a myth-like status in my mind. His accomplishments, his drive, his ability to overcome odds even through the darkest of times, is everything that a writer embeds in a good hero. It is because of these mythic qualities that my grandfather becomes more than just the memoir's 'hero', but also our origin story. His history, like Lee Kuan Yew's is to Singapore, is tied with the history of the Chinese families which lived in Indonesia during the occupation. When Indonesia was first occupied, the Chinese who comprised the bulk of the urban population fled their homes to rural

areas as a means of avoiding the Japanese enemy' (Ooi 1589). Knowing what had happened to their relatives in Nanking, a 'fright-and-flight' response occurred which culminated in an 'exodus of a third to as high as half of the Chinese population of Kuching leaving for the interior and coastal districts… where they lived off the land' (Ooi 1589). This history is echoed in the story of the jewels. Having had to flee their home for the jungle my grandfather and his family forsook all of their possessions. It was only the jewels that remained, buried under the earth in hope for a better future.

My grandfather's history is not a myth because it didn't take place, it is mythical in its retelling. By using it as an anecdote, a signpost for a better future due to his heroic deeds, it functions like a myth. Recounted in my memoir, it not only explains our origins as a Chinese family in Indonesia but how the qualities my grandfather displayed presented us with the life we have now. This is not so different to how *The Singapore Story* functions in Singapore. If it can be said that myths work to build a nation, then I argue the same myths can be employed to unify a family. Speaking on this notion Baildon and Afandi surmise that:

> The [*Singapore Story's*] singular narrative was to be the main focus for history education in order to provide a common heritage and collective past, to develop a common national identity, and to promote national goals for the future. It was designed for political purposes—to ensure Singapore's young people knew a common story of Singapore's past. History education would help build the necessary social, communitarian and political ties to bind a highly diverse nation and ensure that its economic development projects would be supported. (33)

By making *The Singapore Story* a part of the school curriculum the PAP (People's Action Party) was able to promote the memoir's ideals to their citizens at a young age[7]. This works to solidify the party's power as well, since Lee Kuan Yew was its founding member (Loh). Taught as history it ensured that the myths became one with nationhood, increasing the probability that its students would grow to have similar ideals to the ones that shaped their country. The same can be said of relaying familial myths to children. If we grow up believing in our family myths then there is a greater chance that when we grow older we will remember their lessons and want to

[7] For further reading see *Living with Myths in Singapore*, especially Christine Han's 'The 'Myth' of Singaporeanness: Values and Identity in Citizenship Education.

pass them on to our children. In the passing of these myths our family legacy comes into shape, informing how we relate to our family and what we are expected to provide for future members in return.

In the previous chapter I discussed how traumatic events can transcend the generations through postmemory. Hirsch uses the word ‘displaced’ (2012:4) in her texts concerning the memories of the following generations, but I find that the word ‘haunted’ is a better signifier to how the memories reverberate. By haunting I refer to Nicolas Abraham’s notion that ‘What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others’ (1994:172). In other words, it is not my grandfather’s memories which ends up displacing my own but the idealized memory I’ve constructed of him and his life experiences. Similarly, Gary Weissman takes a stance against the word ‘memory’ in Hirsch’s postmemory, arguing that ‘no degree of power or monumentality can transform one person’s lived memories into another’s’ (qtd. Hirsch 2012: 254). Considering Weissman’s stance, perhaps it is not possible for our ancestors’ memories themselves to be embedded, but it is through the constant retelling (or even the impenetrable silence) of these stories in which our ancestors’ memories end up becoming more than they are, haunting the subsequent generations through the ‘secrets’ which they’ve taken ‘to the grave’ (Abraham and Torok 171).

The message, the desire for one’s children to emulate a successful family member, in this case to live up to my grandfather’s story of survival, is stronger than the memory itself. The memory transforms into a need for success. Just like the story of our ancestors from Xiamen (also known as Amoy) inspired my grandfather, his story with the family jewels works in the same way to encourage his children. Each tale is important in the family because they echo the classic the myth of overcoming all odds in order to transform into something better than before. The myth of the family jewels is perhaps the most vital to *The Pretender’s* narrative for it presents the family business as the pinnacle of our legacy by tying our family’s history with a narrative of survival. For a family like my own, marked by diaspora, this is especially important as it gives us a point of origin to look back to.

In this chapter I attempt to unpack the familial myths that lay behind *The Pretenders* and how they are linked to Singapore, the memoir’s home setting. This examination comes in two parts. First, by exploring the myth of our founding, the brothers from Xiamen, a story used to maintain cultural and familial ties to a country we no longer reside in. Second, by looking at how our history as a Chinese family is

made problematic by these myths and how our diaspora distorts our illusion of Chineseness. Marsha Berry and Catherine Cole state ‘that any landscape is read and appreciated through the cultural and historical memory the people bring to it’ (5). By examining Singapore’s myths, we can see its influence on my family’s narrative. Singapore, like myself, is a mixture of races, and has gone through rapid change in its short history.

Myths can provide an origin story, or build roots for a diasporic family. Here lies the core of my memoir, turning to family stories for a sense of place, an avenue for belonging, one used to shape the morals/ideals that I hold myself to. Through the process of writing *The Pretenders* I’ve created a version of my family’s history that is mythical in its retelling. By rooting my otherwise diasporic history it gives my family something to look back on, a foundation for identities that have become hinged to our past. This is especially important for a family ruled by silence. The idea that unspoken secrets can transform into phantoms, not by the absence of words but by the choice of silence, is akin to the workings of postmemory. These secrets pass through the generations of a family developing in ways that the bearers may not even realize. By analysing my familial myths and then considering how these myths function in my memoir one can see how narrative devices such as the supernatural can aid in discussing the topics in which my family chooses to ignore. Topics like violence, abuse, and unhappiness, can haunt a family, passing through the generations like a ghost. Myths can both aid and deter this process, by creating an origin story one can look on to their past as a part of their identity. Like the memories transferred through postmemory one can acclaim: This is where I come from, thus this is a part of who I am.

On a Steamship from Amoy

Though *The Pretenders* ends with my father and I visiting my grandfather’s resting site its epilogue is focused, like its prologue, on a familial myth. This is done to suggest that the story has come full circle, ending on a tale that can be read or left out without the reader missing a part of the narrative. The epilogue takes place in the century in which our diaspora began. The tale begins with two brothers who leave China at the end of the Second Opium War, on a steamship. The brothers, born in an impoverished village to a family of farmers, own nothing but one spare set of

clothes which they share between them. Though not mentioned in the epilogue the brothers become successful in Indonesia and end up opening a bank. Through this bank they amass enough money for the second brother to return to China while the first chooses to remain. The first brother is my father's great-great grandfather. This myth has passed down through our family from parent to child, ensuring that when the child was ready to take over the family business the memory of First Brother remained. In the epilogue I write:

> Sometimes First Brother found it challenging to accept the world for what it was. He was told that a farmer's son could never be more than a farmer's son. He was told that the poor stayed poor and that to be hungry was to be Chinese. But he believed otherwise. He thought that if you were to walk your entire life with your eyes to the floor, then that's what your life would be, but if you were to look up, if you dared to see beyond your reach, then life could be what you made it. (146)

When speaking of Plato's myths, Hegel claims that, 'such stories are only appropriate for the childhood of mankind; when reason has grown up and has matured, they become obsolete' (qtd. Edelstein 463). Unlike Hegel I find that instead of becoming obsolete these myths take a form of postmemory, becoming a part of one's narrative. In other words, as a child grows these ancestral myths do not fade, they work instead as inherited memories, becoming a vital part in the development of one's character. For my father's family there are two points that are always stressed when this story is told, the first that the brothers shared one set of clothes, and the second that the older brother sold his bank shares to the younger brother so that he could begin a business in the timber trade. By instilling concepts like sacrifice and cunning as ideals that were necessary for our ancestors' survival, the retelling of this myth works in setting up an idealized family mythos.

In a family business like the one run in *The Pretenders,* positions of power are filled by family members, while lower levels are filled by distant cousins, and those who the memoir's patriarch, Isk, deems worthy. Earlier I suggested that a family can be built from myths, much like a nation, and that we can liken the myths used to fuel Singapore's governance to those needed in running a family business. The idea that a family needs to stick together and protect themselves from the greed of outsiders speaks to a vulnerability mentioned by historian Thum Ping Tijn. Thum writes, 'the myth of vulnerability argues that Singapore's survival is never assured, since the

country is small, susceptible to external threats and currents, and composed of a volatile mix of ethnicities and religions' (15). This myth of vulnerability is key in controlling loyalty and ensuring that those who benefit will always be those loyal to the family. Yet the myth can promote paranoia as much as it can promote togetherness, by assuming one is always vulnerable, the myths purpose of banding together people of different backgrounds, or in the case of a family business, generations, can work to bring them apart instead.

Thum continues with, 'the myth of meritocracy argues that anyone can rise to leadership in Singapore based on their ability; regardless of their lineage, social connections, race, or religion' (15). The fact that the two brothers made it as immigrants in Dutch-controlled Indonesia during a time where Chinese were looked down upon, and had little power or agency, speaks to the myth of meritocracy. The power to rise through a system that continuously tries to bring you down while overcoming social prejudices is a lesson many wouldn't hesitate from promoting. When looking at a family run business, like the rubber business my father's family runs in *The* Pretenders, myths are important in keeping everyone unified and willing to work towards the greater good of the family. Yet just because the myth is relayed in order to promote ideals in a family does not mean that it will be successful.

By continuously relaying the fact that First Brother sold his banks shares to Second Brother, before starting a new business, the myth ensures that the family members back in China understand that they have no claim to the money that comes from said business. In a chapter that takes place over a family lunch I write, 'Wendy would always entice me with tales of my family back in China—of the impoverished brothers that came to Indonesia by ship—one, my grandfather's great-grandfather; the other, the brother who returned to build the family compound I'm warned not to visit' (45). This is a common theme in *The Pretenders*, by constantly fearing the greed of outsiders the family shuns their relatives in China and eventually end up shunning one another. The myth of the two brothers who started together, but end up divided, is repeated with the current generation. *The Pretenders* ends with the younger brother, Ernest, selling the family business because Henry, the older brother, attempts to take it all for himself.

Even though the final generation of brothers to own the family's rubber business (my father and his brother) grew up with the myth of their ancestors from Xiamen, neither adapted it to reality. In a chapter where Isk laments the

westernization of his children I write, 'When it comes down to it, I am not Chinese. Not enough at least. I don't speak Hokkien, I don't know the customs of our family. I celebrate the holidays but don't understand their meaning. Not that I think Dad knows more than I do. Even though both his parents are Chinese. I feel like we both pretend, trying to cling to the ends we understand while making up the rest' (72). This is an example of where a myth can fall short. For as the generations grow further from the brothers from Xiamen the less they will see China as a home. When speaking of Chinese families in Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia, Vivienne Wee and others state that, 'despite the differences between ethnic Chinese populations… none of them sees China as a diasporic "home". Only older first-generation migrants still remember and retain ties with their ancestral villages' (381). By writing about our Chinese origins in my memoir I am attempting to claim a heritage that is in danger of being lost. As members of my family no longer feel akin to our Chinese ancestors the familial myths which are tied to their culture as Chinese start to lose their power.

The Myth of our Chineseness

I have only been to China once. The trip wasn't taken with the intention to visit China, but ended up happening as a transit on my way to Mongolia. Having less than a day in Beijing I decided to hire a tour guide to visit the Great Wall. After driving several hours in a small van, we reached what the guide dubbed, 'the less touristic part' of the wall. This meant entering a modest hillside village where we were greeted by a man on a red plastic stool and a marker scrawled sign that read, 'five yuan'. After hesitantly paying we began our climb up the haphazardly placed ladders to the towering structure. Despite my initial trepidation at a sign that warned, 'this section of the Great Wall is not open to the public', I was content, for none of my pictures were filled with swarms of tourists and I had plenty of time to revel in the majestic wonder.

Looking back at the few hours I spent in China makes me feel disconnected. The land does not call to me, nor does it recognize me as one if its own. Yet when thoughts of my ancestry or finding myself occur, I find myself thinking of China. Once upon a history it was my place of origin, one that has become mystified in part, to the West's fascination with its cultural aspects (both negative and positive), and with my own fascination with something that is a part of my history. In his extended definition

of diaspora William Safran writes that diasporic communities, 'retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements' (83). Yet this mythical 'homeland' has been disrupted by the many migrations my family has made since the late 1800s. Our diaspora is not recent, and because of this it has become a part of our family myth. The further the generations of my family get from the mythically-shrouded brothers from Xiamen the less we feel like we are Chinese.

Questioning the role of class and mobility in terms of diasporic subjects Lily Cho ponders: 'when someone is desperate enough to leave their home by travelling for months in a locked shipping container with little food or water, sweltering in filth, and fear, the voluntariness of this migration is, at best, relative' (25). Though my ancestors from China, chose to leave, the circumstances which propelled them to leave makes the notion of 'choice' contentious. The fact my ancestor never returned to China marked the beginning of our end of being solely Chinese. This notion of Chineseness is further convoluted by the fact that my grandparents forsook their birth names during a climate that was becoming increasingly hostile towards the Chinese[8].

Furthermore, the fact that we are Chinese in Singapore, a country where a large proportion of the population are Chinese who no longer feel a part of China, contributes to the notion that we do not feel the need to return to a 'homeland' which we no longer consider our own[9]. As Chew and Lee state, 'during the first 150 years of Singapore history, most of these Chinese considered themselves Chinese, and the question of Chineseness posed no problems for them' (127), but as the generations in Singapore grow so do the divisions from their mainland ancestors, and the differences becomes more than just location, they become cultural as well. In other words, though my family may be Chinese by ethnicity, we are no longer Chinese in practice. Though this should seem like the natural occurrence when multiple generations have experienced diaspora, a disconnect exists between what we are expected to be, as people who identify as Chinese, and what we are. The notion of 'topophilia', the idea of place having a significant effect on one's identity,

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[8]For further reading see Ien Ang's 'To Be or Not to Be Chinese: Diaspora, Culture and Postmodern Ethnicity'. Ang states that her family's Chineseness was not cultivated for political reasons, something which she chooses not to condemn since it implicates 'the politics of memory' (7).

[9] As a person of mixed race I do not consider myself an 'Oversees Chinese', nor do I believe that my family currently fits under this label. For an explanation of the label 'Oversees Chinese' see Wee et al. 366.

means that our diasporic lives have left us with a wavering sense of identity (Zhang). Yet it is not the land itself which holds the answers for our identity, but the narratives which are tied to the land.

As a narrative that follows multiple migrations—an ancestor fleeing China after the Second Opium War, my grandfather's escape to London after a stint in jail, his inevitable return to Indonesia, my own journey from Singapore, to America, to Europe—place in *The Pretenders* is difficult to pinpoint. It is not one country, but many that answer the question of how place has shaped my father's family and in turn, my memoir. In *The Pretenders* the familial myth exists to explain what the diaspora convolutes, granting myself, and my characters, roots that our lack of a 'homeland' might otherwise remove. In my memoir there are two characters which personify this displacement of identity, Ernest, the character of my father, and Mercy, the character that represents myself. Both father and daughter, having lived within a multitude of cultures, have no sense of who they are without the family mythos to stabilize their sense of home and in turn, their identity.

Though it might be China I turn to when I think of ancestors, when I think of home I think of Singapore. Nonetheless, my 'Singaporeanness' is as lacking as my 'Chineseness'. This troubled sense of identity is doubled by the fact that I am half Puerto-Rican. American sociologist Ruth Hill Useem, began to use the term 'third culture kids' while living in India to 'refer to the children who accompany their parents into another society' (22). While the term is applicable for children of expatriates, it does not cover children of mixed-race. In Singapore, they find me Western for my thoughts, for my hair, and for my inability to speak Mandarin. For my family in Puerto-Rico I am Chinese, in my eyes, and in my inability to speak Spanish fluently. For reasons both physical and emotional I am a stranger to both parts of a family that want to claim me as something 'other'. In this sense I am not as Useem describes, accompanying my family into another society, I am without country, or a 'homeland' to step away from. I am a mix of societies, a formation of my family's memories and experiences without truly being a part of either. Even in the simplest of encounters the problematic, 'where are you from', always leaves people with more questions. Recounting a conversation with a cashier at Boots I write:

> Leaving the store, I replay the conversation in my head. It's funny how often moments like these occur, and yet I never know how to handle them. Perhaps I'm too compliant, too ready to give people what they want. I've spent years

hiding between the lines of the mixed-race, mixed-face confusion of my upbringing. Maybe if I knew who I was people wouldn't be so curious. (9)

Whether or not I may identify as Chinese might appear trivial, for if my passport is American, shouldn't I then be, American? If the ethnicity on my permanent resident card reads Chinese, then mustn't I be Chinese? No. I am all of these identifiers and I am none, I am, as Ricia A. Chansky writes, a self that 'as it dies, is born, and is reborn again in relation to the spaces and places it occupies' (211). Depending on where I live and who I speak to I am the parts I want to be and the parts people see me as. My identity becomes something in flux, therefore politicized in its purpose (Ang).

In my memoir the elusive search for belonging is what propels me to write it. The moment where I realize we are losing our family business, the legacy for which we have always been able to point back to, to stand on, has me writing in search of something else to tether my father's family together. The identity, or rather lack of, becomes the narrative. 'Myth', writes Josiah Bancroft, 'is the story of what we do not understand in ourselves' (388). This search for what I am but do not understand is found in the links between the generation that migrated from China, the generation that lived through the war in Indonesia, and the one that currently lives in Singapore.

My father, or Ernest, though ethnically Chinese from both parents, is the only Singaporean-born person in an Indonesian family. Sent to an American school as a child his accent became that of his American teachers, something that confused the kids in his Californian boarding school, and incited ostracization when he returned to Singapore for his national service. Though possessing a Singaporean passport and a Chinese heritage he was never accepted within the ranks of boys who were raised in the country itself. While many believe that a 'sense of belonging to Singapore is cultivated through national institutions such as the armed forces, [and] national service' (Suryadinata 145), divisions within the ethnicities still occur. Speaking about Ernest's time during national service I write:

At lunch when he makes his way to a table, everyone will get up and leave. When he's in charge of leading marches, they sing songs that make fun of him. Day in and day out he's reminded that he's something other. (57)

After spending years as a foreigner in America Ernest returns to his homeland as 'a foreigner once again, this time in [his] own lost land' (Courtivron 33). The constant moving between East and West both in body and mind, his yearning to be a

part of both cultures, but never able to completely assimilate in either, means that a ‘homeland’ is an elusive concept. Though the requirement of national service was created in part to foster community within the dispersed races of the nation it is not enough to overcome the economic and cultural disparities that exist both before and within the service itself. While Singapore’s national myths may work as a unifier, the personal narratives that form each ethnic group remain a stronger divide. For Ernest it means that he has to look outside of his country and towards the myths that create his family in order to get a sense of stability. It is the story of the buried jewels that lends him strength and the myth of the brothers from Amoy to remind him that he is indeed Chinese.

Another layer to the characters’, and my own shifting identity, is Singapore itself, a country that continuously writes and re-writes its past in order to make way for its future. The reliance on myths in order to unite its people works similarly in Singapore as it does for a diasporic family. This shifting sense of identity in Singapore is something I attempt to mirror in myself. I write, ‘What will we become? When our past has been erased, when we’ve completed our transformation, bowing in defeat to the glorified beast we’ve named progress. Yet for now, the past remains, interwoven with the things we hold dear.’ (16). If the country itself is constantly changing its landscape, demolishing the old in order to make way for the new, all in search for better, more sustainable choices, then it is easy for the people themselves to forget their past. As Kwok and Waterson describe, as ‘inhabitants find the whole fabric of the city continually being demolished and recreated all around them, the past is constantly being erased’ (340). If we are to see our identity as something tied to the land itself, then as the land changes so do we. This lack of a tangible past in Singapore makes it difficult for the newer generations to relate with the older generations, and brings to question the purpose of revisiting a past which is no longer visible.

If it is the myths, or a history written in order to propagate unity (like *The Singapore Story*), that anchors a diasporic identity, then Singapore’s myths anchor the plethora of cultures that call the island home. By having one past, one narrative to look towards people from different ethnicities can unite. It is as Lee Kuan Yew states, ‘the best of the East and West must be blended to advantage in the Singaporean. Confucianist ethics, Malay traditions, and the Hindu ethos must be

combined with sceptical Western methods of scientific inquiry'[10] (1979). The former Prime Minister, through his memoir, ensures his people that this notion of a unified Singapore is something that has been proven to work. *The Singapore Story*, possessing 'the mythic quality of being able to explain Singapore's history and identity' (Seng et al. 3), reinforces the bonds between otherwise cultural strangers to a nation which they can be proud to call their own. In *The Pretenders* my search for identity is found in the myths that make up my family. It is through the remembrance of their myths that I can find a sense of a 'homeland'.

While myths can work to unite a nation, they can also work to control or subvert its people. This can end up politicizing one's identity in the sense that by declaring yourself as Chinese, or refraining to do so, you can change your circumstances. During the late sixties in Indonesia a majority of the ethnic Chinese population changed their names to Indonesian-sounding names in order to 'better identify themselves' with the nation, or 'for practical considerations such as facilitating their means of earning a living' (Suryadinata 142). This branding of the Chinese as something outside of the population, which required them in turn to forsake aspects of their 'Chineseness' in order to blend in, began during Dutch colonial rule. During this time Chinese people were subjected to protocols that were not required for Europeans or the indigenous locals, such as zoning laws in which they were required visas if they wanted to leave their assigned districts (Ang 6). After World War Two the pressure to identify as Indonesian during Sukarno's rule created a climate where it was hostile to be Chinese. There were several myths that propagated the climate surrounding Chinese in Southeast Asia. First, since they predominantly engaged in trading, that they were a threat to the other ethnicities economically, and second that they were still linked with China which made them a security risk (Suryadinata 135-137).

The inverse of these myths is the fact that the Chinese, thanks to their multitude of migrations, are used to adapting to their new homelands. As Wang Gungwu points out, 'the source of their strength [is] the willingness to adjust to any place and any practice if necessary' (128). This sense of a shifting Chinese identity is something which is echoed in my grandparents' history. My grandfather spoke

[10] Lee Kuan Yew made this statement during his preface of the Goh Report, which looked at Singapore's education system, as a part of the principles he placed for the formation of a Singaporean national Identity. For further reading see Han.

Dutch, English, and Mandarin as a child and when he had children he wanted them educated in Western schools. This can be seen as leftover sentiments of protection for his family from his time under colonial rule. That being said, the myth of the brothers from Amoy is not so much about China as it is about leaving China. Being Chinese is not something constant, it changes and will continue to change as the generations continue to move within and away from China. As we grow further from our more traditionally Chinese ancestors the maintenance of our origin story, and family myths is important. Though my grandparents are Indonesian in nationality their Chinese past remained in circulation through the family mythos. With the narrative intact, they passed these myths to their children hoping their children would pass them on in turn. By writing a memoir that speaks of these myths I am propagating this circle, attempting to continue our legacy now that the family business is gone.

Seng et al. believe that 'as long as myths exist, we put ourselves at risk of being seduced and manipulated by them' (5). I argue that if myths work to strengthen one's identity and can provide someone a sense of placement in history then they should not be seen as harmful. With all of the migration my family has experienced, and all the cultures we have absorbed, it helps to have a story to find a home and place in. Though the feeling of 'Chineseness' that once tied us to a now distant 'homeland' might fade, the myths ensures that we remain at least narratively tied to this identity. It is through these myths that we can point to the fact that our identity is one built from diaspora, making the land (and the loss of land) more than just a place, but a signifier of our ideals. Still, one must ask if these myths are important in maintaining or if as the generations pass through a continuously globalized society whether these myths will no longer feel important as citizens of the world. Wang Gungwu, questioning his Chineseness asks, 'in the context of place and practice, does being Chinese always mean the same thing, or does it change from time to time and place to place? (119). Perhaps the following generation of my family, as they become less Chinese, less tied to the nations that reared the myths I have presented, will not require these myths. If my children, or their children, grow up with a stable sense of a 'homeland', they may no longer need the myth of our ancestors as an anchor for their identity.

Myth as a Narrative Device

When John Cage first performed his composition, 4'33", audiences were introduced to the concept of purposeful silence. What Cage presented when he placed a pianist, for four minutes and thirty-three seconds without playing a single key, was the notion that silence is more than an 'absence of sound,' but what happens when that absence occurs (Tota and Hagen). In a family, the absence of words, the knowledge that an event has happened but is not spoken of, transforms silence into an 'unspeakable secret' (Abraham and Torok 171). By secret I refer to Esther Rashkin's definition, 'a situation or drama that is transmitted without being stated and without the sender's or receiver's awareness of its transmission' (4). According to Rashkin the way in which an 'unspeakable secret is silently transmitted to someone else in whom it lodges is called a *phantom*' (4).

For psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, the phantom 'is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious' passing in an undeterminable manner 'from the parent's unconscious in the child's' (173). In other words, a phantom is a force that lies beyond our own experiences, created by a family's silence which is then passed through the generations. Abraham and Torok dub this passing of silence as 'transgenerational haunting' (Rashkin 22). In this manner the creation of a phantom is similar to that of postmemory—for it is not the dead that haunt, but their secrets, much like the memories of the previous generation. The knowledge that an event has occurred in a family but is purposefully left unspoken is just as powerful as a story of violence that has been repeated throughout the generations. Both are filled with ghosts, with secrets of a past that start before the next generation is formed. The phantom, the literary stand-in for the trauma, is then transferred, embedding itself in subsequent generations, lingering in memories, and every-day actions.

The concept of hauntology is usually related to Jacques Derrida and his *Spectres de Marx* (1993), where Derrida posits that the ghost of Marxism will continue to haunt the world even after the end of Marxist states. Though it is Derrida that most people turn to when it comes to hauntology it is Abraham and Torok who first presented the idea of a phantom and its ability to haunt us through 'the secrets of others' (Abraham and Torok 171). When it comes to literature the phantom that haunts the generations is not always a literal ghost, but rather what happens to the characters when their family secrets begin to affect their lives.

In *The Pretenders* the phantom is born from the occupation, an event which has slipped silently through the generations, allowing familial myths such as the buried jewels to take their place. The phantom, created by silence, becomes even more cogent in the memories that are chosen to be shared. Hand-picked memories take on a myth-like quality in place of those kept quiet leaving the next generation wondering why these particular memories are the ones being passed on. Like Cage's 4'33" the effect of these silent memories isn't in the lack of knowing, it's in knowing the stories exist but are not being told. Some of the stories which I've relayed in my memoir, like my father watching his parents in the kitchen, or being punished in the garden, weren't told to me directly, but from others who knew of these moments. This highlights the significance of the memories which he's shared in contrast to those he's kept quiet. Eventually he shared these memories but having already heard of them they'd taken on different meanings in my mind, bending to reasons of my own making.

Dream sequences, mythically shrouded legacies, the over-your-shoulder ghost, even the phantom in one's mind, they are as much writing tools as coping mechanisms. By employing myths in one's narrative structure, both in its function as an origin story and in its ability to explain one's history through supernatural means we can examine how a family's traumatic history is reasoned through the generations. Esther Rashkin calls this phenomenon, '*Transtextuality',* a term she proposes 'for the specific kind of intertextual relationship at work in narratives organized by phantoms' (46). For Rashkin the 'textual entities, fragments, or allusions the narrative contains—complement, inform, and interpret one another across a fissure or gap in the transmission of a family history' (46). By instilling my family's myths in place of the violent events that occurred during the occupation my memoir mirrors the way the events have been passed on through my family. In this light our ghosts remain intertwined with our memories, speaking to us during the moments that our silence has learned to fill. However, the silence is not the same for each generation. That which my grandparents wished to forget, or my father wished to escape, is precisely what I wish to unearth.

For my family, speaking about difficult subjects has never been our strong suit. When my grandfather spoke of the occupation it was always as matter of fact, like reciting a grocery list. My grandmother's childhood was regaled in laughter, as if the things she did were games. My father rarely speaks of his past, and in the few

occasions he does it’s with a shrug, a sort of, *what can I do?* I echo this in the beginning of my memoir where I ask my father why they had moved to England and he replies with, ‘Ask me some other time’ (19). Other instances which appear seemingly straightforward, like the reason why my grandparents have both Indonesian and Chinese names have only been explained to me by looking at other families from similar backgrounds. Speaking of her own family’s experience as ethnic Chinese in Indonesia Ien Ang writes,

> To this day the pressure on the Chinese minority to assimilate, to erase as many traces of Chineseness as possible, has been very strong in Indonesia; for example, in the late sixties my uncle, who chose to stay and live in Indonesia, Indonesianized his surname into Angka. (7)

Here Ang is discussing the transition period between the end of the Japanese occupation to Indonesian independence. During this time Dutch colonialism had finally ended and the indigenous Indonesians were put into power[11]. The years that followed were filled with massive upheavals which lead the country towards an ‘economic decay’ that ‘left Indonesia as one of the poorest countries in the world’ (Cribb 6). In this climate a series of mass killings took place between 1965-66, these killings are often referred to as *Peristiwa ’65* or the ‘1965 Incident’ (Dwyer 115). The official story is that a coup was attempted by the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) on September 30, 1965. After disrupting the coup, Suharto, an army general, gained control of the Indonesian military which he used to ‘defend’ Indonesia against suspected leftists (Dwyer). What followed was what Mary S. Zurbuchen has called ‘a tidal wave of violence—with citizens killing other citizens’ with thousands of others who ‘were variously tortured, detained, and imprisoned without trial’ (565). The era that followed was one of mass silence and censorship. Speaking on this experience Leslie Dwyer writes that:

> For a new generation of Indonesians, the halting tales their parents might have told of their experiences—or the deep silences they may have affected to preserve their safety—were drowned out by the insistent rhetoric of the New Order. (116)

I mention this time in Indonesia because my family has never spoken about it. I was told that my grandparents weren’t living in Indonesia during these events, but

[11] For an in-depth reading on these events and their aftermath see Robinson.

whether it was because of political reasons or because they were lucky enough to have left for England I might never know. All I know is that when I had a section of my memoir published online I experienced a brief moment of fear at the realization that I had labelled the incident as a 'massacre' instead of an 'incident'. Thoughts of being called out, or placed under the spotlight for my decisions filled my mind. I was overreacting, but the fear felt inherited. The fact that my grandparents had changed their names, their quiet assimilation, it felt purposeful. Meanwhile I was writing about something I barely understood, I was in a sense disrupting their silence, bringing their phantoms to light.

Colin Davis posits that phantoms offer 'a new explanation for ghost stories, which are described as the mediation in fiction of the encrypted, unspeakable secrets of past generations' (374). The ghosts that appear to the characters in my memoir function on two levels, one as a coping mechanism, and two by giving a physical manifestation to their trauma. A ghost can do in a narrative what my lack of experience cannot, it can explain the persistence of the past, it can look at the actions of my father's family and hint at the larger forces at work.

The structure of my memoir and the positioning of our familial myths throughout the chapters emulates my family's silence and the creation of our phantoms. We see this in how Ernest's ghost manifest in moments of extreme depression or abuse. Coming to him in his dreams he wakes to find his ghost sitting by his bed, threatening to bring him to what he calls his void. For Mercy her phantom takes the shape of a soldier. Standing in the darkest corner of her room her spectre neither moves nor speaks. In Feng's narrative her husband becomes her ghost. A force that drives her from her apartment into the arms of a new man and life. Though Abraham and Torok's phantoms are metaphorical I have made ours literal. By using a ghost, something inexplicable by nature, I attempt to write about something that is often inexplicable in one's mind. Whether or not the reader believes in ghosts is not what matters. What matters is that the characters, and their real-life counterparts do. These ghosts are narrative devices, representations of Abraham and Torok's phantoms, symbolic stand ins for the unspoken trauma which remains in the family.

Whether it be our phantoms or our grief the narrative cycle of the supernatural suggests that our history cannot be fully understood within our own generation. It is only as the next generation comes into play that our past can be examined. In *The Pretenders* the phantom is a manifestation of the occupation, forming not in the

stories that have been told but in the gaps of what has remained unspoken. Our phantom, or rather phantoms, may have formed from the occupation but it is their silencing that has passed them on. Linda Anderson notes that, 'traumatic history cannot become integrated into the subjects' narrative history of themselves because it was not fully experienced at the time it happened; nor is it fully comprehended' (130). In line with Anderson's reasoning, R.F. Kuang writes that, 'transmission skips a generation' (Uncanny). What Anderson and Kuang are suggesting is that traumatic events need time to be processed. For the first generation the history is still fresh, while the second, feeling the direct effects from the first, only wishes to escape. Therefore, by the time the trauma has been internalized and transmitted the third generation no longer wishes to turn away but to understand the role the trauma has had in their family.

Kuang writes that there are three things she knows about Chinese ghosts, 'One: They are victims of bad death. Two: They are keepers of history. Three: They obey no boundaries' (Uncanny). For my grandparents their ghosts reflect a past which they cannot forget. A violent unwanted history, one that leaked into their present, into the decisions they made as people and as parents. My father's ghosts were something that he wished to escape, propelling him to move far from home, from a land tainted by memory, by a business that continued to echo the pain that enabled its formation. Through the act of writing my memoir my ghosts are something I attempt to look in the eye, bodies I've dug up in a journey to understand the boundaries of the past.

This generational transmission is what I wish to convey in my memoir's usage of myths. By beginning the memoir with the story of the jewels and delaying the events of the occupation till the second act I'm mimicking the silence. The reader witnesses the effects of silence from the get go, following my character as I attempt to unpack how my family has chosen to fill in our gaps. The knowledge that the occupation happened is present throughout the memoir, sprinkled throughout lunches and shopping trips, in the decisions the characters make in their day to day activities. This gives the stories that have been shared a mythical quality. Taking the necessary pieces, I've fit them into our origin story, comparing the stories with recorded history, or similar tales, in order to understand my past. Like myself, the myths are all the reader has to go on. The origin story of the jewels without further explanation. By allowing the metaphorical phantom to take physical shape

throughout Ernest’s and Mercy’s narratives I explore the way trauma has reverberated through the generations and how we’ve used our myths to fill the gaps of our silence.

Chapter Three: Your Story, My Story, Ours

‘When I look at the faces that surround our table, so composed, so accepting of how things are, I wonder what truths they hide. Each of us is here, trapped in the same moment—morphing faces, gestures, masking thoughts bred from our individual experiences. The rest of my family, even Eddie and his boyfriend have their own truths, spawned from conversations and feelings that I will never know or translate. It's hard not to make them into villains, I try to see them in their own light, but in the end, it's still my point of view.’

(Liauw 48)

The first time I wrote about my family was for a school project in the eighth grade. The assignment was to interview a family member who had faced adversity and overcome it. Unsure of who to speak to my mother suggested my grandmother. Notebook and glitter-pen in hand I sat wide-eyed and ready in front of my grandmother as she spun me a tale from her childhood. Ah Ma told her story in quick short bursts. There were no tears, no long mournful pauses, just facts spoken in broken English. In return for her story I received an A, along with the compliments from a teacher who suggested I continue to write. Looking back at the assignment I wonder, was it my grandmother’s experiences or was it my writing that was rewarded? Or perhaps it was the combination of the two—Ah Ma’s words and my thoughts.

When I think of this story the thing that makes me feel the most uncomfortable is the grade. While a novel can be judged on its success through aesthetic standards, a memoir is more often judged on its ethical standards. But can a life story really be graded, and if it can, should it be? Despite these hesitations, what I began in my early teens I now attempt again more than a decade later, and though I may be older, the questions of permission have not changed. The story I have taken from my grandmother is no longer an assignment, but a memoir written with the intent to be published. By choosing memoir as my narrative’s genre I am not only constructing a creative representation of the past, I am also asserting that that which I have written is true. As Couser states, ‘genre is not about mere literary form; it’s about force—what a narrative’s purpose is, what impact it seeks to have on the world’ (9). The fact that I intend to publish my grandmother’s story takes the personal, often therapeutic journey, and raises its stakes ethically. If my memoir is

published it will mean my family's stories will transition from the private sphere to the public. By introducing people to our secret world, I will assume responsibility not only for my narrative, but for the narratives of the people who make up my life.

The process of writing a memoir usually begins with the pursuit of understanding one's identity. While writing, questions like, who am I, where did I come from, or how did these events impact my life, become integral to the process. Yet it is the people who surround us that end up filling the narrative. A memoir's narrative choices impact more than just the narrative. They also impact the real-life people who appear throughout it. The emotions we convey, the ancestors and events we choose to include, even the communities we claim to be a part of are all affected by a memoir's choices. As Ashley Barnwell points out, it is 'in the process of knitting together family lines and perhaps revealing family secrets, the lives of more than just the author are put on display' (80). While the writing process itself might feel private and isolated, the events we record and the way they choose to record them will no longer be private once it is published.

Take Rachel Robertson for example. In college she spent her time writing letters to a lecturer that she was in love with. Eight years later, when said lecturer sent her a copy of his book, she found her letters amongst its pages. In his novel, her letters, and a dream she once spoke to him about, are portrayed by a character she recognized pieces of herself in (Robertson). Robertson, a writer herself, writes of the shame she felt upon seeing her letters.

> The shame of the dream. The shame of unrequited love. The shame of his representation of me. Most of all, I felt shame that words written in private directly to me by a man I loved were in fact not private, not personal, not a gift to me, but part of a novel. (307)

It was not until years later, when Robertson attempted to navigate the minefield of privacy for her own work, that she understood why the lecturer exposed her letters. In a form of dual exposure, Robertson writes an essay discussing the repercussions of putting someone's private thoughts on display by displaying how his actions made her feel. As a writer Robertson ends up empathizing with the lecturer, recognizing the fact that her words were not written verbatim in his novel, more as a basis of inspiration (Robertson 314). In this particular case we can assume that if Robertson was not a writer she might not have been so willing to

empathize. More often than not people are not so understanding, especially when a memoirist paints them in an unfavourable light.

When Augusten Burroughs's *Running with Scissors* (2002) was released, a narrative that recounts his childhood with his mother and her therapist, Burroughs was sued by the therapist's family for 'character defamation and invasion of privacy' (Snider). And when Karl Ove Knausgaard wrote about his family in a lengthy series titled *Min Kamp* (2009-2011) journalists began to feverishly track down the real-life family members culminating in many of them choosing to no longer speak with Knausgaard in light of his 'tell-all' (Snider). While these might be two of the more famous examples of writers getting in trouble for what they've published there are countless other memoirs that have not only ended up alienating the memoirist from their family but eventually from their audience as well.[12]

When it comes to the authors that I have examined closely in this text their family's opinions have ranged from worried, to appalled, to proud. While Vilar's grandmother refused to read her memoir (Ojito), Pung's father's only concern was that she had recorded too much violence, stating that, 'White people don't want to hear about too much suffering. It depresses them' (Pung 2012:57). For Vuong, his mother's pride was shown in the tears she shed at his first book reading, stating that she never thought she 'would live to see all these old white people clapping for my son' (Late Night).

With the stakes of writing a memoir being so ethically charged it might seem impossible to stay true to a writer's voice or feelings. If one cannot write how one feels or thinks then why write at all? While permissions within a family narrative change depending on the family themselves, this chapter reflects on the questions which I have asked myself throughout the process of writing *The Pretenders*. The first, and perhaps most difficult question I have faced, is how can I maintain a balance between protecting the people I write about while remaining true to my voice? Narrative decisions like pseudonyms and alternating perspectives are some of the ways I have attempted to balance the memoir, yet arguments that fill the theoretical discourse of life writing, like Philippe Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact',

[12] See Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss* (1997), or James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), even Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (2000) raised controversy over historical inaccuracies versus the emotional pull of the memoir.

and real-life emotions concerning certain characters that appear in the memoir can work to disrupt these decisions.

The second question I would like to consider is what will happen when my narrative moves out of the realm of my family and into the wider community? As a story originally told orally in Hokkien and Bahasa, changes have organically occurred to the narrative as it transitioned from a family story into a memoir written in English. This transition effects not only the way the narrative is told, but might change how it is viewed by the communities it speaks of. Though my memoir is a story written about my family the events that occur within it have been experienced by a wider community. How I have chosen to illustrate the events that have occurred will matter not only to those who feel like they are a part of the events I have written about, but also to those who are attempting to understand the landscape of these events. When writing about family a balancing act is required between the literary decisions and the facts, meaning that I need to consider the different audiences that might interact with the memoir. While it is impossible to account for all possible solutions, especially since family narratives change according to the situation of the family themselves, the overall aim of this chapter is to reflect on the narrative techniques and thought processes that I have employed in balancing the protection of my family stories with presenting my own voice and truth throughout my memoir.

Searching for Truth in Intersecting Narratives

Throughout the process of turning my family's history into a memoir, two narratives have developed: the private one, whispered between my family members in confidence, and the one I have formulated for publication. Like a mask, I have found that the stories I convey orally to my friends and acquaintances often hide the stories which I keep to myself. As N.K. Denzin discerns there is a difference between 'historical truth,' 'aesthetic truth,' and 'fictional truth' (1989:23). For Denzin historical truth is based on existing data, aesthetic truth is based on how the truth fits into one's chosen genre, and fictional truth depends on creating 'believable experiences' for the audience (Owen et al. 184). The difficulty with writing a memoir is that it needs a combination of all three. A memoir requires a certain level of access to the events that happen behind the mask, combined with prose that can mask those events, in order to create a narrative that is both engaging and purposeful. For the

memoirist this access, whether frightening or easy, is only half of the challenge, for it is often in the revelation of our darkest-selves that the secrets of others will end up coming to light.

At a glance *The Pretenders* can be seen as a narrative that recounts how a business was formed and eventually sold, surrounding the lives that came into benefit or perhaps disaster because of it. But by being relational in its nature each character's narrative starts where another has left off. Like a ripple effect the violent childhood of a grandmother can affect the raising of a son, or a son's childhood overshadowed by a family legacy can create a reserved and distant father. As Philippe Lejeune writes, 'private life is almost always a co-property' (1986:55). In *The Pretenders* that co-property is apparent as each character comes to life when viewed through another character's perspective. It is through their interconnectivity that the characters become complete. The fact that each character's narrative is so reliant on the others' means that there are a lot of 'truths' to be questioned and told.

In their essay 'truth Troubles' (2009) Owen et al. use an example described by Janice Morse to contemplate the notion of truth. Morse, a nurse researcher, lays out a situation which is often encountered in trauma rooms.

> Intoxicated individuals frequently enter a trauma room "fighting off caregivers." Later, when no longer intoxicated, these individuals cannot recall how they behaved when they arrived at the hospital. (183)

In this scenario there are two versions of the truth, the first, the experience of the patient who cannot remember how they acted, and the second, of the medical personnel who witnessed the patient's behaviour. 'Truth,' as Owen et al. surmise, 'takes the form of what a person remembers happening—her or his own reality' (183). In a sense the truth is co-owned by the people who acted in the event and the people who witnessed it. In life writing the truth is co-owned by writer and subject meaning there will always be more than one version of the truth. Truth can change depending on who is telling it, and it will continue to change depending on people's circumstances. Speaking on this Owen et al. state that 'if truth changes based on representational convention…then framing a life in life writing as "accurate," "correct," and "truthful" is contingent and futile' (183). In a sense writing the 'truth' in a memoir is almost impossible, for it will only be one part of the experience, of the ownership. This is something I attempt to discuss as the chapters change from one

character's perspective to another. As each character, gets to speak, a new version, or form, of the truth tries to come to light.

The danger of writing various timelines and alternating narrators is that the version of the truth I am trying to present is in constant danger of getting lost. Each layout that I have written and re-written has focused on different aspects of the narrative. It has been almost schizophrenic in its nature, wandering across moments of my life that I have still yet to make sense of. This makes me question which truths I should present. Should I focus on the violence that ravaged my grandparents' home, or is my search for identity amongst their tragedy what I am aiming for? Do the two work in tandem, or should they be separate narratives? In the end I have decided that they should work together, that the narratives of the characters in my memoir need to intersect no matter how estranged they might seem. This need for my grandparents' narrative might stem, as I've mentioned in chapter two, from my own wavering identity. Yet even if I need their narrative to ground mine, to hand me roots I have so exhaustively searched for, their narratives rely on mine in order to understand where their decisions have brought them.

Nevertheless, the secrets I decide should be kept private and the ones I decide to tell won't always be in tandem with those in my family. As Barnwell points out, 'what may be a curious and intriguing story to one branch of the family may be an unspeakable grief to another' (80). For example, if I find that it is important for my memoir's narrative to write about the events that led to my grandmother disowning her eldest son, then I will choose to write about it. As a writer the dishonouring of my uncle works as a way to describe my grandmother's character. It shows that Feng not only possesses the hardheartedness to stop speaking to her son, but also paints a complete picture of the little girl who was abandoned by her father, who now as an old woman exhibits the same qualities. As a writer, these events complete the narrative cycle. For my uncle and my grandmother, however, the inclusion of this detail may be interpreted as an attempt to profit from their pain.

Who is right then? Am I, the author of the memoir, permitted to make this decision, because I am the one with the ability and opportunity to write the memoir? Or, do the people who appear in the memoir hold the authority here because it is their story to hide or tell? Even if we are granted permission to the life stories of those who are still living it doesn't mean that they will like the person we write them as. As Claire Lynch observes, 'those who I write about are powerless. If I am callous

in my descriptions, real people's feelings might be hurt. If I disguise, change names, or merge multiple people to protect them, I could face charges of not writing memoir at all' (2019:15). Like Lynch I find that the creation of a memoir often leads to an unbalanced power dynamic, but at the same time, this should not stop us from writing honestly and authentically. Inversely, the danger of writing how we feel is that we might end up creating a memoir that is all parts confession and no parts reflection.

This is where the balancing act comes into play. In my own memoir the usage of alternate timelines and diverging perspectives are how I attempt to handle the balance between ethics and literature. Place and time are not grounding elements in my memoir, since the narrative moves between the present and the past, wandering through different countries and unfamiliar backdrops. It is the characters' perspectives, therefore, which are critical in bringing the memoir's strands together. John Paul Eakin stresses that though autobiography is 'a literary discourse of fact and a discourse of fiction' it is 'even more fundamentally… a discourse of identity' (2001:124). Yet the fact that my family is what composes my identity is what makes it problematic, for if my memoir needs other people's lives in order to tell my own, it needs to be sensitive in how it handles its connections. Where one story ends another must begin, each story feeding into the other as if their lives depended on it, mirroring the reality of how lives often do. Eakin continues, 'life writing is experiential. Because we live our lives in relation to others, our privacies are largely shared, making it hard to demarcate the boundary where one life leaves off and another begins' (2004:8). For the characters in *The Pretenders* each conversation, feeling, or unfinished thought, is just as important to one character as it is for the other, for it is where those emotions meet that the story can take place.

Though I have tried my best to protect the people I care about it is impossible not to hurt feelings or cause inadvertent offence. No matter how well I may write, I will never be able to write my relatives as they truly are, for they will always be seen through the tinted glass of my own experience. Even outside the realm of memoir our lives are being documented and determined by people outside of ourselves, created in reflection to our actions or other's preconceptions. Couser notes that we consistently 'have our lives written for us by others: by our peers, in school yearbooks; by our teachers, in narrative evaluations; by our physicians, in medical records; by our employers, in personnel records; last, but by no means least, by

those who writer our memorials, death notices, obituaries' (27). While insensitive and thoughtless writing can risk hurting the people I care for, or don't care for, unless I un-write my memoir it is impossible to predict which parts might end up hurting someone. In order to be true to my memoir, to myself, I need to convey each person as I see them.

A memoir's truth, after all, is based on perspective, it changes depending on who is speaking, when they are speaking, and why. As Denzin posits, 'every time you return to truth it is different' (qtd. Owen et al. 185). In this moment this memoir is my truth, but it may not continue being so. Still, in order for the narrative to maintain any form of authority, it needs to portray its characters how I see them whether or not it pleases their real-life counterparts. Literary critic William Zinsser sees this as something a memoirist should stand by noting that:

> If your sister has a problem with your memoir, she can write her own memoir, and it will be just as valid as yours; nobody has a monopoly on the shared past. Some of your relatives will wish you hadn't said some of the things you said, especially if you reveal various family traits that are less loveable. (2006)

Yet standing by what I've written can be harder than it seems especially if there's a chance of hurting someone with what I've said. Though I aim to be sympathetic to those who appear in my memoir there are those who I struggle to sympathize with. The best example of this dilemma would be the character of my grandmother's nurse, Eddie, and Lara, my once math tutor, now my uncle's wife. While my affection towards them in reality is troubled, my memoir attempts to find balance for them as characters. I have shown this through the way the different characters/family members speak of them. For example, when they are viewed as more problematic characters it is through my perspective. When viewed in a more sympathetic light it is through my grandmother's. When I first started writing about Eddie it was difficult to portray him without the glare of my opinions. Yet when I tried to envision him as my grandmother would, a companion, a confidant, someone she wants to spend her life with, I started to see Eddie in a different light. As Gornick points out, 'because the narrator knew *who* was speaking, she always knew *why* she was speaking' (6). If I am writing Eddie from my grandmother's perspective I must envision him as she sees him, but if I am writing him from my perspective he should appear as I see him, for he is appearing in my version of the truth.

In a way, by writing Eddie through two different perspectives, my feelings for his real-life counterpart have changed. The more I tried to see him from my grandmother's perspective the less angry I felt towards him. I soon began to feel guilty for some of the things I had written about him. This led me to a crossroads. Do I keep how I felt at the beginning of the writing process in the memoir, because that's how I felt at the time, or do the revisions include my 'softened' feelings? If my memoir is indeed a recording of my memory, then it should speak to my memories. Yet this doesn't mean that the narrative should remain stagnant. Still I wonder, if Eddie reads about himself, will he like what he sees? Perhaps he might not even recognize the Eddie that I have written him as for that is not how he sees himself.

While there is not one way to write about family, for each memoir's structure depends on the family itself, I have found that perspective has been key in balancing ethics and memoir. As Gornick observes, 'The poet, the novelist, the memoirist—all must convince the reader they have some wisdom, and are writing as honestly as possible to arrive at what they know' (14). There will always be many lives that intersect in a narrative both within and outside of its pages. The fact that our life's narratives are a collective experience means that they are not just our own, but belong to our families and friends as well. Where one story starts another might end, where the writer feels that the memoir brings closure another family member might feel like it rehashes old wounds. Couser likes to remind us that the term memoir 'derives from the French word for memory' (19). For if our memoirs speak from our memories then we cannot 'demand that life writers tell stories that definitively replicate events or duplicate experience' (Owen et al. 192), since our memories themselves lack the ability to do so. A memoirist will inevitably have to reach for their imagination in order to fill in the gaps of memory, something that Patricia Hampl asserts 'isn't a lie, but an act of necessity; as the innate urge to locate truth always is' (31). Whether it is our imagination or our memories which upset our family it is impossible to speak for everyone, impossible to make everyone happy while maintaining a semblance of truth to ourselves.

In this section of the essay I set out to find the balance between presenting a memoirist's truth while protecting one's family. In my own work I've found that using pseudonyms and alternating between perspectives to be the tools that have been most proficient in the balancing act. Just as I can only truly speak for myself in my memoir I can only speak for myself in the writing process. Which is why what I offer

is more a reflection than a solution, temporary tools in portraying memories that will never be just our own. Even if we find ways in our memoir's structure to discuss or deal with the ethical conundrum's of writing the lives of others, we are still writing the lives of others. Solutions like having our family members read and respond to what we've written or informing the reader from the very start of the memoir that it is in fact a memoir can help balance the dynamic. But these solutions are still subject to the memoirist's family themselves and what kind of audience is engaging with the memoir. Which is why if a memoirist feels that they need to take the plunge, that their story must be told, then they should go forward with their version of the truth. As Lynch suggests, 'For all the trouble it might cause, the author needs to hold tight to his or her 'authority'' (2019:15). A memoir might only be the memoirist's version of the truth, but it is still their truth, something they feel needs to be heard.

Searching for Truth in a Community

Though a relational memoir, *The Pretenders* works on two levels, one as a journey of personal understanding about my Chinese heritage, and two, as a way to speak of events that have happened to the communities my family are a part of. By expressing moments of war, diaspora, and depression, the memoir bridges the gap between the private and the public by engaging with aspects of Chinese history, society, and culture. Dorrit Cohn writes that 'history [is] more often concerned with humanity in the plural than in the singular, with events and changes affecting entire societies, rather than those affecting the lives of individual beings' (3). A relational memoir like *The Pretenders*, though focused on a specific family, can become a lens for society, mirroring the history of the public through its private events. In other words, by looking at the individual we can see a reflection of society's workings. For example, we can see my ancestors fleeing China as a direct result of the Second Opium War, and my grandparents' move to London as a reflection of Indonesia's economic climate in the sixties. Even the languages we speak, like my grandfather's fluency in Dutch, has to do with the laws that were in place during colonial Indonesia. The private and the public in this case need each other in order to tell a complete story. The memories that fill my family's stories are unfinished without the actual history of the time, and inversely, a memoir can work to fill the gaps of history.

If a memoir ends up reflecting on a community, then it needs to be conscious of how it portrays these communities in its narrative. By writing the private moments of a family a memoir can put the lives of vulnerable or misunderstood communities on display. For it is through the lives of people that the social, political, and cultural climate of a time is reflected. Couser writes that, ‘Regardless of one’s motives (although they are pertinent), appropriating an ethnic, racial, or religious identity that is not one’s own violates the identity claim basic to memoir as a genre’ (10). As a person of mixed-race, writing about my Chinese family often feels like I am speaking of a culture and a community that is not my own. I often wonder if I can write the story of Chinese children persecuted by war, or even of a Chinese family going to lunch, or if by doing so I am appropriating a culture in my memoir that is not my own. Am I, through the fact that it is in my blood, in my history, allowed to touch upon subjects I was not a witness to? Can I piece together parts of my culture and my history that are slowly fading even though I have never been to China? And perhaps most importantly, am I violating an identity claim or am I clinging to one?

The more research I put into the events that have constructed our family history, the more I have realized that we have become something other than just ‘Chinese’. As Chansky writes, ‘Since diasporic lives are on the move and are unable to be located within set boundaries and borders, diasporic life stories are correspondingly difficult to trace within traditional textual boundaries’ (207). Though my family originated in China when my ancestors left in the late 1800’s we began a process of dissimilation from the family who remained. Edgar Wickberg posits that ‘by 1900 at least three million Chinese lived outside China’ and that ‘ninety percent of them [lived] In Southeast Asia’ (35). These numbers suggest that there are a multitude of Chinese that, like my family, might have tried to preserve their heritage but have also had to ‘surrender parts of that heritage’ (Gungwu 128) in order to assimilate with their new culture. Wee et al. explain that due to anti-Chinese sentiment in the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya ‘social pressure on the Chinese migrants to become less non-indigenous and, if possible, to assimilate to the indigenous population’ were high, especially ‘in areas where the Chinese migrants constituted a small minority’ (367). In this light, events both historical and political have led to a new understanding of what it means to be Chinese. As the generations of my family have unfolded so has the blending of our culture, each

move resulting in a careful collection of our new ‘home’, making our culture less Chinese and more a reflection of our diaspora.

Memoirs can reshape the way history is viewed by re-imagining narratives of the past, creating a past that is both familiar to the community and individual to the family. The dialogue between the community and the individual forms when the writing of one’s memories requires research in order to fill the inaccurate and often failing function of memory. Instead of relying solely on memories for my memoir I had to turn to other writers and their families in order to fill in the gaps of my family history. In Jing-Jing Lee’s *How we Disappeared* (2019), the description of the attap hut her main character lived in, its ‘one rattan chair’ and the ‘one bedroom’ where they slept ‘head to foot to head’ (22), was used to help me imagine the home my grandmother grew up in. Similarly, Meira Chand’s description of a home made out of ‘mud and reed walls’ with a ‘patched roof that disintegrated whenever it rained’ (29), was used as well. Though seemingly trivial these descriptions helped to paint a childhood in which my grandmother shared only the broad outlines of, and were necessary in helping me create a more complete picture of the person she was.

In this sense, when my writing feels like it lacks a Chinese ‘authenticity’, it is in fact mirroring my search/loss for said Chineseness. The history of my family, and the search I have taken in connecting with our history means that once my memoir is released to the public the collective ownership of my family story is returned to the community itself. In other words, by writing about my family a dialogue forms between the community and the individual, for my story is not only our own but something that has also happened to other Chinese families in South East Asia as well. While my memoir was never written with the intent of being a social commentary, writing my memoir has helped me to realize that by connecting with a family legacy which I felt was fading, I was also connecting with a community I have always had difficulty feeling a part of.

At the core of its creation *The Pretenders* was always an exercise in understanding the generations of the Chinese side of my family while simultaneously searching for a sense of roots and belonging. As Chansky suggests, ‘the diasporic subject who exists between two or more nations has a circumstances-based need to declare belonging’ (210). This lack of belonging is further enforced by the fact that I do not speak the same language as my ancestors, and that I express myself differently because of that fact. Language in itself is a reflection of time, for it

changes as the generations grow, and adapts to the political and cultural climate of the land. Growing up as Chinese in Indonesia meant my grandfather spoke Bahasa, Hokkien, English, and Dutch. Similarly, my grandmother speaks the same languages as my grandfather, but her English is less developed. My father, like his parents, speaks Bahasa and Hokkien, but exchanges a command of the English language for a lack of Mandarin. At home we speak English, and though my mother made sure we speak her native Spanish, my father never taught us any of his languages. When the stories that are in my memoir were first told, they were told in Hokkien to my father. Later when my mother became a part of the family they were told to her in English. These stories, now passed down to me, are translated once more through the language of second-hand experience.

Perhaps the one element which remains untranslated in my memoir are the passages that deal with food. Food and the act of having a meal is a large part of my memoir, a time where the family can come together and form a brief window of understanding over something which they all enjoy. This is why I don't translate the foods which appear in the memoir. Foods like *teh tarik* (pulled tea), *nasi goreng* (fried rice), or *har gow* (shrimp dumpling), remain in their original language without much of an explanation of what they are. This is done as a way to mirror how food is the one subject which doesn't require translation or explanation between my family members. In her collection of essays, *Silent Dancing* (1990), Judith Ortiz Coefer takes a similar stance when writing about the foods she grew up with. In the essay 'Casa' she writes:

> At three or four o'clock in the afternoon, the hour of *café con leche*, the women of my family gathered in Mama's living room to speak of important things and to tell stories for the hundredth time, as to each other, meant to be overheard by us young girls, their daughters. (14)

Having spent her childhood being shuttled between New Jersey and Puerto Rico Ortiz Coefer's *Silent* Dancing reflects the way she flipped between the two languages and cultures. By keeping terms like '*café con leche'* in her essay Ortiz Coefer is using the beverage as a link to her Puerto Rican heritage and childhood. Juanita Betancourt sees this switching between Spanish and English as 'venues for cultural manifestations' (202), as the links to Ortiz Coefer's memories lie in the languages themselves.

In another section Ortiz Coefer describes ‘Christmas on the Island’ (61) through the ingredients used for their meals. Puerto Rican ingredients such as *sofrito* or meals like *arroz con gandules* and *pasteles* are written in Spanish. By leaving these foods, which Betancourt explains ‘are common knowledge to most Puerto Ricans’ as they are, Ortiz Coefer is providing us with a ‘sense of identity’ since these foods are direct ‘links to memories of Puerto Rican cultural experiences’ (202). My own childhood was experienced with this sense of duality, with Chinese and Puerto Rican traditions meshed together to form new traditions. By keeping the foods in my memoir in their original language I am trying to express this duality. Though I might not be able to the culture that surrounds my father’s family I am able to relate through the language of food, dishes that I grew up eating just as my family had.

I mention language in this section because it works similarly to how being mixed-race reflects community permissions concerning history and culture in a memoir. To say that language is universal would be to deny the nuances that each language possesses. Expressing yourself in English is not the same as expressing yourself in Hokkien or Spanish. The stories that occur in *The Pretenders*, and the way they are told, reflect the evolving languages of the generations. In effect, two translations occur, first, from the original language the stories have been experienced into English, and second, from the way stories are told orally to the way stories are told in a memoir. As Salman Rushdie writes, ‘It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained’ (1991: 17). By translating a story through multiple languages, the story, itself mirrors our diaspora. It shows that what has started as Hokkien now continues in English, reborn in the generation who wishes for the narrative to live on. It also reflects how these stories have been passed on, first from grandparents who wanted to impart their legacy on grandchildren who couldn’t speak the same language, and now in a memoir in a language they cannot read. The language, like the narrative, changes according to the location, social landscape, and desires of the family.

If the ethical concerns associated with memoir can be seen in conjunction with the narrative’s purpose, then if my memoir has been written in response to recording and understanding my family legacy, then language is important even in the fact that it changes how I write. Knowing my parents will read it, but my grandparents never will, does something to the words I choose. Knowing, caring,

how the person will respond, versus knowing they never will, changes the permissions you give yourself in their story. As Walter Benjamin writes, ‘What distinguishes the novel from the story… is its essential dependence on the book’ (146). All the stories my family have told orally up to this point have only been dependent on the members and language itself, the fact that the stories now rely on my memoir in order to reach subsequent generations puts greater importance in how I chose to narrate them. In this way we can view the cycle of the family legacy developing much like storytelling has for Benjamin. By beginning as something orally transmitted the family legacy was once dependent on the family in order to be passed on, now as something recorded in a memoir, the memoir itself becomes essential since the family members who passed it on orally no longer live.

This journey through translation changes the way the stories are remembered, meaning while some things might have been lost in their translation, other things have been gained in their re-telling. As Mikhail Bakhtin writes, ‘It is possible to objectivize one’s own particular language, its internal form, the peculiarities of its world view, its specific linguistic habitus, only in the light of another language belonging to someone else’ (62). Without the language of my ancestors I would not be able to understand my own ‘linguistic habitus’, in other words, my culture, my identity, my writing, could not have been formed if it wasn’t for the languages which came before. Even though I don’t speak all of my family’s languages I still take my social ques from their linguistic culture. The way I express myself, what I deem appropriate in social situations, even the way I treat people. Eva Hoffman describes this sense of ‘cultural ques’ in her memoir *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language* (1989). She writes:

> I learn restraint from Penny, who looks offended when I shake her by the arm in excitement, as if my gesture had been one of aggression instead of friendliness. I learn it from a girl who pulls away when I hook my arm through hers as we walk down the street—this movement of friendly intimacy is an embarrassment to her. (146)

For Hoffman’s mother the longer Hoffman spends in their new country the more she appears like her peers. Mary Besemeres proposes that ‘Accounts like Hoffman’s suggest that such rules are followed… precisely because they are unwritten, that is, learned in an ‘osmotic’ rather than explicit way, often in childhood’ (2015:221). In my own childhood these social ques were mixed and often confused. I

received certain ‘rules’ for being, from my mother’s culture, my father’s, and the American school I attended. In one of the opening sections of my memoir I write:

> When I was a kid, he would always shy away from hugs. Mom, ever affectionate, taught me to love with abandon, yet Dad had trouble adjusting. According to him, kids weren't supposed to hug their parents, they were supposed to respect them. Yet here is, softened by time, letting me hug him as if it's always been this way. (13)

Here the reader can see the dichotomy between my mother’s culture, one which promotes physical affection, with my father’s one, which is more reserved in this sense. As a child it was often confusing, and it took a while to learn that affection was present in my father’s family, it just didn’t manifest the way I was taught to expect. This dichotomy can be seen not only within the pages of my memoir but also in the decision of writing a memoir itself. As my father’s daughter I am someone who was taught that there is strength in silence, as my mother’s daughter I am someone who believes that sharing can lead to healing. Perhaps the legacy that lives on in my memoir is not one of a specific culture, but what happens within one’s family and identity when multiple cultures meet and interact.

This is why I often find myself at a crossroads with the positivity of my memoir’s ‘translation’ of my family’s memories. On the one hand my memoir shows the cycle of a legacy, moving from one generation to the next, learning of new cultures and languages, but it also dilutes the experiences through my second-hand telling and inability to fill in the gaps through memory alone. I do not wish for my memoir to enforce certain tropes which are already related with Anglophone writers writing about Chinese cultures. Besemeres hints that when it comes to travel writing writers often ‘readily reproduce exoticizing tropes that readers (and publishers) have come to expect’ (2015:223). Though Besemeres is speaking of writers who don’t speak the language of the country in which they are writing about the same can be said about me writing a memoir about a culture in which makes only a part of my identity. In this sense the community is just as vital to the history as the memoir, for both are required in order to grasp a bigger picture of the events that have come to shape my family, and on the grander scale have come to shape Chinese communities in South East Asia.

Conclusion

I began this creative journey as a quest for understanding, an attempt to look at the pieces of my family that I had trouble fitting together. It seemed like everything I wrote before *The Pretenders* was an attempt to write *The Pretenders*. I was haunted by this vision of my brother and I laying under the sun, reunited in our family home, talking about the decisions and events that led us to that moment. It was a picture stuck in time, an echo of the past, a brother and a sister mirroring my father and his brother who were very much a mirror for their own father and uncle.

It goes without saying that three years ago, I had a very different story in mind. Though my grandparents were always a part the plan, as was the occupation, I envisioned my memoir more as an exploration of my relationship with my father. At its heart it is still a story about my father and I, but it has been interesting to see how my feelings have changed as the story took shape. The more I wrote my father's character the less angry I became with him. In a way I was developing an understanding of him as I explored the reasoning behind his character's actions. Through this process my father became less father and more human, something we as children often forget our parents are.

Sometimes I wonder if this newfound sympathy I have developed is more for the character I've written my father as or if it's actually for my father himself. Perhaps it does not matter. As I write, it is inevitable that my memories and history will be altered with the words I end up choosing meaning my perspective can also be subject to change. Throughout this process I have found that the more I developed as a writer I also developed as a daughter. After all, the memoir I envisioned when I began my PhD is most definitely not the memoir I am ending up with. In five years, ten, my feelings will most likely change again. Perhaps everything I have written now will no longer be true, perhaps I will have found a better way to tell it.

The word truth, though littered throughout this essay, is something I am uncomfortable with. Jackie Spicer suggests that 'language…by its very structure…always contains the possibility of lying' because it 'exists in the absence of its referent *and* emerges from the subjective reminiscence of its author' (387). There are different types of truths, different versions, yet people approach memoir as if the memoirist is required to tell them an all-encompassing version. As if we could pinpoint an exact history without any of the colouring that makes a memoirist a writer. I want to stress once again that I find truth to be less truth than it is opinion, or

perspective. Truth can never stand up to the standard its name sets. After all, we all have our own truths. Truths that will change as we age, as we experience new stories, meet new people. Something can be true to us for years and all of the sudden it can be turned on its head in a matter of minutes.

Ownership of our stories, troubled power dynamics, truth-telling, and postmemory are the main themes I have examined critically in this essay and have worked like a writer's journal to my memoir. Yet even as a writer's journal, the idea of writing a critical commentary to accompany my creative work did something to the way I write. Jeremy Popkin reminds us that 'life writing is not an academic exercise. It arises out of real needs in authors' lives' (2010:183). Analysing what I have written has made me both frightened of what has been put on paper and also more careful. I was angry at my father for a long time. I wrote a lot of passages that expressed this anger. Scenes that spoke of my loneliness as a child, his frustration and lack of understanding over my existence. My truth changed as I wrote this memoir, I am no longer angry. None of those passages are in the memoir, nor will they ever be. The writing process changed my truths. They evolved as I wrote them, as I explored my memories in conjunction to the theories and thoughts of other memoirists. For my memoir this hesitance has been beneficial but I sometimes wonder if it subverts my truth-telling. Am I really writing how I feel or has it become more of a performance? With the communities my memoir touches in mind have I ended up writing something marginal rather than something mindful of my own truth? Has my memoir blended real-life and fantasy to a point that it has become more carefully constructed words than actual writing?

The backbone of my critical essay and my memoir is Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory. Hirsch's theory opened my eyes to a world of memoir and ideas that enabled me to write when writing seemed impossible. Though I do not believe that my grandparents' memories have displaced my own I believe that I have inherited them. That together our stories complete one another. This is something I hope that I have been able to express, if not in my memoir then in this essay, the idea that history and memory can come together through memoir, that by re-telling our history we are in fact telling the story of how each generation has come to understand the other. That being said, even though our stories are intertwined the power balance is not. Just as my grandparents' stories have consumed my mind, my memoir has consumed their stories. This power dynamic is why the way we choose to write our

family's stories matters. Careful construction of voice and structure are critical in developing a memoir that attempts to speak on not only our own lives but those that we come into contact with.

Throughout this essay I have emphasised the word structure, by which I mean, the way an author chooses to organise a narrative, whether in terms of the perspectives employed or the order of the chapters. In the texts I have examined I have found that the author's structure mimics the way they've grappled with their postmemory. Choices of tense, voice, and perspective, alter according to the way they've inherited their trauma and their current relationship with their family. How much violence the authors have witnessed themselves coupled with a return to the original site of their family's trauma also factor into the way the narrative presents itself.

A memoir's structure is the pillar of its recorded memories, it determines the way the audience reasons the parts of our (and our family's) lives that we have chosen to share. In my own memoir I write my perspective in first-person. I see this as taking agency in my truth and emotions, while third-perspective for my family is meant to create a distinction between me telling my stories, my truth, and me telling their stories, altering their truths through my writing. The choice of making my structure jump, both through time, and perspective, is done to portray the fact that my identity is as much my own creation as it is the formation of my family's experiences. In this way I've tried to echo the workings of memory. Memories aren't remembered chronologically. They are brought on by certain events or things we hear. Memories don't end, they resonate, effecting both emotional and physical responses in the present.

When I spoke of Alice Pung's decision to write both her perspective and her father's in the third-person as an equalizing force, I did not mention my scepticism in the memoir's ability to do so. Despite Pung's desire to step back and approach both narratives with equal distance it is at its core a story of a daughter writing about her father. Still, I find the fact that she tried to give them equal footing in the first place to be what matters. When it comes to my own memoir's voice I am more in line with Irene Vilar and her belief that writing in anything other than first-person would not be her telling her story. Though I played around with both third and first person throughout my drafts, in the end, first-person was the perspective which felt sincerest. After all, my memoir is me, telling a story about my family, and there was

no reason I shouldn't be upfront with the fact. Though some may see the usage of naming my character Mercy, instead of my real name, as not taking ownership of my story I see it more as encapsulating the person I was at the time under a character. Owen explains that a 'writer must change elements, add, alter, or eliminate details' in order to 'strategically structure a story', that 'invention' is something the 'fallibility of memory' requires (191). By writing in first-person as Mercy I am stating that these are my memories, this is how I saw it, but it can be subject to change. Our lives are not straightforward, they are messy and often confusing. By choosing a structure that jumps between family members and time periods, between first and third person I am attempting to convey this fact. The truth might not even be found in what I have chosen to write but rather in what I have decided to omit. If we are to read and write life stories we might have to accept the fact that the power balance will never be entirely equal. If it is clear the memoirist has made an attempt to balance the dynamics between the parties recorded it might have to be enough.

When I first read *On Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong's choice to write his life stories as fiction made me question my own choice in labelling my memoir as a memoir. The past, though relayed to me by relatives, and furthered by my own research into the time, will always be my version of the past. In that way it is indeed a work of fiction. Vuong's reasoning of wanting to make his story apply to Asian-Americans as a whole rather than a single isolated incident is a noble view (Late Night). One that feeds into the idea that memoir is something personal while fiction is something collective. Perhaps I have chosen memoir as my medium in a lack of confidence, in the willingness to say that I possess the ability to speak for a race or culture that is not one hundred percent my own. Furthermore, I never experienced the tragedies that my grandfather's generation and community have lived through. This is why my memoir attempts to subvert the violence it records. By writing it as a game my grandmother plays as a child, or dreams that my grandfather has, I am speaking on how the violence has been internalized rather than how it has been witnessed since I have never witnessed it myself. However, I did see how the impact of violence was dealt with in the present and how the handling of its effects affected my father and in turn myself. This is why I have chosen to label it a memoir. These stories happened, if I do not claim them then I would be denying their place in my family's narrative. Again, when it comes to recounting violence structure is key and should reflect the story it is trying to tell. Which is why I have found the metaphorical

work of phantoms and dreams to be critical in explaining the impact and rationalization of what has happened to my family as the generations attempt to understand each other's silence.

It is both strange and comforting to see that our life stories are not ours alone. The fact that I can read Alice Pung's *Her Father's Daughter*, or Irene Vilar's *The Ladies Gallery* and find pieces of myself and my writing amongst their narratives means that even when our stories are uniquely ours they are also shared. The Japanese occupation was experienced by an entire generation of South East Asians that are now fading from our midst. My grandmother herself is in her nineties and will never read what I have written, but if my memoir were to be published other relatives of these survivors will. The ability to turn to a piece of writing and find our family stories is important in not only understanding ourselves but our community as well. As a person of mixed-race who often feels without a home, being able to find myself in a book, even if the author is of a different mix, makes the world seem a little less lonely. As Rocio G. Davis argues, 'life writing can be not only a potentially productive source for a nuanced reconstruction of the past, but also a valuable document for discerning processes of identity' (4). Through the process of re-examining our life stories we can help build the communities which have aided us in our discovery of how our history affects our identity by understanding the aspects that stem from our shared experiences.

Before my PhD I hadn't explored Singapore's history theoretically. I have argued that the way one relates with their country is exemplified in their identity. That being mixed race has given me a complex view of how I identify with my country. The fact that a sense of place is not constant in my memoir is something that I attempt to show through the time and perspective skips. The multitude of countries my family has called home has changed the way we conceptualize ourselves and understand one another. My brother and I are the end of our 'Chinese' heritage. Our family's ties to China and Indonesia are in danger of being lost. Perhaps in a continuously globalized world it is not so important to be tied to a place. Personally, I have called many places my home and I am able to be equally nostalgic for each of them. Whether it is eating piraguas with my mother in Old San Juan, or hiking through the Santa Monica mountains, drinking teh tarik with my father, or even wandering down my street in Poplar. All of these locations have imbedded more than memories, they have imbedded pieces of my identity.

Being mixed-race means I never feel wholly at home or accepted by either side. Claiming any part of my identity culturally or historically often feels like appropriation. As if I'm pretending to be something I'm not. I have to be that much more Chinese or that much more Puerto-Rican in order to belong. As I've grown I've found that my family's myths have taken a part in the development of my character. Whether it be the phantoms their silences have created or the stories that have become akin to postmemory, each tale has evolved, transforming into a root for the past, a reasoning to the different parts of where I've come from.

This is why Chapter two focused on the idea of my grandfather as our family's founding father and the origin story of the buried jewels. While it might seem pretentious to compare my grandfather to Singapore's leader I've found that the qualities we imbed in a country's leader are not so different than what we expect from a family's patriarch. Paraphrasing Rousseau, the social contract between a family is not only the most sacred, but the most basic tenant of a society (The Social Contract). In this vein a country and a family are seen as an exemplification of one another. The processes the patriarch of a country goes through in order to assert his will and guidance is not that different than the patriarch of a family. The ghost, the myth, isn't always literal, but something which haunts in every-day moments.

By constantly relaying the story of how he built our family after the war my grandfather was able to assert his dominance over our own stories and decisions. In this way he becomes the ghost, the myth that dominates our origin. I do not believe this to be inherently bad. Through my family's origin story, we have been given not only a legacy, but a point of origin for an otherwise diasporic history. When I compare my family story to a myth I mean myth in the sense of an explanation for our current lives. An ancient story of the past used to explain where we are now, a story that has become mythical in its re-telling, and even more mythical in my usage of memoir. History can become mythical the more times it is relayed, not in its truth, but in how we interact and use it in our day to day lives.

Terry Tempest Williams writes, 'I write to make peace with things I cannot control. I write to uncover. I write to meet my ghosts. I write because it allows me to confront that which I do not know' (6). My writing has come from a place of love for my family, out of respect, and a desire to understand how my family has shaped my identity. Factors like my mixed-race, my family's diaspora, and notions of postmemory not only feed into one another but are the reasons why I've chosen to

write and explore my memoir the way I have. This has been the fuel of my memoir and effects how I've tried to balance my truth with the protection of my family. When it comes to these power dynamics the answer is never clear-cut, but wholly dependent on the situation of the memoirist themselves. Every memoirist experiences their truth differently influencing the lines they will eventually draw. Which is why I cannot offer solutions, only tools, benchmarks to look back on to ensure that the autobiographical pact is being respected. In this sense the memoir should concern itself with Owen's three truths. Historical truth, as in recorded dates if the memoirist is discussing past events that have affected a community. Aesthetic, in that the text respects the expectations of its genre. And fictional, in that a truth may be presented in a literary sense but it's been done so with the expectation of an audience. With these truths in mind the story of our experiences and our families can come together, blending almost as incomprehensibly as they do in reality.

Through the act of writing, the careful structuring of our thoughts and experiences, our ruminations on our family, our past can find a way to come full circle. Throughout this journey I have come face to face with a past that has haunted me. Though tears have been shed, and uncomfortable questions have been asked I have found that the journey has helped me understand how the past has shaped my identity. My grandparents' stories may always linger in the background of my life but they have also given meaning to my own stories. After all, each family line is itself a never-ending strand of memory stretching back through our roots, touching upon all that we were, and all that we might come to be.

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