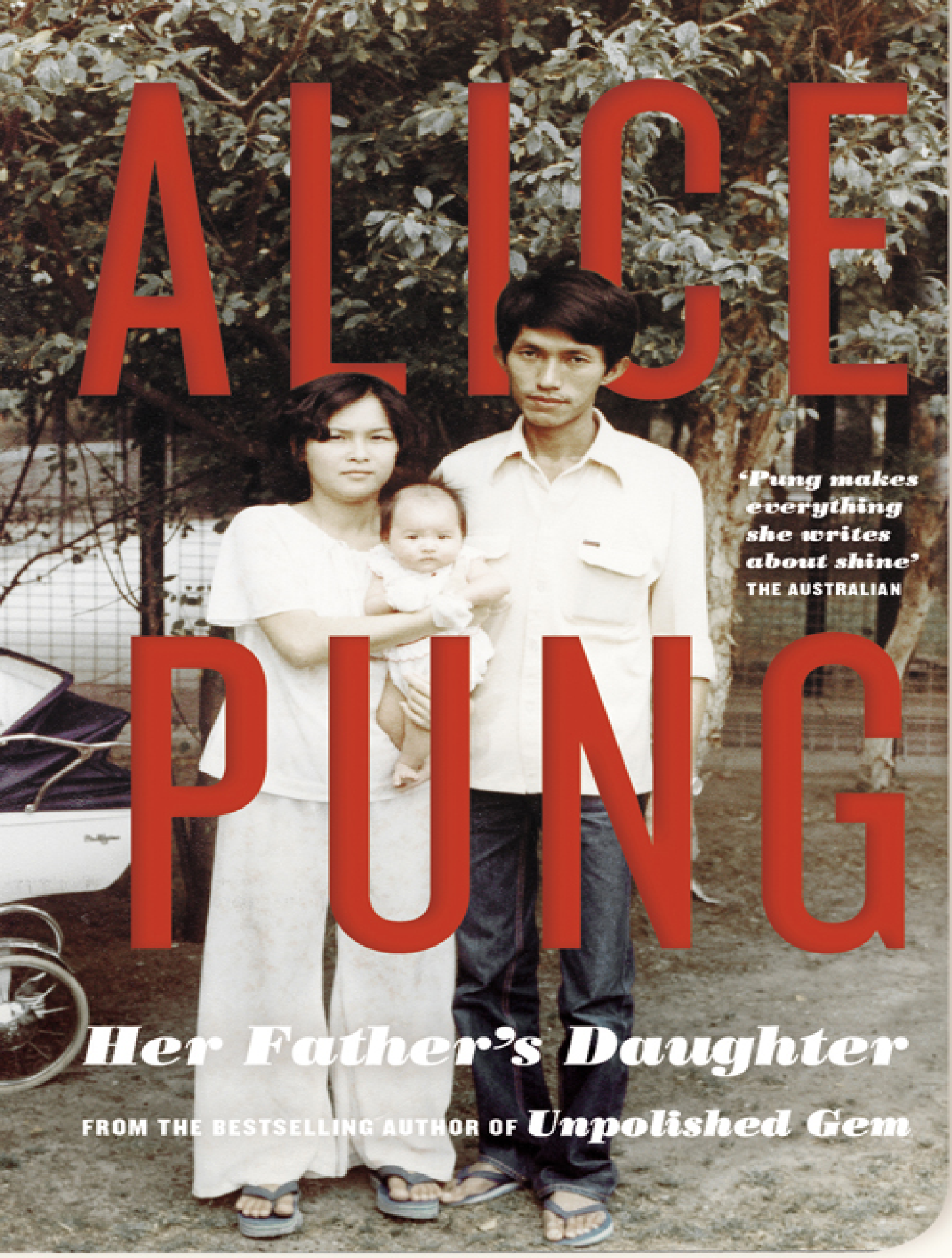
ALICE
PUNG
'Pung makes everything she writes about shine'
THE AUSTRALIAN
Her Father's Daughter
FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF Unpolished Gem

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ALICE PUNG

Her Father's Daughter

Contents

Dedicated to Dad and Mum

I said to my soul to be still and wait without hope
For hope would be hope of the wrong thing
Wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing
Yet there is faith
But the faith and the love and the hope
Are all in the waiting.

—T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

PROLOGUE

STAY AND DEFEND

FATHER—

His daughter is coming home. Well, not exactly home, but back to Australia. It panics him whenever any of his children are far away. She has been gone nearly three months – the first time she has lived outside the country. And to think that less than a year ago he had made such a fuss when she went off to Perth, on the west coast, for three weeks to edit a book. ‘Why do you need to go so far to write?’ he had asked her. But there was nothing he could do. She wasn’t a child anymore. Still, she called home every evening for the three weeks she was there. In China, she is not so diligent. If three days pass and he has not heard from her, he will assume the worst.

His daughter is in a different country and she will get herself into trouble. He just knows it. He has a feeling. He remembers at the airport a woman with a baby in her arms, carrying two suitcases, waiting to board the same plane as his daughter. He saw his daughter offer to carry one of the bags, just as she was about to pass through the boarding gate. He was too far away to call out to her, and he felt ridiculous. It was only a domestic connecting flight and there was no death penalty in Australia. But he worried about drugs. Why did she do such stupid things? And now she was in Beijing, living in an apartment by herself, writing. Why did she have to go so far away to do that? With modern technology and an imagination, she could look at the country through the internet. He remembered when she showed him Google Maps before she left, and how to roam the foreign streets to find Peking University where she would be staying. It was incredible – you could even zoom in on the red and white tennis courts. ‘Can you see people too?’ he had asked.

‘Of course not, Dad. Don’t be silly. What do you think this is for, surveillance? They’re satellite pictures.’

Well, why couldn’t she just see the world through these satellite pictures? It was safer. She could watch movies. Why did she think people invented

such things? They said that a desktop was a dangerous place from which to view the world, but it was also the safest spot for the watcher.

He wants her to live a life where she will not be harmed by anything more than the occasional paper-cut. He is pleased she has a job she can do safely ensconced within four walls. If she wants to write, then he will give her stories. Why did she need to go overseas to find them? But there is so much to occupy his mind now, and no time or desire to plunge a hand back into the past to pull out details. He wishes that he had photographs, but he owns nothing that is older than 1980. Everything in his life before then has been taken, lost, wiped out.

*

‘Australians are strange,’ he remarks to his daughter over the phone the next time he calls her room at the Peking University guest house. ‘Why don’t they buy insurance? How can they think that safety and peace of mind are expensive?’ Their conversations across continents are often confined to things he has read in the newspaper.

‘I don’t know,’ she replies, ‘but I can understand why they stayed to defend their houses. Some of them were over sixty. They might have felt it was too late to start all over again. It was their family home.’

People want to hear stories of great horrors and triumphs. His daughter’s stories so far seem to be about small things. He wants her to write about the glories of a civilisation that once claimed to be the heartbeat of the world, and how proud she is of having ancestry from the Middle Kingdom. Instead she writes about taking a bus to go strawberry-picking on a farm outside Melbourne, and about his wife Kien learning English word by word from his youngest daughter’s school books. What is the point of telling a story if it is only about things that happen every day? They are so easily forgotten. She needs to see the world through a larger lens. But what does he know?

To live a happy life, he believes, you need a healthy short-term memory, a slate that can be wiped clean every morning, like one of those toys he bought for his daughter when she was young – an Etch A Sketch. If you turned it upside down and shook it, your art disappeared.

FAR FROM HOME

DAUGHTER—
Every time she calls home, these are the sorts of things her father thinks she needs to know: ‘Always lock your doors, and always look behind you when you walk through a doorway. Did you hear that a Korean boy and a Chinese girl jumped to their deaths from their Sydney balcony when an intruder followed them into their flat with a knife?’

‘Wear earmuffs. Your Uncle Kiv told me that when the Cambodian refugees came to Canada, their ears froze off during the first winter. They had never felt snow before.’

‘Buy a face-mask to ward off the pollution.’

‘Don’t go out when it is getting dark.’

She imagined walking through the ancient city, touch entombed in gloves, hearing buried beneath earmuffs, smell suffocated behind a white paper mask and blinkered eyes watching for wayward cars and potential rapists while wonderful things like the Temple of Heaven passed her by. *I hope nothing happens to you* seemed to be the secret wish behind every phone conversation. Yet to stop bad things happening, you had to stop anything happening.

The next time her father calls, he tells her about the bushfires raging through Victoria’s summer, while she is in the middle of a frozen Beijing winter. The fires are reported in the *China Daily*, but not on the front page because of the everyday man-made horrors constantly happening here. Mines are collapsing, schools are tumbling down, trapping only-children inside. Milk for babies is poisoned, killing more only-children.

‘Staying and defending your home is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard,’ her father rails. He feels let down: Australian democracy should be infallible. ‘Why does the government let them stay and defend?’

When she was seven, her teacher advised that if ever their house burnt down, they should save the family photos.

‘Ridiculous,’ her father replied when she reported this to him. ‘You don’t save the photos. You save yourself. And then perhaps the money and the

gold. That is all.’

If their house burnt down, she knew her father would not stray from his word. Leave it, he would command, no matter what they clung to. They would grab Alina to stop her going back for her guinea pig. But Dad would not tell Mum to let go of whatever she was holding onto, because Mum, like Dad, had been through this before. They knew what to do. Mum would be clutching small bags of gold and wads of money, things that could easily be carried in the hand to start over.

In her childhood she had grown up with survivors – weary-looking men and women who took sewing home or made jewellery or worked in factories, people who did things that didn’t involve much talking. First, they didn’t know much English, and second, they didn’t talk about these things with people who would never understand. But among themselves, it was different. Her parents and their friends greeted each other not only with ‘How are you?’ but also, ‘So you survived the Black Bandits?’ That last question was a question that did not need an answer: the answer was right in front of their faces, in the breath that came in and out. And finally, the question they had all asked each other in their previous lives, but which now took on an extra weight, like something still to be digested in the stomach: ‘Have you eaten yet?’

So when she was eighteen, she began to research how not having any food kills you slowly. She learnt about the body breaking down its own tissues and muscles to keep the heart and the nervous system thrumming away. She read about ailments such as anaemia, beriberi and pellagra, which sounded more like the three Graces in a pidgin language than the effects of vitamin deficiency as a result of starvation. There was even a word for the sense of exhaustion that comes with being starved: inanition.

And then she stopped.

She thought of her grandfather – her father’s father – dead of starvation, her two cousins buried alive, half her relatives wiped out, the whole of Cambodia reduced to one extended bony arm begging for a bowl of rice. This was her heritage. No wonder her father didn’t want her to see it. Her parents were born in Cambodia, but her grandparents were from China. So she would begin this new book on a bus instead, in her grandmother’s hometown, as all such heart-starting stories of homecoming should begin.

PART I.
CHINA

BEGINNINGS

In her flat in Beijing, she writes the first sentence.

This story begins on a bus.

This will be her prologue, set in Chaozhou, the Tide Prefecture, in the Guangdong province. While she is on her writing residency, her father has given her the names of two places to visit: Pulin and Jieyang. He has never been there himself, but he thinks she should go and take a look at the birthplace of his parents. Yet the two names mean as much to her as Tukums or Jékabpils. It is like opening an atlas of the world and pointing to any two towns in the same region. Still, she perseveres:

This story begins on a bus. The bus rolls down dirt roads, and when it stops, she will disembark and scoop up soil and kiss the land of her ancestors and tell the world how good it is to be home at last.

The reader is not there with her; she can say whatever she likes. But the ground, as she can see, is salted with spit and dotted with dog-shit, and it is not even soil. It's just dust.

'How do you feel?' her Guangdong friend Peina asks her. Peina knows she is here to write about her heritage. 'You must have some special feelings about returning to your ancestral hometown. I can tell by your face.'

In reality, she is only squinting because some dust has blown in her eye.

All the windows of the bus are open, in this bus that is not really a bus. It is more like a minivan, crammed with far too many people. She doesn't feel anything except squashed. People are packed in like last-minute socks in a heaving suitcase. The lady conductor reminds her of her mother or perhaps one of her aunties. 'Ay, ay, your stop has arrived!' she says with a smile that is missing two teeth, and extends an arm to pull her out of the bus and eject her onto the street.

There are half-burnt buildings and dogs running about. Children in their school uniforms – polyester tracksuits of primary colours – are climbing on top of what look to be rubbish mounds. She watches this, surprisingly, without any smear of sadness. She has seen more miserable children

howling in toy stores in Australia. These kids in Jieyang probably know the limits of their unfulfilled wants. They can see the corners of their universe, even though they have probably known for a while that the earth is not a flat square block and that heaven is not a circle floating above them.

She sees families pulling children along in wheelbarrows, to the lake. She sees lives of wood and splintery faded plastic, held together by string and nails and glue, like the toys being sold in the small stores in the streets. She sees old ladies telling their grandkids to stop pointing at the foreigners. She realises she can understand almost every word they are saying, but nothing is familiar.

‘Who are they?’ some kids down the street ask each other when they spot her, Peina and her British friend Katie walking through their narrow laneways.

‘Foreign ghosts!’

She smiles. ‘How are you?’ she asks them in Teochew.

They run shrieking with laughter down a narrow alleyway, their schoolbags knocking against their polar-fleeced legs.

Now comes the part where she is supposed to write that she feels home at last, and that seeing these beautiful children in her ancestral hometown, who look so much like her, makes something pop in the centre of her chest.

But she can’t lie.

It doesn’t happen.

Her words can’t bridge the distance between what she sees and what she understands, and the further she travels, the less she feels close to anything. In fact, the more she sees of modern Chaozhou, the more the world her grandmother had told her about recedes. Details are replaced by their newer modern versions: Fergie and Eminem blare from shopfront speakers as she wanders through the streets late at night, looking for the promised river, the radiant river of Jieyang, which is meant to be a short walk away. Yet all she seems to find are stores and more stores: merchants selling fruit in bags and on sticks. Vendors selling bras shaped like soft soup bowls, and people peddling trays of pirated DVDs.

What would life have been like if both sets of her grandparents had never left China, never had their babies in Cambodia? If it were not for the stab of poverty and the blunt force of war, she would probably have been born in

this town, pulling along two small cousins in a narrow barrow. She would at least know the limits of her world.

FORD

Returning to Beijing at night, roads stretched everywhere. Car headlights moved white down one highway lane, while tail lights flashed red in the opposite; and all these roads looped so that the city became swirls of diamonds and rubies on black bands.

A taxi dropped her at her flat at the university hotel. Peking University had once been the site of the Emperor's summer palace, with bridges over lakes, rooftop eaves that curved at the corners, and old ruins in its green parks. But the campus guest house was built in the austere square style of the Communist era, all beige bricks and little rectangular windows, the sort of building that had the sturdiness of a peasant wife whom you might eventually resent when the decadent Western mistress came calling.

A week after her return from Chaozhou, she was tired of being cooped up in her flat overlooking the Lake with No Name. She had to get out, so she went to a small town called Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius. It was surrounded by an ancient wall that was around six hundred years old. And a lesser wall, which was about six months old.

In Qufu, they openly advertised dog meat, wholesale. Old men and women sold turnips and dates from small carts outside four-star hotels. Nuts were called nutlets. You could order 'par-boiled balls' from a hotpot menu.

It was there that she met the young tour guide Ford, who had named himself after the car because he couldn't afford one. His English was so good that he was funny.

'Do you know what the national bird of China is?' he asked her.

'No.' Her Chinese was so bad that she did not have a personality.

'Guess.'

'The phoenix?' That wasn't even a real bird, she realised. How dumb.

'No!'

'Then what?'

'The national bird of China. Look out your window. You can see it.'

'I don't see any birds.' She suddenly realised she had not seen a single bird in this country since her winter arrival.

‘There. And there and there and there.’ He pointed.

‘I still don’t see any birds.’ Against the grey sky, industry stuck out like knitting needles.

‘The crane!’ he exclaimed. ‘The national bird of China is the construction crane! Ha-ha!’ He then told her that two-thirds of the world’s cranes were in his country. He was very proud of this. At night, she had seen construction sites where men in yellow helmets walked unharnessed across high beams in near darkness. The following morning a bit more of the superstructure would appear as if by magic. The yellow helmets were only to enable them to see each other in the dark, because there was no way one of those little bowls was going to stop a man’s skull smashing if he fell to the ground. She did not tell Ford this. He kept saying, ‘China is a developing country,’ in awe that development could be so extraordinary.

He asked her where she was from, presuming, as they all did, that she came from the country that had invaded his homeland before the Second World War.

‘No, I’m not Japanese,’ she said. ‘My family’s from the Chaozhou province.’

His ancestors had built the Forbidden City, but hers were known for spitting in the streets and generally pissing off across the seas to Southeast Asia in times of political turmoil or famine. There is a special word for overseas Chinese – *huaqiao* – because so many of them left. Not to colonise other lands, but to settle in the market centres of small and large cities. Her ancestry was a race of small-business owners.

And here she was, back after three generations of exile. She was wearing her fake Oaks overcoat with plastic silver buttons and fake leather lapels, which she had bought from the local marketplace. She carried a bag with *Spoony Dop* printed on it in big white letters above a pilfered image of Snoopy’s face. But there was nothing ironic about her personality in China. All she was was literal and polite, which is how she had come to meet Ford. She had turned to the person behind her in the queue at the station and asked, ‘Excuse me, but could you please tell me how much a ticket costs to get back to Beijing?’

He told her and they started a conversation. Or, more accurately, he started talking, and she started listening, and eventually they ended up catching the train back to the capital together. Ford had a limp because he

had sprained his ankle falling off the tour bus a day ago. She suspected that he had sprained it quite badly, but he was stoic about it.

‘Don’t you need to go to see a doctor?’ she asked, worried.

‘No, not today.’ And that was all he said about it.

He was about the same age as her younger brother, she figured. When they arrived in Beijing, she told him she was going to the local market, as she needed a new jumper. He came with her, probably out of boredom, and also partly out of a sense of chivalry.

‘Don’t speak,’ he said to her, ‘because then she will know you are a foreigner and raise the price times five hundred.’

It was too late – she had already opened her mouth and asked the vendor a question. When she heard the price, she said dutifully, as her local friends had taught her, ‘Too expensive,’ and made to walk away. She wanted only a small reduction because she had calculated that by Australian standards she was getting a phenomenal bargain.

But then Ford opened his mouth. She could not believe what came out. He started yelling at the market-stall holder, who was an old woman with a face like a walnut. She had two tame black crows with her; they walked up and down a bamboo pole. The old woman howled back. He yelled louder, the aggressive hook of his head leaning towards her.

In his anger he looked almost psychotic. In fact, it frightened her. He was barking like a mad dog. The old lady got so worked up that her brown face flushed the colour of a strange ruddy wood. She looked as if she would keel over any second and die.

‘Stop it!’ she said to Ford. ‘Stop it! I don’t care, I will pay what she said!’ She could not bear to be responsible for this poor lady’s death.

In the end he managed to lop quite a lot off the price for her, but she felt ashamed, even though she had not asked this local boy to do her bargaining for her.

She opened her bag and realised that he could see her wad of notes scattered inside, without a wallet. The reds of the one hundred-yuan bills were glaringly obvious, and the smallest thing she could find was a fifty.

‘They all do it, don’t worry,’ he told her. ‘You just watch. She’ll repeat the same thing with the next customer.’

The next customer was an American, who was happy to have a tiny amount taken off the price.

‘Americans are dumber than Europeans,’ he muttered, ‘happy with two kuai off, thinking they’ve really tricked the seller.’

They walked past the place where she had bought her black coat when she first arrived in Beijing. She heard the lady tell a customer about the same coat, ‘Two hundred and fifty kuai.’ She hoped he did not notice. He would have told her it was worth only one fifty, and he would probably have been right.

They decided to take a rickshaw and see the hutongs of the city – the narrow alleyways of Old Beijing. Again he bargained the rickshaw driver down to a third of the price. She wondered how the people living in the hutong must feel, with tourists coming endlessly through their narrow home laneways. She imagined hordes of Mexicans or Mongolians touring the leafy huge-house suburbs of Australian coastal cities – but that would never happen. The rickshaw driver did not have change when she handed him a red note.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll get it. You can pay for dinner,’ Ford told her.

He led her up and down a few more streets and they came across a building with a red and green veneer, painted like an imperial palace. ‘Old Beijing is dirty,’ he said. ‘Make sure you wash your hands before you eat.’

At the restaurant, she let him order. He ordered enough for five people, even though there were only two of them. She knew that he knew that she was paying. He ordered so much that half the food went to waste. She would never see him again, so she watched his greed with bemusement. She had really grown quite fond of him, and he looked so happy sitting there eating gold and silver mantao dipped in sweetened condensed milk. He called the waiter over and ordered bowls of noodles. She understood what it was like to be so young and expectant, with so many words to describe things.

‘Did you see the Bird’s Nest already?’ he asked her. ‘The Water Cube? The CTV tower?’ The modern marvels of Beijing. Yes, yes, she told him, they were very lovely.

He took out his new computer to show her that he had the latest model, and that it wasn’t a replica but a real Apple.

She liked the fact that he kept his hands to himself as a good Chinese boy should, and that he kept a great distance between them. It was nearing the end of the afternoon.

‘How old are you?’ she asked.

‘Guess.’ He loved that guessing game.

‘I don’t know. You look very young.’

He looked nonplussed.

‘I am about your age,’ he said, ‘probably older.’

‘How old do you think I am?’ she asked.

‘My age.’

‘Which is what?’

‘Guess.’ God, it was annoying. She’d met a few Chinese who loved this game. You had to guess at things, and they would never tell you the answer. In the end she figured out that there were cues – such as, if they stayed silent for longer than two seconds, it meant you had the right answer. But sometimes they would just stay silent throughout and make you guess some more.

‘Twenty?’

‘Older.’

‘Twenty-one?’

Because he did not say anything, she knew this time she had got it right.

‘Well, I am much older than you,’ she told him. ‘I am definitely your older sister.’

‘How old are *you*?’ he asked. She noticed he now looked worried.

‘Almost thirty.’ There, that should kill it, and indeed it did. There was nothing more undesirable than an unattached woman nearing thirty. The fact that it killed his fascination pleased her – his embarrassment confirmed her intuition that he was, at heart, a good and decent Chinese lad.

She paid the bill, which came to only one hundred yuan. ‘Have you ever had a meal this expensive in Australia?’ he asked her.

‘It was a good meal,’ she told him. ‘You ordered well.’ She did not tell him that one hundred yuan was the equivalent of twenty-five Australian dollars. Twenty-five dollars for a five-hour cultural tour of Beijing and help at the local market was a steal, to her mind.

She stood up and shook his hand. ‘See you again, Little Brother,’ she said. They both knew they would not, but there was no Mandarin word for goodbye. It was just literally, ‘See you again.’

Ford walked her to the subway station and showed her the platform and which train to catch. ‘I hope you get your car one day,’ she told him as she

boarded.

She watched from the cramped train window as he limped away from the platform, back to his home in one of the hutongs in the outer suburbs of the city.

FOREIGN BODIES

Back in her flat at Peking University she sat with the heater turned up for about a week, in a full padded black ski outfit. She didn't own any skis but before coming to China she had been told that it was cold, so in Wagga Wagga she bought a ski jacket and pants. She thought she would wear them in public and no one would care because it was a communist country and communists tended to wear dour pillowy winter clothes – at least they did in the pirated DVD television series her mother watched in Australia. In these interminable series, they donned furry Russian caps with ear flaps and were always fighting an endless army of Japanese soldiers. So at the market she'd also bought one of those olive-green hats to keep her ears warm.

Oh, how wrong she was. This was one of the most stylish cities in the world, yet on her feet were a pair of children's Aussie Bush Tracker boots, which were not walking anywhere.

She had come to Beijing to write and find her roots. Instead she had become a black larva with a puff of fake fur around her head. Waiting for something to hatch. Waiting to grow legs and arms, searching for an authentic feeling to bring home. But no such luck. Her mind was a mollusc, and her mouth a small suction pump. Things would go in, but not much came out. Most of what went in was the complimentary jasmine tea that came from the university guest house, and she drank so much of it that she was sure her internal organs were dyed khaki by now. A few more months and maybe her skin would be entirely camouflage, but it was no use being olive in a city of steel and glass.

*

The first time she had seen snow in China, she was outside on one of her aimless five-hour walks. The sky was grey and hung low. Snow came down like grotty soapsuds, and when she wiped her face with a tissue, the tissue was smeared brackish grey. She dragged her feet through pavements dotted with dirty ice and showed her pass to the security guard standing at the west gate of the university. When she had first arrived, she thought these guards

standing at every gate were members of the Chinese Communist Party. They were dressed in what looked like green military uniforms, with matching caps. She felt as though she should salute. She was also scared of them, but she realised that she automatically feared anyone in an official uniform, even ticket inspectors in Australia, even when she had a ticket in her hand. She wondered whether her parents had passed on this fear through their genes, in the same way that some people passed on the fear of spiders and snakes.

The fear evaporated early one evening when she watched two of the guards heading home balanced on one bicycle. The boy at the front had his hands on the handlebars and his friend behind him was clinging on tightly. They had flung their hats off and were hooting with laughter through the quiet wide driveways of the university. She noticed how young and brown and lovely their faces were, how their features were bent blank with delight, how their hair whooshed in all different directions. *Hello, Officer!* In Australia no one wore a uniform if they could help it. Uniforms were for schools and gags.

*

The last time she had seen Teodoro was two months ago in Melbourne when they parted, but what she remembered most was the feel of him, even more clearly than what he looked like. He became a series of textures beneath her fingertips. Parts of him felt like sandpaper softened in water, and other parts were hot velvet. She remembered seeing not in colour, but in gradients of heat. It was then that she knew, without a doubt, that desire was the accelerator of life, and that she would speed along its trajectory while she was with him.

All men were literally foreign bodies to her. She had been twenty-four when she first saw a man in his birthday suit, and that was only because she had secretly arranged to take life-drawing lessons in the evenings at the university. Those men quickly became planes and lines and light and shade. The older the subjects were, the more interesting pictures they made because there would be more grooves and hollows, and very quickly she began to get used to the idea that the human form was just a subject to be captured in charcoal.

But then the storm of pheromones wiped out the smug self-restraint which had grown in her after day upon day of drought. She had always thought the word ‘pheromones’ made it sound as though molecules were floating in the air, shaped like little fluted horns, ready to attach themselves to the nearest target. Microscopic Edison phonographs flying about, their brassy mouths puckered to sucker onto bare unsuspecting skin. These were what he sent out to her. The pheromones. The eyeless babies of energy.

She learned about his arms, his upper deltoids, his face, like Helen Keller learning about water. What a thrill to sense on her fingertips the growth of stubble. The Adam’s apple at the throat, and the difference in their shoulders. ‘Yours slope downwards,’ he said to her. She would have made a nice aristocratic concubine because she had read somewhere that the Emperors liked sloping shoulders in a woman, but unfortunately she was born in this century, ‘born in a nun’s habit’, as he once joked to her.

It was as if all the air had been sucked out of the room and had collected in mean little hordes between the fibres of the clothes he had left discarded on the floor. She tentatively walked up to him and put her arms around his waist and her face against his chest and stood there feeling faint. She hadn’t realised it would have such a visceral effect on her. It was like the legend of Aphrodite and Hermes: how the girl saw the boy by the pool bathing and was so struck by his perfect form that she couldn’t help herself and ran up from behind and grabbed him and clung so hard that she became bonded to him, and the gods smote them and melded them into one person.

*

He was a generous lover, there was no doubt about it. It was just that the two of them had very different ideas about love. When he said *I love you*, he meant it with absolute conviction at that moment. It was a feeling that swelled and needed release. But perhaps he might feel differently the next day, week or month. You had to find someone to make you more acutely aware of your own feelings, was the way he saw love, to take you back to your essential self.

Teodoro was an artist living in Macau, a painter. He’d moved there because he had been commissioned to do work in Hong Kong, but one day took the ferry into this former colonial island owned by the Portuguese and found its quieter ambience and old buildings charming. So he stayed.

They had exchanged letters long before they met. When she first started writing to him, she didn't think of the possibility of their meeting any time soon because he lived overseas. She'd write to him from her writers' festivals and interstate school visits, clean convivial letters about books she had been reading, things she had been doing, and ideas that preoccupied her mind.

But then he came to Melbourne for a week. She remembered what they talked about: John Keats, Sisyphus, Cyrano de Bergerac. All their metaphors and references were from Western culture, and there they both were, different shades of non-white. His was a body so close to hers in colouring and everything else, and yet so different in its maleness, that she felt he was her corresponding puzzle piece.

'People say that our faces are flat,' he said to her, 'but they are looking at us from only one angle. See, from the side, and from up above, and beneath the chin, we have more contours than Ayers Rock.' She liked his sense of humour and his rugged Australian accent. Although his mother was Timorese, he had grown up in Darwin.

'When I go back to Southeast Asia, I don't identify at all,' he told her. First they used up all their A-grade conversation, and then the B grade, and then C and D, until they were scraping at the bottom of the barrel to find things to say to each other.

Once, he told her, he had stayed in a farmhouse when he was younger, with his parents. Every morning he'd wake up and go outside, and the ground would be covered with dead bees.

Once, she told him, she and her brother held a funeral for a ladybird that they had kept in a Ferrero Rocher box for three days. They'd carried it around from room to room until its wings were bruised, and until one day it didn't move anymore.

Once, he said, his pet turtle died, and he wanted to free it from its trapping of armour. When his mother came home and saw him in the kitchen, standing by the sink, a porcelain bowl filled with turtle limbs and him still trying to pull out the face, she burst into tears.

They spent a week together. She knew this was impermanent, but when she also realised how good it was, and how blissful and alive she felt, as she had never felt before, then that sealed it. There was nothing wrong with an

action if deep in the heart it made a person feel so alive, kept alive in them a dream of ephemeral affection.

She had once thought she was so self-possessed, prided herself on this self-possession, but he taught her that she didn't understand the first thing, at twenty-seven, about what it meant to be self-possessed, and how it began with possession of your own self – your fingertips, your face, your hands, your feet – all the parts she had not been aware she owned, but had carried around for years like a thing trailing a few steps behind her mind, forced to serve it. Just a rickety painted barrow to cart around her thoughts. Now he breathed this knowledge into her, let her know she was alive, alive and living and young too.

The language of lovers was so complicated and self-important, but the language of touch was simple and magically self-effacing. She wanted to kiss him until her kisses had rubbed down his skin to the colour of her lips, the colour of a fresh graze, the consistency of seedy jam over hot toast. Why hadn't she done this in seven years? Sometimes she looked at him and looked at him like a psychopath, as if the craters of her eyes could swallow a man whole.

Then at the end of their enchanted week, Teodoro told her that he was planning to move to Melbourne.

'That might not be such a good idea,' she replied tentatively. Her heart was racing. This would bring him closer to her than she had ever anticipated. He wasn't taking any of this slowly.

He told her he was in love.

It was definitely not a good idea.

They had been two unattached people suspended in the strange state beyond home and family and thoughts of money and mortgage. There was the pure joy of eating chocolate and going for long walks in parks and in the city and seeing museums and theatres and feeling in love. But in the gaps, her belief in this romantic hedonism started to get a little shaky. What they seemed to have, she suspected, was the essence of love without its attendant responsibilities and woes.

'But I'm soon going away for three months to China,' she told him.

'I'll come with you.'

She couldn't understand this strange need to plummet into immediate action based on a blind feeling. Did he not realise that feelings changed at

least five times in the course of a day? If all love was about was clinging to good feelings, then things might not work. He was a solitary wanderer, but she came with a thousand attachments. ‘You might want to be with me for a couple of years and then decide you’d rather be with someone else,’ he once told her. ‘That’s all right. At least we would have spent that time together.’

But it was not all right. That was not how she wanted to be with someone, yet she couldn’t explain why. And because she could not yet explain why, she slowly started to reconsider her experience – maybe love was not a matter of life and death, but could be imbued with a sense of playfulness, a sense of joy for its own sake; not cold comfort derived from surviving, from sticking together, from not losing anything or anyone.

So when she went to China on her residency she decided to take a short detour from Beijing to Macau, a warm reprieve in the middle of the cold winter, to see if she had been wrong. Perhaps she could live a different life, a daring one; perhaps she could even become a completely new person and shed her old skin.

COMPANIONS IN THE GLASS

When she stepped off the plane into the ferny corridors of Macau International Airport, she wanted to lick the walls. She could have poured her plane-issued crackers on the ground and eaten them from the floor. The world seemed so clean.

‘Alice! Alice!’

She turned her head towards the voice. Suddenly she saw him, her Elder Uncle – her father’s older brother – with his crooked walk and wooden cane. He was in his seventies, wore square glasses and had a bung leg. ‘Bunged it up in Shanghai,’ he explained to her. ‘Those crap Cultural Revolutionary doctors operated on me twice.’ It stuck out like a tripping device when he sat, but now he was hobbling towards her, looking so happy. The deformed dumpling in her chest that was her heart swelled and she thought she would cry. Instead they gave each other a hug.

‘Let’s go and collect your bags.’

‘This is it.’

‘That’s it?’

Elder Uncle looked at her one piece of carry-on luggage for the entire week. He probably wondered what she was doing in this tourist city as a young woman if she wasn’t going to shop. ‘Hong Kong is only an hour’s ferry ride away,’ he advised her. She looked like she’d just paddled across the sea in a boat, with her worn-out red bag and ‘Vietnamese hair’, as her auntie and uncle called the braid down her back.

He took her to his apartment in the city. Elder Uncle’s residential compound resembled a picture in a Jehovah’s Witness paradise pamphlet, but with pink apartment blocks. It had gardens with waterfalls spouting out of artificial rocks, and children’s play equipment on little patches of greenery like daubs of coloured paint. A doorman and concierge stood in each foyer, and marbled elevators took them up to his home overlooking the water.

Elder Auntie greeted her and handed her a pair of sandals. There was a different pair for every room of the house. ‘There is water in the bathroom

and oil in the kitchen. Those don't mix,' her auntie explained.

Then they sat her down and asked about Beijing.

How long had she been living there?

One month.

What was she doing in Beijing?

Writing.

Oh, really? What about?

I don't know yet, she confessed.

Luckily they didn't ask her why she was in Macau. Instead, Elder Uncle took her on a walk down an escalator and into a strip of shops. He bought her a boiled egg, a sandwich and a cup of Ovaltine. She hadn't eaten a boiled egg for so long that cracking the little dome with a spoon made her teary with nostalgia and gratitude. Elder Auntie took her shopping on the first evening, bought her some stylish black 'young people's clothes', while Elder Uncle waited on a bench inside the mall, his stiff leg sticking out like an inadvertent prank. The following day they both took her through the beautiful streets and she realised that in some quarters if you removed all the black-haired pedestrians and Chinese shop signs, this could almost be a city in Europe. They visited the Kun Iam temple with its golden Goddess of Mercy rising twenty metres from the lotus rooftop, wandered through halls of celestial kings and looked at the festively plump stone Buddha sitting there smirking at his own private joke. Behind the temple they walked through the Chinese garden and its 'Tree of Loving Couples', where she watched young lovers offer prayers for good fortune in their future lives. After these trips, her uncle and auntie left her to her own devices.

*

She was in this city to see him, of course.

When they met each other again, there was the awkward moment of how to greet each other. To hug or not to hug, that was the question. They had thought so much about it that their thoughts flushed away all spontaneity, and they ended up just saying hello.

'It's good to see you.'

'You too.'

He took her to see his spartan white flat on the fourth level of an apartment block. The rent was much cheaper than the other levels because

the Chinese here were superstitious and the word for ‘four’ sounded too close to death.

He showed her his paintings and sketches while she sat on his white couch. There was a great big window at one end of the flat and a great big screen at the other. The noise of the city below, and the sea so close by. Could you imagine yourself living here, he was asking her, without words. She tried to imagine it – her and her computer and notebooks and nothing else. Perhaps some clothes, but that was it. She would leave her flat in Melbourne behind. Her family. Her friends. Her students, her work, her colleagues, even her baking tins, and live the way an adventurous twenty-something would live. A spontaneous and in-the-moment existence, until the end of their love.

Yet their adventures in this city seemed so transient and surreal. They went on a tour of all the establishments that served dessert. They ate dessert for lunch and dinner two days straight. It was so pleasant and sweet that she forgot her doubts. But in the evenings, when she went back to her auntie and uncle’s flat where oil did not mix with water, an ill feeling congealed in the pit of her stomach. This life would drag her away from everything that grounded her. She couldn’t see love the same way he did.

They only spent three days together, and on their last day he took her to the zoo. The animals seemed to howl, even though the cages were enormous compared to those at Beijing Zoo.

‘What do you think they are saying?’ he asked her.

‘I don’t know.’ *Desire was a hard thing to kill*, she thought.

But she didn’t say it, because she knew what his reply would be: *Then why kill it*?

There was a man there in a booth a little larger than a toilet cubicle, with a glass window. He was probably the zookeeper. He kept an eye on the animals from his little cage. She would not have noticed if it was not pointed out to her, because she kept her gaze on the ground.

She could not look at her companion beside her, because every time she did she would be reminded that he was someone who saw these little things.

‘What is your favourite animal?’ he asked her.

‘The elephant.’ The elephant had self-awareness. She remembered reading about experiments in which they put mirrors in front of certain animals – dogs, cats, cows, elephants. While the dogs rushed up to play

with their companions in the glass, the elephants opened their mouths to check their teeth, then checked their ears and up their noses.

Yet it was not the elephant from Beijing Zoo that had stayed with her, but the rhinoceros, because it was in the cafeteria. There were the usual plastic tables and chairs, and the stalls selling fairy floss and meat on sticks and reheated meals. Then in one corner was a tiny concrete square, where the rhino lay on its side as though dying. The square was so small that there was only enough space for it to walk two or three steps. It didn't even bother to stand up; there was no point. People were throwing apple cores at it.

She did not tell him about the rhino.

She tried to be happy that day, but the zoo reminded her of cages, and people who lived in cages.

*

They sat across from each other at a table in a restaurant and shared a last meal together. She could not look anywhere but at her hands.

'I can't believe you ended it,' he said. 'And,' he added, one eyebrow raised, 'unconsummated too!' They would laugh over this in the future. It was so much fun, what they had, but it would never have lasted. That didn't matter to him, because he probably didn't expect it to anyway. But it mattered to her.

What was the matter with her? Instead of discovering more certainty as she grew older, and finding conviction in a course through life, or else discovering that its impermanence heightened the desire to seize whatever happened to fall her way, she had decided *not* to have an experience. His parting gift was a pomegranate from his travels. He gave her an orb of perfect seeded gems encased in incarnadine, but inside her ribcage was rotting fruit.

HAIRCUT

After they parted, seeing all the beautiful perfumed young women floating around the city with places to go to and things to do made her feel weary. There she was, with her grimy heavy boots, wandering through streets of designer stores where people would go if they had a big win at one of the casinos. She glanced in a shop window and discovered that it had *Newsweek* magazines. It was the first time she had seen something in English in a long, long time. She entered and sat down to read, but despite this sudden small jackpot of words nothing seemed to register. She read an article on the death of the book, while four male hairdressers with ridiculously trendy hairstyles like hedgehogs milled around her in a squeezed-up circle.

Twice in the past she had decided to lop her hair off, but to no avail. The first time, in Footscray, Veronica the Vietnamese hairdresser would not do it for her.

‘How you want?’ she asked.

‘All off.’ She pointed to her ear.

‘No, no good, you look like boy!’

Veronica just trimmed the ends and charged her twelve dollars. Then decided that it was too much and gave her back five.

The second time, on her way to the hairdresser again, this time in Richmond, an earnest ground-level window cleaner stopped her in her tracks and told her how lovely it was. Vanity stopped her from going any further. There was something vestal about long hair, since the girls who wore ao dais and saris to their friends’ weddings had it. Funny how people inadvertently conspired through sheer kindness to make her into someone she thought she was not.

‘We thought you were Vietnamese,’ one of the four hipster hairdressers told her. ‘Only Vietnamese girls have hair this long.’ Their job in this glamorous city was to erase any sign that you had just come off a boat.

They tied back her hair.

She read about how the book was dying in its rectangular tree incarnation.

They began to braid it.

She turned the page and looked at pictures of electronic books.

Then they lopped it off.

She closed the magazine and looked in the mirror.

Afterwards, they wrapped it up in cling-wrap for her, so it became a macabre thing she had to carry around all afternoon. She couldn't go home to Elder Auntie and Elder Uncle yet. They thought she was going out with friends, not that she was passing time alone in malls, lost, clutching a cling-wrapped wad of hair in one pocket.

The first time she went to the loo, she realised she did not have to think about whether her hair was up or down. It had been the first thing she would think about before she sat. When you had hair that long, you did not want to take its ends on a crappy swimming expedition.

She sat in a plastic chair in a mall café and gulped down some murky brown soft drink. Halfway through, she felt a choking sensation. That lump in her throat was like a golf ball. She wiped her eyes with a sleeve. She no longer cared how emotional she got in public. It must confirm everyone's suspicions of her being a straight-off-the-boat. She didn't care.

'I don't think I will ever see him again,' she wrote in her notebook. Funny that in an era of mass global communication and email and Skype and all the rest of it, a person could still make such resolutions. This was the end. No longer would she see his handwriting tumbling down white sheets, sometimes sprawled, sometimes the characters curled and spooned into one another.

*

When she returned to the apartment, it was already past midnight. Her uncle and auntie were still awake. They weren't waiting up for her, they reassured her; they were just insomniacs who stayed up watching television.

'Wah!' they exclaimed happily. 'You look so modern now, and so much younger!'

At night the sleeplessness caused her to make strange shapes in her solitary bed. One knee up and the other straight out, one arm draped over her neck, eyes wide like a traffic conductor who hadn't seen the car coming

in time. Or she would try to sleep with her arms folded behind her head, both knees towards her chest like a sunbather afraid of shallow-swimming sharks. Or arms and legs bent in tight towards the torso – praying mantis wedged between a car and its tyre with nothing more to pray for except that the car would stop. Her world was peopled with attachments and yet she was afraid of being alone. The world was spinning too fast. Stop! she wanted to yell, Stop the world, I want to get off for a bit. Have a little rest and then step back on.

RETURN

She returned to Beijing, to the chimneys belching black smoke like giant cigarettes against the sky. In the taxi the driver asked her to guess his age. She looked at him – the skin on his hands like uncured leather, grooves etched in the corners of his eyes from a lifetime of squinting at the sun and snow. He looked forty-six but she wanted to be generous, so she guessed a decade younger.

‘Wrong!’ he laughed. ‘Thirty-two!’ She realised she hadn’t hidden the surprise on her face well enough, because he then laughed and said in Mandarin, ‘Being poor makes a person look so very much older, wouldn’t you agree?’

He stopped at her university and let her out. The young guard at the gate let her past with a slight nod of his head. She walked through the empty streets of the campus. It was the semester break and the students had all gone back to their hometowns.

The food halls were empty, so she went to the university supermarket, which sold mostly snack food. She grabbed a plastic bowl of dehydrated noodles and lined up at the checkout. Three of the young security guards were in front of her. They were handsome boys, she realised, as she looked at their faces. Each of them clutched four or five plastic bowls of instant noodles, their meals for the next two days, supplemented only with a few roasted yams perhaps, or insipid boiled corn bought from the roadside.

Now, back in her own room, she was feeling flatter and emptier than ever. It seemed that the outer edges of her sight had started to shrink, until her pupils became self-absorbed pinpoints. It was as if there were too many details in the world and she had to home in on one thing at a time or else she would go mad. Being alone in a foreign country like this had made her peripheral vision disappear.

All thought and feeling was condensed to simple words. I am well, I am hungry, I am tired, thank you thank you thank you. It seemed that nuances of feeling did not exist anymore if she didn’t know the Mandarin words for them.

But she didn’t feel hungry. It was as if desire and appetite were from the same source – which they probably were – and when one dried up, so did the other. She took to eating one meal a day, like a Buddhist monk. She just wasn’t hungry anymore, for anything.

You could have lived out the experience with him, she kept telling herself, on the overnight train, on the bus, on the road. You could have had company in China. You didn’t need to be alone.

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. She was afraid of loss, and of change, and of all the inevitabilities of life. She never let relationships run their course. She didn’t want to believe that love could die.

*

Her three kindly professors took her out to lunch and commiserated over the loss of her hair. ‘She used to have beautiful braids,’ Professor Liu told Professor Hu. Professor Liu was a large-hearted, practical woman who had helped her get her meal and library cards at Peking University and settled her in.

Professor Hu, who was seventy-five and dressed like her grandfather, told her a story about when he was young. ‘A very long time ago, of course,’ he laughed. ‘I was in love with a girl who had very long hair. I tried to help her braid her hair one day, but I could not do it and messed it up terribly! It was very funny, but it was the end. Sometimes when you’re young, small things like that can end big things very quickly.’

Professor Hu asked her to visit his apartment after lunch. His wife peeled and cut up an apple. The pieces filled two small tea-saucer plates and a bowl. ‘Hu and I can’t finish one of these apples ourselves,’ she said, ‘because they are so big. So we eat bananas and save our apples for guests.’

Professor Liu said to Professor Hu in Mandarin, ‘She is so independent. She came here and didn’t phone me for help or anything after our first meeting.’

Professor Hu’s wife said something in Mandarin about how hardy and self-sufficient young foreigners were.

‘This old grandma is praising you!’ Professor Hu joked, before she left their warm apartment.

She didn’t feel too independent. There had been hours of loitering alone, feeling lost, feeling like there were feral kittens fighting in her solar plexus.

But perhaps she was.

*

They had told her back home that she would have a ‘fish out of water’ experience, but she knew that fish died out of water when their gills no longer flicked like the pages of a book. It was dead, dead, dead, and she might as well keep it closed.

It was time to return.

She arrived back in Australia on the worst day of the bushfires that had burned all through the summer, Black Saturday. The plane flew low in the afternoon, through turbulence and dense clouds. The clouds looked like the thick batter of an orange and poppy-seed cake.

When the plane landed, the passengers clapped.

PART II.
MELBOURNE

HER NEW HOME

DAUGHTER—
‘I can’t believe you’d want to move out of home to live in this creepy ghost house.’ Her mother had packed a plastic washtub with cleaning supplies and was wiping down every surface with a cloth and a bottle of detergent.

It was four years before the China trip, and she was twenty-three. Her parents were helping her move into her new flat, but there was not much to move. She had packed only a few boxes with some clothes and some books so they wouldn’t feel anxious that she was gone. She brought along with her the leftover incense that was burned at her grandmother’s funeral in case the flat still smelt of new paint. She had also dragged along her easel and sewing machine. It would seem to them like a camp, temporary accommodation. Workers’ barracks.

Her new flat was in Janet Clarke Hall, a residential college of the University of Melbourne. At the interview she had worn her mother’s old black cardigan with the frayed sleeves, and a brown skirt that fell far below her knees. She needed to look older because she didn’t want the principal to see her as someone applying to be a residential tutor just for the parties and something to write on her resume. She wanted the job so badly that she was prepared to spend her mid-twenties in dowdiness if it meant she could have a place of her own.

She was offered the job straight after the interview. When the vice-principal showed her the apartment, it was being painted by two men in beige overalls. Newspapers covered the floor, and there were no blinds on the windows. Sunlight shone in like a beacon, to the real fireplace in the corner. ‘This would be your flat,’ said the vice-principal. It was the most beautiful place she had ever seen in her life, and it was enough to turn her white-knuckled with want.

Although she’d never lived in a college before, she cajoled her father with a repertoire of reassurances. She told him that the security was good. It was only a twenty-minute drive from home. She had been going to the university behind the college for six years. She was used to allaying her

parents' fears, and knew that any hint of faltering uncertainty would elicit a clear no.

It wasn't the sharing. She didn't mind sharing her room or her bed with her little sister. In fact, she liked the warmth of another person next to her at night. She just wanted to do things, normal things that normal people approaching their mid-twenties did, without feeling guilty all the time.

That whole week before her father said yes or no to her moving out of home, she felt as though she had insects teeming inside, so that she might soar off at any given second. She couldn't sit still or sleep.

*

This was the first time her parents had seen the place. Inside the college, they went all quiet. Then: 'Wah! Look at all these rooms, they are completely empty,' exclaimed her mother as they walked down the hallway.

'The students don't arrive until a few weeks before university begins,' she said quickly.

'Wah! It looks so unsafe. Why don't you come home tonight? Wait until all the students arrive before you move in,' suggested her father.

She thought the place was perfect in its quality of solitude.

Yet when she unlocked the door to her flat, she could see the panic rise in their faces. Since her last visit, the rooms had been filled with furniture. 'Don't worry, the place will look better once I cover the table with a tablecloth,' she said. She knew that this was standard-issue university furniture: the dark-brown wooden table with the metal legs, the foamy chair with orange, brown and beige stripes. The single bed with its brand-new mattress protector. The light bulb hanging from the ceiling. Even the curtains that looked like the remnants of the roll of fabric used to make Greg Brady's flares. The items had been carefully, even lovingly, placed there by the maintenance staff of the college, and she knew that they were clean and useful and hardy. But her parents had filled their new house with granite and marble, porcelain sinks and gilded spas, and could not imagine why one of their children would want to move out to this.

The flat had already been meticulously cleaned by the maintenance staff, but there was no stopping her mother. People went about their day-to-day business of living, but no one ever stopped to question why these migrant women were scrubbing at dirt that was no longer there, why they loved to

wrap all furniture in plastic, or why their houses had to have white walls and tiled floors. These were the sorts of things that migrant-support settlement groups never talked about. Beyond the practical discussions about groceries and doctors and English classes, there was no other dialogue.

She imagined support groups of a different kind. A roomful of women of different generations and languages – Armenians, Greeks, Vietnamese, Sudanese, Chinese – sitting in an AA sort of circle, going on about the things that mattered.

'How many years have you been clean?' they would ask each other if they could speak the same language. This would be the most important question. 'How many years have your kids been clean?' They would not be talking about drugs. Free from scabies, free from lice, free from musty, mildewy concrete houses and the dirt. Their deities were Mr Sheen, White King and Toilet Duck. This was what it meant to be clean.

She worked alongside her parents, who had rolled up the sleeves of their blue Retravision salesperson uniforms. When they felt that her flat was clean, her parents bid her a hasty, no-nonsense farewell. 'Call home if you get scared at night,' directed her mother.

'I won't get scared,' she said, as she handed her mother back the tub of cleaning supplies.

'Keep it, you will need it for a laundry basket.' Now why hadn't she thought of that? Her mother had even remembered to pack three rolls of toilet paper.

'Call and come home any time,' her father told her, 'and I will come and pick you up. Are you sure you don't want to sleep at home tonight? Just for tonight?'

'I'm sure,' she said. 'We have a tutors' meeting.' Even so soon out of home, the lies had started. But what could she tell them – that she wanted to spend the night alone roaming the halls? There were too many attachments in this world, she realised, and sometimes love bound too tightly.

That first night she slept in her first single bed. She didn't care that the mattress had probably been slept on by a decade of randy students. She didn't care. This was a room of her own.

The next day, she walked down the corridor and asked a taller tutor, the new physics tutor, to take down the curtains for her. Suddenly, light blinked

into the room, a little at a time, until it was like an awakening. And there it was – her flat as she had first seen it – light entering every porous surface, including her skin. It was beautiful again.

VISITORS

DAUGHTER—
When the academic year started, she began to learn about the traditions and rituals of a residential college. Twice a week there would be high-table dinners. At the commencement of each meal, the principal would recite a Latin prayer, and the tutors, dressed in black academic gowns, would be served a three-course meal by the students. The principal explained to her that this tradition dated back to medieval times in the Benedictine monasteries, where St Benedict's fundamental rule was that the strong should protect the weak. The head monks would impart their knowledge to their novices, and the novices would serve them a meal as a sign of gratitude for their teaching.

When the students started to arrive, she was laughed at, in a good-natured way, for being the tutor who would not let any male student step an inch inside her flat unless accompanied by a female student – not even to help her change a too-high-to-reach light bulb. They didn't realise how much she depended on this job, and how she had to be seen as completely proper. She was the mentor to twenty students living on her floor, and meetings were initially held on two chairs set outside her doorway, while students discussed how they were settling in at the university.

*

On weekends she would return to her parents' house. She would sleep in the same bed that she had shared with her little sister Alina when she was still living at home.

'When are you coming back, Alice?'

'I don't know, pet.'

'What if you never come home?' Alina rubbed at her eyes with her fists. She could tell by the small squelching sounds from her knobbly fingers that she was crying.

Alina was eleven, Alison was fourteen. They were creeping out of childhood, and she felt bad for leaving them behind. Their pictures were

stuck all over her new bedroom wall with Blu-tack. In the evenings there was no warm little body next to her. In the mornings, no milky breath in her face. As an infant, she had shared a bed with her parents; from the age of four to seven with her grandmother; then with her younger brother Alexander; and finally with Alina, who had crawled into her bed one evening complaining about an ache in her leg. Her siblings were the people who would be most biologically similar to her, made of half of each of their parents' genetic material. Even her own future children would not come this close. It awed her to think that they'd be made of half of some stranger's DNA, someone she was yet to meet.

Every year since her sisters were five, for their birthdays she had made them cakes shaped as their favourite cartoon creatures. She had sewn their costumes for their school dress-ups. She wanted to give them the *Women's Weekly* kind of childhood that she thought would lead to healthy adolescence. When her sisters' friends were discovering the Build-a-Bear Workshops, franchises that let kids shove polyester stuffing and a little felt heart inside a pre-sewn bear and then deck it out in an exorbitantly priced costume, she went to Spotlight Haberdashery and bought fleece, glass eyes and a pattern. 'This is the real build-a-bear workshop,' she told Alison, showing her the flat furry cloth, teaching her how to cut out the torso and limbs. This was the way she understood the world and how things fitted together.

Yet during law school, she felt that she had just been stumbling through, feeling stupid with the rest of the class while the two most vocal members engaged the lecturer in prolonged debate. Five years later, she understood the wild look in a student's eyes in tutorials when words were flying too fast to follow. She instinctively knew when a student would stay back after the others left and burst into tears. Usually these were the country students, beautiful young women who had not yet developed a penchant for wearing black so as to fit into a new and sleek city life. She took them to McDonald's and bought them Happy Meals when they were particularly sad.

'I just don't get it,' a student would sob. 'People seem to know everything.'

And there was so much to know. If Blake could see heaven in a flower, why couldn't the students see globalisation in the toy in their Happy Meals:

forty-three separate pieces of man-made polyester stitched together by a group of young people in a factory in China, possibly around their age, maybe even younger? Or why couldn't they watch family law in practice at the table next to them, as a mother waited for her ex-husband to pick up the kids following a shared-parenting order?

At the college she would tutor any subject they gave her, order the reading notes from the university, study and summarise them for each lesson. She became the tutor in political science, creative writing and linguistics. How did the university expect first-year students to jump into postmodernism without any definitions or starter course? How did they expect the world to make sense when students were being taught the abstracts before they could open their eyes to the concrete?

For linguistics, she led them up and down alleyways in Chinatown. She wanted them to distinguish between different dialects, to listen to the cadences of an unfamiliar tongue. She was not prepared for the reaction of her American exchange student, Jess. 'Oh my gaahd, you can't do this! You can't do it! You just can't! We are so going to get mugged.' Their first experience of Engrish was in the aisles of an Asian grocery store, where one of her students bought some biscuits named Colon.

For creative writing, she took a group of her first-year students to read aloud from their work in a bar in St Kilda. A silver-haired old man from Venezuela bought their little group a bottle of wine. During global politics, she asked her father to come in one evening after work and tell them what it meant to go through a real and bloody socialist revolution. She brought in her good friend Luke to talk about working for the United Nations' International Labor Organisation.

She kept her students busy while they spoke to her about their personal problems, kept them knitting, or folding origami, or helping her make pastries.

*

'Do you miss home?' her mother asked over the phone.

'Yes,' she lied, hoping that this would not make them tell her to come back.

When her parents came to visit after she had settled in, she opened her wardrobe and showed them her academic gown. She told them she had to

wear it to high-table dinners. They tried on the gown and she took photographs of them posing by the fireplace.

‘Heh heh, look at your mother.’

Her mother had put on her glasses. ‘Wearing this gown brings out the stupidity in me. Heh heh, look at your father pretending to be a professor. Old man, you look like you’ve robbed a graduation parade.’

The gown was so long that it fell past his arms. Her father held up some rolled-up sheets of papers, pretending he had degrees.

They looked so happy.

She knew that they didn’t mind her being here after all.

*

Another time, her parents came to visit her after work with a pot of tapioca pudding. She wanted them to have dinner in her flat. ‘Are you sure?’ they kept asking. ‘We don’t belong here.’

She kept reassuring them that it was fine, that other tutors had their parents come and visit, that the students would be happy to meet them too. Funny, but she suddenly realised how proud she was of them. She wanted to show them off in the way Chinese parents wanted to show off their kids’ piano-playing awards or A-plus report cards. Her parents’ accomplishments were more than the material gleanings of life. They represented everything that was possible if your new life followed a narrow path, from which you did not deviate because you knew no other way. Failure? There was no way to fail in a fresh new world that offered you a life starter kit.

As they were walking up the stairs to her flat, they came across two of her tutor friends, Allan and Benita, who asked her, ‘Are you coming to the tutors’ dinner tonight?’

‘What dinner?’

‘The one the social club organised.’

‘Oh, I completely forgot!’ There would be other dinners with her friends; they were always organising social functions of one kind or another. ‘I’m having dinner with my parents in my flat.’

‘Okay, see you soon!’ Allan and Benita left.

‘Were you meant to have dinner with your friends?’ asked her mother.

‘No, we’re having dinner in my flat.’ Her parents had never eaten there before. They did not know that it was here that she cooked three-course

meals, that she baked brownies and muffins and complicated cheesecakes, and even made fudge.

‘No, no, you’d better go off with your friends. You don’t want the other tutors thinking you are strange and don’t like to be around other people.’

‘You’ll never get anywhere if you don’t make friends at college,’ her father told her, ‘and if you stay in your room all the time.’

‘You need to go out and meet new people.’

‘We’d better be leaving now.’ And with that, they disappeared down the stairs and back out the gate. She followed them, asked them to stay, and they kept telling her to hurry and catch up with her friends. She watched their car backing out of the driveway. She felt a sadness seeing her parents shuffle away like that, so afraid were they of interfering in her new world. When she came back from the dinner with the other tutors, she noticed that her mum had left the pot of tapioca pudding at her door.

As six months turned into one year, and one year into two and then two into three and four, one thing became clear: although her parents would always be willing to wait outside to pick her up and take her back home, they would never come and eat with her in her flat.

AWAY FROM HOME

FATHER—

He had not expected his daughter to come back from the university one afternoon with a handful of brochures, telling him that she wanted to move out of home. She didn't say it in so many words. She told him that she had been offered a job at a residential college. He hadn't even known that she had gone for an interview. He thought she was applying for law jobs because she had finished her degree. His children were like that: they would do things and then tell him the results without letting him know the in-between steps, as though their lives were mathematical equations done so quickly in their heads that they had no need to scrawl down the workings-out. But the truth was that their plans were laboriously plotted and closely concealed, and it was only the results that took him by surprise.

Just like the time his daughter decided to go to Sydney for a debating tournament when she was eighteen. She made the excursion sound like such an official university event, but when she returned with her album filled with photographs, he could see that there were no lecturers or tutors present. What had he expected? That eighteen-year-olds in Australia would be chaperoned? Well, why yes, he had. That was what he had expected. And uniforms or gowns of some sort, even, to show that they were a team. But no, in her photographs it was a hotchpotch of jeans and dresses in different colours and lengths, river cruises, a boy standing on a dustbin doing an impersonation of the prime minister, a red-headed girl kissing another boy with a head of hair like spiral pasta, and his daughter, standing there in the middle of it all, smiling her head off like she was part of this amateur thespian production, a cameo role caught in the spotlight. Surrounded by those Australians, she looked like she was twelve.

'Why do you have to live at the college?' he asked. 'Can't you just teach there and then come home in the evenings?'

'Because it's part of the job description. They won't hire me if I don't live there. It's only a twenty-minute drive from home.'

His wife was against it, of course. How could he even consider allowing their eldest daughter to move out? People would think she was a runaway, that there was immeasurable misery or wantonness in the family that had caused an unwed daughter to leave home. Those Australians, his wife told him, think that childrearing ends when the kids reach eighteen. Then they tell them to get out of home and make their way into the world without so much as helping them buy a car with airbags! Perhaps that's why so many of them didn't finish university. They had to fend for themselves: eighteen-year-olds with rented houses preparing their cheap meals of macaroni mixed with melted squares of Kraft cheese!

He could not understand his daughter's strange need for space, and to be alone. After all, hadn't the family stuck together during the years of the Black Bandits? He had lived with his mother all of his life, and his sister, and later his wife. He had never been separated from the women in his life and he hated the thought that his loved ones would be far away from him.

'Just have a look at the brochures, Dad,' she had pleaded with him, and left them on the table. He glanced down and saw the picture on the cover of one of them – a stately red building that looked like the fairytale castles in the books he had read when he was young.

The college was at the back of the university where he had dropped his daughter off so many times, watching her disappear through one of its gates, which weren't actually gates but wide pavements surrounded by trees. He liked the look of this place – he thought it looked exactly the way a university should look. University: such a strangely perfect word. It had the word 'universe' in it. Somehow, it seemed appropriate; each time one of his children entered this place they were like little planets flung into far distant galaxies. He was reminded of one year not too long ago, on Christmas Eve, when his daughter had herded them all to the science museum. She woke up early, looked in the street directory, and then the whole family drove out to Spotswood. He realised, in a bewildering yet not unpleasant way, that lately the kids had been taking the parents on little excursions.

Kien had fallen asleep in the planetarium because it was dark. There were stars in the domed sky, but it seemed too close, the ceiling was too close and it pressed down, reminding him of all those nights they had been running away from the Black Bandits, and how they had slept beneath the

sky – he and Kien and his mother and his sister. The skies were clear then too, and the stars winked like unforgiving blades.

*

In the end, he decided to let his daughter go.

‘You start with this one now,’ said his wife, ‘and they will all want to leave.’

‘She’ll be home on the weekends, she said.’

‘She won’t! She’ll soon decide she wants to go out to parties all the time with the Australians.’

No, his daughter had never been any good at maths. Even when she wrote down the calculations carefully, she would make one silly mistake and mess up the whole equation. She would arrive at an answer, and it would not match the one in the textbook and she would ponder why and run through their steps again, overlooking the same mistake in the middle, even though it was obvious what she had left out. But she would plod along, believing that the sum would work out in the end. And when it didn’t, she would just start working on a new question. This new world was an infinity of possibilities.

He finally decided that it was safe enough for one of his flock to fly. He didn’t understand the magnitude of what he had done until the second week, the third week. For the first few days it felt as though she were on extended school camp. But then she was no longer around.

INVISIBLE

DAUGHTER—
In that first year of moving out, she also got her first office job that had nothing to do with the family business. She was an articled clerk for a law firm, and every day she sat in a cubicle in front of a computer screen. She was responsible for about two hundred and fifty company files in pink and blue folders. She had to make sure the companies were registered, that they were not on the edge of insolvency, and that they would not fall foul of the Australian Securities and Investments Commission.

Her boss was an Italian man who was in the office by six in the morning and on weekends too. Since the dissolution of his professional partnership, he was working himself sick. When the firm split, he could have started afresh at a new firm with a new set of staff like the other partner did, but he took on the old and the fledglings, the employees who had worked with him. His wife came into the office like Rosie the Riveter, ready to begin secretarial duties.

'Italians are just like us,' her father would tell her. 'They understand family business, loyalty and hard work.'

'Walk, don't run,' her boss told her, 'work smarter, not harder.' From anyone else, it would have sounded like Anthony Robbins fist-punching-the-air bull; but coming from him, with his economy with words, it made a lot of sense, especially when she had to go into the city. 'Make friends with people in the lower places and life will be much easier.' He meant the clerks at the prothonotary's office, the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, all the places she had to visit to make deliveries or do searches or collect documents.

*

She had had interviews – quite a few – at the larger law firms. She had waited in foyers and receptions, sitting in chairs that resembled frozen lettuce leaves. 'We're ready to see you now,' the receptionist would tell her, and lead her to the human-resource manager and two partners seated at a

table, eyes already fogged from seeing a stream of too many young sycophants. Her resume would be in front of them, and they would go through it – finally pausing at her seven years working in an electronics business. They took one look at her and thought she spent her time working for a mum-and-dad shop in the dodgiest of neighbourhoods. No better than a hairdresser, really.

I'll be completely honest with you, someone had told her in law school, *I have only seen them hire people like you for the receptionist jobs.* So her friend Fiona spent an hour giving her interview tips, making sure she got things right, and another friend, Clara, offered to lend her an Oroton bag to carry to interviews.

Then came the interview at her boss's office. 'You represented your father at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal last year?' The moment she realised that he thought something of this was the moment she stopped going to interviews.

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Her boss explained to her the finer aspects of asset protection. 'When you know this well enough, you can even help your dad with the protection of his business,' he explained. She worked with Kathryn, who had eyes with starburst irises and who taught her, slowly and carefully, the ropes of the legal profession. She worked with Maria, who knew more about conveyancing than the lawyers because she had been doing it for more than two decades. And here, working alongside these two generous and competent women, she felt a sense of camaraderie, that they were allies in the face of adversity: angry clients, cases that dragged out for years, the daily round of tasks.

On Saturdays, though, she still put on her blue Retravision shirt and sat in the back office of her father's store. There were no windows in the office, and it also served as a storeroom. Sales staff would burst in to collect repaired goods or pull radio alarm clocks and Discmans from the stacks on the shelves above her desk. She would help her father with his property investments, dealing with estate agents and repairers. She hated doing this job. He owned so many properties now that it was hard to keep tabs on them all.

She didn’t know how her parents and their friends found these properties, since they didn’t trawl through the ads in the newspapers. One of them would let the others know that there were cheap houses somewhere, and her parents would go and check them out for themselves. Sometimes this involved a weekend interstate trip, to Brisbane or Launceston. It was all about the location, except that her mother and father were not so much looking for the right locations as the wrong ones: urban poor areas in Tasmania, or Slacks Creek and Woodridge in Queensland. They were especially enamoured of the Queenslander architectural style, timber houses on stilts with sprawling verandahs, since it reminded them of the houses back in Cambodia. It didn’t matter if the property had peeling paint (that could be easily fixed) or overgrown grass (all it needed was a mower) or that the neighbours looked a bit suspicious (after all, they weren’t going to be living there themselves). If there was a noisy train track at the back of the house, even better: it meant the property would sell for much less. These houses would then be let out, and her role at the back office was to deal with the leasing and constant stream of repairs that needed landlord approval.

She wore the Retravision uniform in case there was a staff shortage at the front of the store. There was no such thing as doing just one job. Anna from accounts would go out to the shop floor to connect just-purchased mobile phones if there were not enough salespeople. When there were no customers, the salespeople would dust the shelves and replace the tagging and study up on the latest model fridges.

Once she was called out to connect up some mobile phones for a pimp. She wanted to be back inside the office working on a statement of adjustments for a property because it was taking her an awfully long time to get the numbers to line up. Instead, without realising at first what kind of set-up this was, she was connecting the pimp to his girl with a two-for-one mobile-phone deal. It was summer, and the girl, Diep, wore a long white smocked dress. She looked like a Murakami heroine – there was an anaemic delicacy to her face and a butterfly clip in her hair. She called the man who was with her ‘uncle’ in third person but ‘Daddy’ in second. The man had a scar running from his lip almost to his left ear, as if someone had tried to give him a permanent sneer. She noticed how the pimp gave his business card to the white salesman in the store, but not to any of the other

employees. Diep sat there looking at her. ‘You have a good smile. You don’t have to sell phones, you know.’

*

The four walls of her flat became her sanctuary, and the suburb of Parkville her private retreat. The outside world could seep in slowly, one trickle at a time, but she did not want a deluge. One day she might see a friend, the next she might walk through darkened streets and look through yellow windows, and the day after that she might read two books in one sitting without feeling guilty that there was work to be done – floors to wipe, dishes to wash. This was what it was like to be free, to live for yourself. You could set your own priorities and it didn’t always have to be work first. You could choose to focus on other things. It was then she realised the relativity of tasks: that reading could mean as much as toiling, or that sitting in the sun looking at her hands would not result in a boot-stamp of guilt in the face. Perhaps she was freeing herself from the moiling mentality of her parents, free now to be a let-us-all-rejoice Australian.

She took to waking up when the sun rose and walking the empty streets before the stores opened. *At such hours, the world belonged to her and her alone*, she thought, whereas the night belonged to so many other people – insomniacs and students and factory workers and people who were beautifully painted.

She also walked the streets alone just as darkness was beginning to fall. For company she sought out the houses where the lights were on. Her forays into other people’s lives did not bring up much except people watching television in their front room facing the street. She wondered why some people didn’t draw the curtains. She could see in, but they could not see out. It was all darkness, and she watched the faces of the television watchers to see the skim of real human emotions they were experiencing from an electronic box.

She didn’t have a television; she even quit having a radio. There were more interesting things to watch, like the way her own thoughts developed like Polaroids and the way some of the images would not show up as anything but a grey blur, while others were so vivid that it hurt to look at them with the naked eye. No one was watching her and she was invisible.

AGENCY

DAUGHTER—

‘Your mother and I can’t understand what your problem is,’ her father told her late one evening when she was at the family home. ‘We are introducing you to people, new people you would not have a chance to meet because you’re too busy with work.’

‘I can meet my own people.’

‘Obviously not,’ he replied, ‘because why else would you have felt the need to go to that dating agency? We’re your parents. We know you better than any dating agency.’

‘Yes,’ she sighed. Oh no, they were still going on about the dating agency. ‘But the dating-agency manager did not sit next to me and the other party on our first date. That’s the difference!’

‘When I was courting your mother,’ her father replied, ‘I went and visited her all the time at her house when her parents were around.’

‘That’s not the same thing. You scooted her off on the back of your bike ten minutes into each visit. How would you like it if you saw her for the first time across a yum cha table, wedged in between her parents, and you between grandma and grandpa, not being able to speak to each other properly?’

But she knew his first engagement was probably arranged in just this way. He had been set up to marry a nice Chinese-Cambodian woman back before the Black Bandits took over the country and they lost each other.

‘You don’t have to speak that much to each other on the first meeting,’ her father explained. ‘The first meeting is just for looking.’

‘So I’m just meant to sit there, to be looked at?’ Her father was impossible! She couldn’t understand why he thought it acceptable to arrange and intrude on the first dates of his grown-up offspring. It had happened more than once. Invariably, someone would turn up at Retravision with photographs of their son or nephew, or mention their child who was a lawyer or doctor. Numbers would be exchanged, a lunch

arranged on a Sunday afternoon with the boy and his family – and his grandmother too if she wanted to tag along.

‘Why can’t you just give the guy my phone number and ask him to call me?’

‘What if he’s too shy to call?’

‘But getting your parents to do all the work for you?’ Come on, couldn’t he see how pathetic this was? Why was he so stubborn, so paternalistic?

Her father was wearing his Smiling Monkey pyjamas. A fifty-something man in boy’s flannelette pyjamas. It was the same when her mother wore her Western Bulldogs beanie and her puffy red polyester vest. It was difficult to be angry at your parents when they were dressed like sleep-befuddled children from a 1981 Target ad.

Yet she had lost the affability that came naturally to her younger siblings. It was a battle, and she often felt that she had to be the one who fought tooth and nail to prevent meetings like these. Young adult automatons, glaring at each other across a table while their parents raved on about how good and obedient they were, which is why they could not find life partners. Because they studied so hard. Because they worked so much. Because they saved up for a mortgage. Because they were good and never went out to nightclubs.

Her father was tired. He had stayed up for an hour to have this conversation with her.

‘So what you are saying is that you don’t want your mother and me to introduce you to anymore people?’ he asked, irritated.

‘Don’t set me up on anymore dates!’ How could they not see that every time they tried, the results were disastrous? The most recent candidate had been Rick, who came from China and was working at Retravision; the only sentence she could extract from him was that he liked Van Damme films. Her mother had brought Rick home on one of her father’s birthdays, and there was no way to get out of it. Because she had been polite to Rick, her father worried that she might be interested in him – and then became irritated because he didn’t want her to be. Anything other than open hostility was to be construed as interest.

‘Why haven’t you met anyone?’ her father wondered. ‘You must meet heaps of people in your work. Maybe your mum is right and the reason you are still single is because you live out of home.’

‘What?’

‘Perhaps because you are living by yourself, all the players come, the ones who are not so serious. If you were living at home, then you’d just get the suitors who were serious about you.’

Where on earth had he picked up a term like ‘players’, she wondered.

‘I’d get no one!’ she said to him.

A while back, she had naively gone to a dating agency because she wanted all of this to stop. She worked at the law office during the day and came home in the evenings to teach at the college, a pattern of unchanging contentment that was only ruffled when she returned to her parents’ house and their incessant worrying.

So she had ventured into the least tacky agency she could find, close to the Chanel store in the city. Two slippery grey pillars stood to attention at the front, topped by Art Deco reliefs of Atlas holding up the world. The foyer looked like Marie-Antoinette’s marbled ballroom. The floor immediately below housed one of the top international law firms. She saw its name on the office listings in the glass cabinet. When the elevator stopped at her level, she thought she might be in the wrong place. Perhaps she had ended up in the entrance of the law firm after all. There were three young receptionists with pencil skirts and pencilled eyebrows. One of them asked if she could help.

‘I’m looking for the Elite Encounters Agency.’

‘Oh yes, please take a seat. Caroline will be with you shortly.’

She sat on a red couch and waited. She was glad that she had worn her work suit. This looked like serious business.

Caroline came out, brown hair pulled back and arranged in a loose bun like a Cadbury milk twirl. She was led into an office with nothing on the walls and nothing on the desk except a laptop. Caroline sat down opposite and explained how the agency worked.

‘There are seven main areas that couples are most likely to fight and separate over,’ she was told. That was why the agency had a special personality-compatibility test for her to take. The results would be matched up with those of other candidates, and pairings would be made. First, though, Caroline asked her some questions.

‘What are your hobbies?’

‘What would you consider your greatest achievement?’

‘What are the personal habits you can’t stand?’

‘What is your star sign?’

She had no idea how a couple of rocks millions of light years away could determine potential conjugal bliss, but she answered anyway, out of curiosity. She wanted to see where this was heading.

‘Do you belong to any professional networks?’

It was beginning to sound very much like a job interview, though she could see that Caroline wasn’t as interested in taking down the answers as she was in getting to the next part, showing her the lifestyle packages. The Silver Service, the Gold Package, the Platinum Ultimate Lifestyle Enhancer. The first came with a selection of potential dates which would be emailed to her once a month, the second with a life coach, and the third with a personal stylist to offer make-up advice and a voucher for a haircut.

‘Some people just don’t know how to appear confident, or even how to groom themselves,’ Caroline advised her. ‘You’d be surprised by the number of professionals who are successful in their careers but have such trouble finding partners.’

‘Really?’

‘That’s why one of the questions on our test is how often a candidate showers.’

‘What are the options?’

‘Twice a day, once every day, once every two days, once a week.’ Caroline knew she was digressing, and pulled the conversation back to the packages. ‘So,’ Caroline continued, ‘once a month you’ll get emailed profiles like these.’ Turning her computer screen around, she showed her a picture of a middle-aged man named Tom who, according to his profile, was a self-employed entrepreneur.

‘How often does Tom shower?’ she joked, but Caroline wasn’t biting.

‘That’s personal information I can’t divulge.’

She didn’t know whether a computer and a five-minute interview was enough to find her someone she could tolerate for the rest of her life. Could you choose a life partner the way you might a car, she wondered. Where was the human element in that? Was this any better or worse than what her parents were trying to do?

‘I will have a think about it,’ she told Caroline, but when the elevator deposited her in the marbled foyer she almost tripped over in her hurry to

get out of there. What on earth had she been thinking?

She was still in her mid-twenties, for crying out loud.

THE SURFACE OF THINGS

FATHER—

She had been gone for two years, three years, and in her fourth year his daughter wanted to look for a house. She now wanted to leave the beautiful flat, which had been renovated over the years so it had new carpeting, new kitchen, new paint on the walls, a new light-filled bathroom. All this great newness and she wanted to leave! There was no precedent for it: what to do about unwed daughters leaving home before they were married? Who would look out for them? She had seemed so happy at Janet Clarke Hall. The staff were supportive. The students had really taken to her. And the college had safely cloistered her: a visitor had to get through a locked gate, two layers of doors and a flight of steps before they could even approach her flat.

He started thinking. If she moved to Footscray, he and Kien could check up on her every couple of days. Bring her home-cooked food. Make sure she was not sick. He'd found her one day with the flu, curled up on the floor of her flat with a half-eaten tin of lychees.

So he helped her do what she wanted, which was to look at homes for sale every Saturday. They would set off mid-morning, with the real-estate sections of the newspaper on her lap in the car, and they would go house hunting. These trips made him realise that his daughter only looked at the surface of things. She couldn't care less about house foundations or building materials. She deliberated over rooms that he knew at a glance would never be worth investing in. The space was too small, the house too old, the walls made of flimsy plasterboard that had been painted to disguise its poor quality.

Yet she would rail at the sight of a house in Braybrook that was bright blue or bright green, as if paint could not be repainted, as if such ugliness had to be permanent, as if she had never considered that it could be knocked down to rubble.

You could put a vase of flowers on a tablecloth in a bomb shelter and his daughter would be sucked in. Look at this, she would say, a sign of life –

when all the people with their hands over their ears would be the clearest sign of life to him. Gestures like the vase were such time-wasters. It was like playing a violin to a buffalo, as that Burmese expression goes. Come to think of it, who would play a violin to a buffalo when the fields needed ploughing?

Dignity in poverty, she would have called it, seeing all the little gewgaws – a plastic vine with washed-out yellow fabric leaves wrapped around an iron railing, cheap porcelain cats, curtains hanging from the kitchen window. It seemed the older the house, the more it mattered to her. That was the trouble, he thought, the accursed poverty of these people, these new Australians. They found a place, their first place, and decked it out with flecks and flickers of their cash flow, treating the flow like a tub of freshly opened Dulux paint. Oh, we'll just use a little to fix up the curtains. Get a glass cabinet for the living room. A larger television. Maybe even a home-entertainment system. It won't empty the pot. But he knew that once the lid of the tub was open, the paint would dry out quicker. And that's how they became stuck. These people were not long-term thinkers. They were always thinking of immediate comforts, to make it a bit easier here or there. Whereas he and Kien – well, they worked and worked until they could build their new house away from the carpet factories.

So when his daughter was away in Adelaide for work one weekend, he and Kien decided to look at some blocks that they had driven past on their way back from work – new parcels of land near the Maribyrnong River. How best to tell their daughter who was so quick to react to things? They decided they would not tell her until she got back from Adelaide. It would only make her anxious.

A PLOT OF LAND

DAUGHTER—

‘Do you want to hear some good news?’ her mother asked her one evening. It had been two weeks since she had been home to see them.

‘Did you buy something new?’ she asked. ‘Something on sale, perhaps?’ It was a longstanding joke in the family. Her mother really could buy things for a steal: shoes for five dollars marked down from eighty, suitcases for four dollars, once a new fully-lined coat for three dollars because it had been tagged incorrectly at Kmart.

‘No. *You* bought something.’

‘What did I buy?’

‘You now own a block of land!’

‘What?’

‘Your dad and I went to the new-release-of-land sale early Saturday morning. We had to line up – you should have seen how many people were there so early! We had our eyes on that block for you – the big one in front of the fence. Near the golf course.’

‘The golf course I was telling you about last year,’ her father added. ‘The one where Bill Clinton played.’

Her parents had bought the block while she was interstate, and signed as her nominees. She knew well enough to resign herself to such surprises. They never threw surprise birthday parties – bad for the heart – but unexpected acts to secure the children’s future seemed to be the done thing.

‘Don’t worry, your mortgage will be cheaper than the others,’ Dad told her. ‘We got a real bargain.’

‘Why?’ she asked. Uh-oh. ‘Aren’t they all the same?’

‘Well, your block is actually close to something that you probably won’t notice when the houses are built, because they will all be building double-storey houses anyway to block it off.’

‘What?’ All she could ask of them was ‘what’ and ‘why’. She was a living perplexed eternal query.

‘There is a mobile-phone tower behind it,’ said Mum. ‘A Telstra one. Don’t worry, Telstra was state-owned, so it should be safe.’ She didn’t understand the correlation between a phone company that was owned by the government over a decade ago and the safety of its towers, and what any of this had to do with the block of land.

‘I don’t think it’s cancerous,’ Dad said. Then she understood – they were worried about radiation from mobile-phone reception towers!

‘When you get the Vendor’s Statement, you can check out the Environmental Report to see if the tower is poisonous – but I am sure it won’t be. And what’s more, you have a cooling-off period.’

‘Solicitors don’t have any cooling-off period,’ she told her father.

Her mother and father glanced at each other. They had woken up early and lined up like teenagers to get the best concert tickets – except they had got her a mortgage instead. They had been telling her to put her money into real estate since she was twenty-one, but being the practical people they were, they knew that they had better act for her because if they didn’t, all her earnings would evaporate.

‘Damien across the road from us has already bought his block,’ her mother said. Damien was twenty-five, married and visiting display homes every Saturday. Her parents talked about her future neighbours: ‘The Vietnamese family who lined up to get the block next to yours seemed very nice and decent. And if any of your friends want to buy a block, I think there are a few left.’

Her father showed her the plans on the contract, including the AV Jennings fold-out at the back, with four suggested architectural designs. If they were faces they would all have looked the same, but for the eyebrows.

Who knows, it could be fun, she thought, building a new house. And perhaps she did want to live a short walk away from Highpoint Shopping Centre and the Bill Clinton golf course. She tried to get excited at the idea of the block. But the truth was, she had wanted a house.

They had spent weekends searching and searching, she and her father. The areas they had targeted were in the western suburbs of Melbourne: the properties in front of the carpet factory in Braybrook, the weatherboard homes in Footscray, Sunshine and Maidstone. They planned their day according to open-house times, and parked the car five minutes before the arrival of the agents. At every house they inspected, she noticed at least five

other Asian couples or families. She had no idea which ones were planning to buy investment properties and which were wanting to break out of the rental cycle, since they were all dressed alike in shabby Saturday clothes that they had owned for decades or made themselves.

Entering each house, she was hit by the smells of sleep, cooking and the familiar stuffy stench of daily life conducted in such close quarters. She saw the sewing machine next to the baby's cot in the back room, the Laminex table and cork chairs. The curtains nearly falling off their rods but always drawn so that outsiders could not look inside. The children's rooms packed with boxes of miscellany from import businesses, or stacks of cut fabric. She looked down and saw the grouting of the tiles clotted with blackness. She looked up and saw the plastic prints of fluorescent deities on the wall – Buddha or Jesus looking down at her, condemning her condescension.

She saw backyards filled with weeds and sad broken clotheslines, some of which were just strings tied to the side of the house.

Her father did not seem to be affected by all this. 'How many square metres is it? What is the rental in the area like?' he asked the agent, taking notes.

'Of course you're not going to live in it,' he told her when he noticed her dismay at how windowsills were cracking, and windows were coated with grime.

But she had seen people's long johns hanging on clothes horses, five Indian families to one Footscray dwelling, freshly renovated Victorian houses with the interior painted the colour of pig's liver. Those were people's homes, and they were where lives were lived. Molecules of former existence floated through every wall and partition. A house was substantial. A block of land was just a block of land.

'How am I going to pay all this off, as well as build a house on it within two years?' she asked, looking at the contract.

'Well then, you have two years to find yourself a partner who will marry you and help you pay off the mortgage and build the house.'

Poor bugger, she thought, coming into this predetermined life. Then she realised that perhaps there were a few lazy men who would think this was an excellent arrangement, coming into a wife and home like a Lego-set.

'Mum says she will help you out,' her father told her, and began to scrawl on the back of an envelope lying on the table. He reassured her that

he and her mother had worked out an arrangement whereby they would lend her a sum of money, interest-free, and she could pay them back slowly as well as pay the mortgage. Drawing diagrams and writing down figures, her father pointed and enthused, ‘See how soon you can pay off this mortgage with this plan!’

That did seem very soon, she thought. Suspiciously soon. How exactly did it work?

‘Oh, simple,’ said Dad, ‘you will just move back home.’

‘Move back home …?’

‘And you’ll continue to work at the law office, but if you need extra money we can help you – you can work at the shop too.’

She should have seen this coming. It was like when she was eighteen and her parents wanted her to work every spare moment during university breaks at their shop and put all her earnings into paying off her university loan.

‘You will be able to pay the mortgage off in less than ten years!’ her mother advised. Life was filled with figures for them, figures to be crossed off.

Ten years! she thought. She would be thirty-six. She would be stuck at home with her parents still setting a 10.30 curfew for her. She would have worked for ten miserable years of her life just to pay off a piece of property.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said, ‘I will just pay off the mortgage slowly.’

‘But it’s thirty years!’

She could cross off figures too, but she definitely wasn’t going to move back home.

ARRIVING

FATHER—
What was wrong with these kids, he wondered. They seemed to have no future plans, and yet they also resented it when he and Kien stepped in and tried to help. Like they didn't need help at all, as if they were completely independent beings.

He remembered when he first arrived in this country. The sweet bread-and-butter faces of the Australians and their tenderness like pudding. They didn't see human debris when they first looked at him. They saw a man and his very pregnant young wife, his 28-year-old sister and his 72-year-old mother.

He remembered when he first saw Melbourne, too. The geometrical wonder of the city rose from the horizon, each skyscraper a glorious robot rooted to the ground by the strength of its individual personality. Across the metal and cement marvel that was the West Gate Bridge, he looked out of a car window at the factories below. How wonderful to live in a world where everything was paved over, each tree only there because of human thought, and each leaf of grass grew only because a person allowed it to. Even the sun gave a clean warmth.

On the corner of Flinders and Elizabeth streets he had watched a flock of obese grey-white birds that didn't fly away until you came really close. Then he realised why the seagulls were so complacent. No one ate them. Human beings provided bread without expecting a pound of flesh in return. Once, his family were taken to see the fairy penguins on Phillip Island, and he watched the birds waddle up to the edge of the beach, marvelling at how such small flightless creatures could stray so close to human feet.

So many things that he could not take for granted then. Electricity. Tap water and a bed that was not a rattan mat. Also, his *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. It was one of the first books he bought. Some words that the Australians had told him about were not in there, like 'spork', a cross between a spoon and a fork.

He bought an exercise book from Sims Tuckerbag supermarket for twelve cents and started to make lists. He vowed to learn three new words a day.

Aglow

Abode

Amen

He picked words that he liked the sound of, in no particular order. He wrote down the lists in the evening.

Spores

Spoons

Sparks

Yet this new country: there were no words in his Longman dictionary to describe the surprises she brought into his life. He learnt that a tender submission was a business document. Manslaughter – made of two wonderful words, man's laughter – was the act of killing someone. And sweet relish was a jar of mashed pickles.

Because he could speak English and French, he worked at the Midway Migrant Hostel where his family were staying, as an interpreter for the new arrivals. Some people sat on the edge of their beds most of the day and did not speak, while others pleaded with him to beseech Father Government on their behalf. That's what they all took to calling the Australian government, like it was their new King Sihanouk, except more epic in its generosity, more mythical in its magnitude. At the camp, he realised, they had existed day to day like children sustained by the story of Father Christmas, and their arrival in Australia was akin to finding out that Santa Claus was real. There was a miracle in all of this, which was why some men and women expected the near impossible and demanded the un-doable. 'Beg the kind white people to help me bring my family over! Tell Father Government my wife is still back in Cambodia.' Suddenly they thought that *all* their wishes could be fulfilled.

The staff at the Midway Migrant Hostel wanted them to concentrate on more immediate things. 'Ask him how he is settling in,' they would instruct, as he sat next to a new arrival.

At first he didn't understand what this meant. He translated, and would get a blank look. He suggested in Teochew or Khmer, 'Tell them you will look for work to support your family and start to pay rent on a house.'

That was not what the staff meant by settling in, he soon found out. It was not about whether the new refugees would settle down and do useful work. The migrant hostel staff wanted to know how the new refugees were *adjusting*.

Some of the men would cry.

Be quiet, he wanted to say, stop it. Be grateful that you are here. Stop begging and make yourself useful. But it was easy for him to think that. He had not lost his wife to marauding soldiers. His children had never stepped on landmines. The only people he had buried were dead. He had been a young and relatively fit man, and now he could begin a new life.

He was a lucky, lucky man.

In his new life, he counted his blessings.

Do you want to go to sleep here, a Black Bandit had once asked him, sickle to the side of his temple. To sleep meant to be put to death.

No, no, no, his eyes had bulged. *I want to stay awake!* How could he go to sleep when the sun was so high in the sky, when every sense was suddenly on full alert? He felt the heat behind his eyeballs, the powdered earth beneath his feet, wetness beneath his armpits, smelt the promise of the fish and clutched at his banging heart.

When the Black Bandit left, the fish was still in his hands, his birthday gift for his mother.

FRIENDS FROM AFAR

DAUGHTER—
Her parents were so interfering, with their small-minded anxieties: *Have you called him yet? Has he replied to your email? Why not? Maybe you sent him something really offensive. Maybe you were just not trying hard enough. When you are in Adelaide for your writers' festival, call his parents and meet up with him.*

They led tightly coiled lives, in tiny communities, and sometimes it wasn't even a community, sometimes it was just the little yellow nuclear family ensconced inside the large white house, like an egg inside an eggshell. The bigger the house, the more they believed these padded boxes would protect the people inside from bruises and shake-ups. After setting up their children on awkward yum cha dates, they would go over and inspect each other's boxes to make sure that their beloved daughters were going to be in safe neighbourhoods, money trees out the front and all manner of appliances lined up inside like a modern army to fight against germ warfare.

For her mother, friends were memories from childhood and young adulthood. Once in Australia, she no longer had them. Friends were to while away time with, and her mother had no more idle time. All she seemed to do was closet herself in the garage, working, chipping away at the decades with her peeling tools and peeled hands, making her jewellery. Her work as a goldsmith was more fulfilling than the strain of gauging people's moods. As much as she tried to lock them into her mind as fixed characters, as much as she tried to set them with her words – 'always like that, giving things away', 'always so clumsy', 'always so reckless', 'always telling the same story' – people would shift and change.

Her mother's childhood friends were the only ones who did not change. They were easy to control in her head, and they aligned themselves completely with her visions. Even when their lives branched out in strange ways and bore stranger fruit, she would try to find a way to link their narratives to the fixed seedlings in her head. According to her mother, Ai

Hua, her mother's best friend from childhood, had always been placid and family-orientated.

'That girl was always too stupidly generous,' her mother told her. 'She kept giving things away, and paying for things for other people. When we were kids, she always treated us when we went out. Her father had died when she was young.' Her mother paused. 'She had a suitor once, who wanted to take her abroad; but her mother didn't want the daughter to leave her all alone in her old age.'

She could imagine the old woman digging desperate fingernails into her daughter's arm, crying and cursing her: 'Don't you leave me now! You dare and you die!' And the daughter would have probably been in her mid-twenties, knowing that if she couldn't set sail in the water with her lover, then she would miss both her boats.

Now Ai Hua was in her mid-fifties, an illegal immigrant working at a Chinese restaurant in the United States, sending most of her earnings back home to her mother. She'd been living this illegal limbo life for seven years, sleeping at the back of some stranger's house.

'Don't worry. It wasn't important anyhow,' said her mother when one of her aunts went to the States on holiday and was unable to locate Ai Hua. 'It's just as well. She might ask for money.' Her mother was afraid, not that her friend would claim her favours back like coupons, but that she would expect the same kind of unconditional friendship as before. Her parents were so afraid of what other people thought, all the possible ways you could offend a person with gifts and acts and random notions. People could take you the wrong way, so don't even try. Their main priority in life was to be left alone. 'Why do you spend so much time with your friends? Why don't you mind your own business?' Worse still were their threats of withdrawal of love, made on behalf of other people. 'You'll see. You might think you have so many girl friends now, but when they get married they will abandon you.'

Yet she was a bridesmaid to her best friend Hanh, who had arrived as a refugee when she was twelve. They shared the same bed on Hanh's last evening as a single girl, in the house Hanh shared with her parents and many sisters. She and Hanh lay on the queen-sized mattress that had once been shared with childhood siblings, looking up at the ceiling. They did not wonder about what a wedding night would be like, or talk about the future.

They did not speak of the past either, at least not their own. They were content to lie there, like sisters. ‘My mother got married at nineteen,’ Hanh told her. ‘She said that soon afterwards, her mother-in-law made her feed the pigs back in Vietnam.’ They both marvelled at how different life would be for them. At Hanh’s Vietnamese wedding, Hanh’s Jewish friends got them all up and dancing Jewish dances to a karaoke machine.

She remembered her friend Angela’s hen’s night – the prematurely balding stripper singing ‘I’ll make love to you’ with a rose between his teeth and a cherry wedged in his bellybutton, and how Angela’s Italian aunts and mother, women who had had a number of children, were squealing and blushing more than the younger women. At Angela’s wedding, Angela’s father danced with his daughter one last time, and at the end of the dance she had to pat him gently twice on the back before he would let her go, red-eyed.

Her friends were beginning to get married now. She had read somewhere that marriage was not a passion-fest, that it was more like a small partnership formed to run a tiny, quite mundane and often not-for-profit business. This was never so true as it was for the ‘good’ children of the Southeast Asian refugees, who were just too damn practical. With every transaction accounted for, they knew where they were heading, with houses and mortgages maximising their first-home-owner’s grant. They planned at what age they would have children and the schools they would send them to. Book them in as soon as the ultrasound is done, to Scotch College or Methodist Ladies College. Or, if they didn’t have the money, they made sure they trained them up to take the scholarship exams so that their kids could get free tuition for at least three years.

And lie low, she had always been taught. If you do make it, don’t ever make a fuss. Shine quietly but don’t be outstanding. To be outstanding was to stand out, and make yourself an easy target. ‘Keep quiet,’ her mother would say when the refugee boats were rolling in at the beginning of the new century. Figuratively, and sometimes even literally, they were all from the same boat. Their parents had stayed in the same sort of camps, grabbing for clothes during hand-outs. They had seen things that had made them want to tear their eyes out but for the hope of a better place in this life, not the hereafter. And now their kids were getting married.

How could her parents begrudge her friends such happiness? She would show them pictures of weddings on her camera. Her father would always zoom in on the brides and grooms. She knew what he was doing, and she wanted to snatch the camera from him. She knew what he was looking for, and even if it was not there, she knew that he would find it. ‘Your friend’s wife has a crooked tooth,’ he would say about her friend Matthew’s lovely new bride. Such mean-spiritedness. When had her parents turned so hard, she wondered.

Yet to her parents, being interested in friends post-marriage was the same as being nosy. Love was a verb with a certain amount of energy attached to it – a daily quota – and you had to choose on whom you wanted to spend this energy. That was love. That was why people had to pray for it. If it were not finite, no one would pine for love in their lives – they would just wait to receive or learn to give. But Buddhist love, she knew, was meant to be non-discriminating, like the wind. The wind passed through a rubbish bin as well as the leaves of a tree.

‘That’s rubbish,’ said her father. ‘You can’t love everyone equally. Sooner or later you have to choose.’

THE WONDER OF WHITEGOODS

FATHER—
From the moment he arrived in this country with one empty suitcase, he was bent on filling it up, like Mary Poppins' infinity bag. That was a movie his kids used to watch all the time. He didn't like it; he found it nonsensical and silly. He preferred the other one with the children running away from the Nazis, singing *Do Re Mi*. It instilled a good lesson, he thought, about surmounting adversity. 'If you work hard enough, you will get somewhere,' was the other lesson he tried to instil in his kids. It was a simple lesson – if you did not drink or smoke, you could save up your money and start a business.

That's what he had done – he saved up the money from his factory job and started his electrical appliances store. It began as a small shopfront selling the electrical equivalent of smallgoods: batteries, watches, radios, musical Christmas cards and alarm clocks. Within a month of opening, thieves broke in one night and took off with ten-thousand dollars' worth of stock. The store expanded five years later, when he moved further up the street into two shopfronts. There, the thieves became more brazen. One evening he received a call from Chubb Security to let him know that the alarms had been activated. When he arrived, he saw that someone had rammed a truck into the roller shutters and loaded it up with all the televisions and video cameras and walkmans they could grab.

Over the years he kept his eye out for different properties in Barkly Street, Footscray, to see which ones were shifting owners, moving locations, leasing. When the enormous old hardware store across the road from the Barkly Hotel was being auctioned, he brought along his sister Kieu, and they made the winning bid.

All of his family were part of his business now – Kien, Kieu and her husband David, his eldest sister, his wife's sisters, his brother from Guangzhou. He employed sales staff and office workers until he had a team of forty – loyal Lambchops in deliveries, hardworking Hanji, indefatigable

Anna and Sim, hi-fi fanatic Joe, Karaoke King Ben and Jim, the Macedonian George Clooney.

In his store he had a whole shelf, a shrine, dedicated to food. Not the provisions themselves, but the machines that made them. Machines that spun fairy floss. Electronic capsules that popped corn. Things that cut and pulverised food to a mash, machines to extract juice from fruit, machines that made waffles, machines that made bread, machines that toasted bread. With these machines back in Cambodia, someone could make themselves a small fortune by selling snacks on the street. But these were machines designed so that there would be no street food in this new country, because of hygiene. They had names like Sunbeam and Kenwood, Tiffany and Tiger. Black & Decker were, to him, a pair of stalwart brothers, or two faithful Doberman dogs. This was his small-appliances family.

He also housed the progeny of the forefathers who turned electricity from a mysterious abstract force into something to be generated and shared – dishwashers from George Westinghouse and General Electric. Kelvinator was like a fridge combining the strength of the Terminator and the flexibility of those Transformer toys his son played with.

And the fans – he had a whole fan club waving at him every time he stood at the front counter. Small brown squat ones with heads that rotated in your direction every five seconds. Big straight-backed ones. He had heaters and electric blankets. He created warmth in winter. He made sure people *slept wonderfully well* with Linda, as the slogan on the pink box said, like a comforting sign in a boudoir. He had Brown Goods and he had White Goods – and he looked at his store and saw that it was all good.

He would bring each machine home over the course of the year for a trial. When they were small, his children watched the corn kernels pop. When they were teenagers, they clamped down batter in heart-shaped metal to make waffles. But when they were older, they had had enough.

‘Dad,’ they said, ‘stop bringing home the machines. We don’t want homemade focaccias. We don’t want a plug-in machine with a heated wire that can cut cling-wrap.’

His wife was tired of cleaning the gear every time she had to squeeze a lemon or grind some peanuts. Her arsenal of cooking tools – wok, pot, cleaver, chopsticks, sometimes a mortar and pestle for grains and nuts – was enough. Back in the old city, no one needed this stuff. They would have a

National rice cooker if they had electricity in the village, but that was it. Kien used her wok so much that after twenty years she had burned a hole right through it. For two years she wouldn't even use the dishwasher, until the goading from the kids became too much.

In many places in Cambodia they still didn't have electricity. He imagined the villagers checking out a mobile phone, hearing the voice of a distant relative from Phnom Penh. A reincarnation without death! Instead of feeling the exuberance that the first listeners to Edison's phonograph experienced, would these people be flailing their limbs about, terrified? Three decades ago the villagers would have looked up as the bombers whooshed above them and wondered about the iron birds. And now he sold ironing boards that came with two-hundred-dollar irons in a land where all the people in the countryside had electricity.

'Let's make waffles,' he would declare on Saturdays. 'Let's pop some corn.' But his kids were no longer interested, and over the years he stopped bringing home the machines.

*

One day his sister Kieu set up a new gadget in the back office, getting ready to take it for a test run. 'These are murderously expensive,' she declared as she opened a cardboard box. 'Each one of these plastic pockets costs a dollar.' She pulled one out. Then she slid a few cardboard price tags between the sleeves of the plastic sheet and put it in the slit of the machine. Out it came on the other side, with a new wipeable surface. 'Wah! Who else would like to test this out?'

Anna from accounts opened her wallet and took out a photo of her fiancé and herself. Lien from small claims pulled out a picture of her husband. Sokha from sales pulled a photo of his daughters from his back pocket. Kieu found herself surrounded by staff wanting to encase their loved ones in plastic. She put the five small photographs into one A4 plastic pocket, started up the machine and slid the plastic through the slot. It went through very easily.

'Aaargghh!' cried Lien when she saw the hardened plastic come out the other end. They hadn't realised that the machine had four settings and the factory default was the highest. Faces became Edvard Munch terrors, candle-wax blurs, couples congealed together like spat-out toffee.

‘I’ve had that photo in my wallet for five years!’ Lien wailed. The staff huddled together, passing the stiff sheet of their scorched loved ones around. What was meant to protect their faces had effaced them.

‘Oh hell,’ he said as he walked past. ‘Oh dear.’ Then, under his breath, ‘They’re only photographs.’

*

His daughter’s Certificate of Admission to legal practice was framed on the wall of his office. He remembered the day she had received it at the Supreme Court of Victoria, barristers in black robes with heads of woolly-sheep hair rising in unison to move the admission of their charges. He also recalled her law-school graduation. After that ceremony, everyone had gone to an enormous high-ceilinged hall, where they ate from paper plates and drank wine with the parents of the other graduates. He observed that wealthy white people preferred clothes of many textures, while poor yellow and brown people liked clothes of too many colours. The university served up food that tasted like various solidifications of vomit – blue-veined cheese and runny Camembert. There was vinegar poured over salads, splashed onto the raw green plants like scrappy jungle food, like a dog pissing on a garden patch. And stuff they called Dijon mustard that, when squeezed out of the plastic bottle, had the colour and consistency of diarrhoea. He had learnt, very early on at the Midway Migrant Hostel, that this sort of thing was the white people’s *good* food.

At the hostel the elements were the same, only in different dilutions. Baby salad greens became lettuce, mustard became tomato sauce. Human-bud steak dripped with a sponge of red blood in the middle. Back then Kien couldn’t eat any of it, and she was about to burst with the baby who would grow up to be their eldest daughter. So he would secretly feed his wife two-minute noodles in their room because they didn’t want to offend the kindly white people, who of course would never understand that to his wife food that smelt and tasted of vomit and shit and blood was terrifying.

His employee at work, Ah Ung, understood. Each day Ah Ung opened the lid of his lunch container, which was a washed and reused tofu box. ‘I can only have my fish fried or steamed now,’ Ah Ung told him. ‘I can never eat prahok again.’ Prahok was a pickled kind of fish that he used to love

too, until he realised that a decomposing human body gave off the same odour.

‘What was worse than smelling all those dead bodies,’ declared Ah Ung, ‘was seeing all those cattle trucks stacked with bodies to be dumped. One of them drove by when I was working in the fields once, and after the truck had stopped, I could see some arms and legs still moving through the metal grates.’ Ah Ung shuddered, and then shook his head and shoulders as if shaking off an unexpected deluge of dirty rainwater.

He looked at his own lunch. Kien had packed him three plastic boxes that morning. Leftovers sometimes tasted better the next day, particularly when she made ginger-soy prawns, because all the sauce would seep into the Cs of the crustaceans’ bodies. They were now eating prawns and durians, dragonfruit and Lindt chocolates.

But of late, sometimes he couldn’t even taste his food. Only a short-term guest, perhaps on a funded trip, would remember to feel grateful for every single day of their stay. Some days, he forgot. Quite often, he was forgetting. Stress at work was the same as going through a minor car accident every day, he had recently read in the newspaper’s lifestyle magazine. He didn’t even know that such a word existed – *lifestyle* – that a person could style their life like their hair. Some of the Australians seemed to think that if you had a near-death experience, or if you experienced great fear for your life, then it put everything else in perspective. True, but only for a little while. After a while, missing the bus to work, not understanding the growl of countryside Australians when spending a day picking fruit, waiting for your child after school – those were just as stressful. You began to sweat the small stuff again. Minor collisions happened in your head every day, and these entirely avoidable mishaps inevitably raised your fear premium.

STATE OF EMERGENCY

DAUGHTER—
After her China trip she came home to an empty flat in a new college, Ormond, a place held between green lawns and high gates, in a city where old trams crawled along crammed with people who were too polite or self-conscious to take empty seats.

At her new college she had a big double bed but she still curled in one corner with the blankets folded over doubly for warmth, so that half of the bed exposed bare sheet, like a half-iced cake. For a long time her fingertips missed the feel of another person. They felt as if something had been stripped away, felt raw, like new pink skin that had grown over burns, without the protective layer and with barely perceptible fingerprints.

She went back to work and sat at her desk, realising that she had spent more hours in her life staring at a screen than at any person, touching a plastic keypad more than she had touched anyone. What had been happening to her for so long? She was no longer the young girl who worried about being compared to cotton wool, once dirtied never able to be clean again. But what she now had was a sadness that she could not stretch to its inevitable end, and then let go.

Love was like notches on a speaker that could be cranked up and down, the decibels of desire, the frequencies of feeling. Sometimes she thought that she might have cranked it all the way up and broken the dial before the music had even started.

But slowly and gradually she settled back into her life of teaching students in the evenings, giving talks in schools and libraries, and going to work every day in her new legal research job in the public service. She had so many good friends, and leisure time to visit art galleries, museums and cinemas. She was content, and she realised that perhaps her parents were right – contentment rested in the concrete things.

She eventually scrapped her inchoate story about going to China, which was sounding too much filled with easy epiphanies. It didn’t matter to her if she never wrote another book.

Almost five years ago, her first book had come as a complete surprise to her. She knew nothing about what it was like to write one until she had finished it. ‘There is a box for you in the office,’ the principal of her college told her excitedly one day. ‘I think it’s your book.’

It had been about a month before the official launch, and she lugged the box upstairs. She saved a copy for Michael, her first sweetheart, who took up five chapters, put aside three for her family, signed one for the principal, and saved one for herself inside the box, buried in white plastic foam. Then she put the box away and continued with what she had been doing in her life.

So its success was unexpected.

She had written about the self-centred myopia of being young, and the paranoias, real and imagined, of her outworking relatives. Months before her book’s release, she feared the response of these people, who did not entirely understand the laws of the country, who regarded most outsiders with suspicion, who would not get the humour. Yet her aunties and uncles, relatives and family friends, had come to her book launch to support her. They brought all sorts of audio-visual recording equipment, and their children.

She was asked to give talks at universities and colleges, secondary schools, graduations and even aged-care conferences. She did radio and television interviews, wrote articles for magazines and for newspapers. People wanted to know what it was like to look through the windows of those concrete houses in Braybrook, what it was like to open the fly-screen doors and see a sliver of the life inside.

‘We’re very proud of Alice,’ her father would say to crowds at writers’ festivals, chuckling. ‘But if she had shown us the book before it went to print, there would have been parts we wouldn’t have let her include!’

‘You wrote that I wore a second-hand wedding dress!’ her mother scolded her one evening. ‘Your aunt told me! She said that her daughter read about it in your book!’

She waited for more reproaches, even excoriation. It seemed impossible that this should be the extent of it, but it was. She started to see her mother and father in a new light. They had a sense of humour! They knew their private lives were completely separate from the world their daughter had described in another language.

Yet she often felt guilty when she occasionally asked them to come along to her talks. They would drive to the venue, exhausted from the day's work. They always came late, because the shop had to be closed and locked before they could leave. They would sneak in and sit at the back, but she always knew when they had arrived: it was like a sixth sense she had. She could feel their quiet swelling pride if there was a large audience.

On the evening of her reading at Ormond College, her father was driving in and her mother was supposed to come by train and tram. Her father arrived first and she led him into the enormous foyer, past the framed photographs of famous alumni like Sir Weary Dunlop, and through to the carpeted hall where chairs and a lectern had been set up. Soon, the room started to fill with people. Her father received a call on his mobile phone ten minutes before she was due to begin.

'Your mother caught the wrong tram and is now heading somewhere she doesn't know! She thought all the tram lines from Elizabeth Street led to your college!'

She asked him what number tram her mother had got on.

'What number tram?' he urged, his phone-voice too loud for the high-ceilinged, oak-panelled hall. Then he turned to her: 'Fifty-nine.'

'She should have got on tram number 19. Where is she now?'

'She says she doesn't know, it's too dark outside.' Her father handed her the mobile. It was strange, having her loud mother condensed into this little block of vibrating metal and plastic, just as loud if not louder because you had to put the phone up to your ear.

'Ma, where are you? What are you passing?'

Her mother had once caught buses easily. Number 219 and 216 from Braybrook to Footscray and to the city. But over time the trajectories had turned into smaller and smaller loops. From home to the shop to the loud yowling markets after work and then back home; and on her days off, to the malls, those clean places where you could wander into a Target store.

Once her mother's train to work had terminated two stations before Springvale, due to a technical fault, and instead of calling a taxi or trying to find out whether there was a replacement bus, she had walked the distance of two stations. It took her two and a half hours, and by the time she arrived she was so exhausted she felt ready to collapse. Her mother didn't trust the taxi drivers and she knew that her father didn't either. He would rather his

wife walked, because he had read in the papers about new-arrival taxi drivers from third-world countries who had no idea about directions.

‘Ask the person next to you,’ she advised her mother over the phone.

Her mother wouldn’t do it. She didn’t have the words.

‘When you pass the Seven Eleven on the corner, you will recognise Essendon Station. That’s where you catch your train to work in the mornings, remember? That is your stop.’

‘You’re confusing me! Aiyoh, I don’t know where I am. It’s all dark outside and I can’t see what is what. I have no idea whether I’ve passed Essendon Station or not.’

‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘The tram will stop at Airport West near the shopping centre. That’s the shopping centre you always go to.’

‘Aiyoh, stuck in Airport West in the middle of the night!’

It was only 6.55 p.m.

‘Well, let’s send Dad out to get you,’ she suggested. Her father was by now a panic disorder personified.

‘We’re going to look up on the street directory what route the tram goes. And then you get off at the stop we tell you to, and Dad will pick you up from there.’

She took her father to the library, where Therese the librarian was packing her bag. ‘Sorry to bother you, Therese, but would you happen to have a street directory?’

‘Oh, I’m just packing to go and hear your talk!’ Therese did not ask why they were in such a state over a street directory; instead she immediately went to look for one.

‘My mother is lost on a tram that is heading to Airport West,’ she explained.

‘Oh dear. Oh dear indeed.’ Therese with her soft eyes was the only one who seemed to feel their plight, saw it not as a father and daughter carrying on about some small carelessness on the part of their wife and mother. ‘I have a better idea,’ she suggested. ‘Let’s look at Google Maps to see where the tram stops.’ Therese could see that their world had become a state of emergency.

*

She'd given talks to hordes of schoolboys, old people in bookstores who fell asleep, principals of high schools, ladies in book clubs and young men in jails. She was never nervous, not even when smart-alec audience members yelled out about ching-chongs eating dogs, not even when the security staff took her aside and warned her not to get alarmed if some of the child wards acted up and had to be physically restrained.

But now she began to get the jitters. Her father's panic permeated everything so that nothing was normal anymore. His fear was casting shadows on her newly built white middle-class existence and making her walls crack loose like chalk. The roomful of kindly friends, fellow tutors, supportive staff and people who had driven an hour to get here, waiting, waiting, for her to read – they became a pinprick of receding light as the lens of her world became smaller and smaller.

She and her father had fidgeted through the poet Chris Wallace-Crabbe's reading and she hated herself for not being able to appreciate art and poetry after spending a decade studying it. All her father could think of was losing his wife on a tram bound for the safe suburbs, the last stop being an enormous well-lit mall in Airport West. Over the years her parents had learned a kind of helplessness. They lived like acrophobes on the precipice. She was irrationally annoyed at him, in fact, angry at them both. But she felt a gnawing guilt over this anger.

When it was her turn to go up to the lectern, she tried to make a joke of it. 'My mother's stuck on the wrong tram, so Dad might have to leave in the middle of this to call her up to see where she is.'

During a break in her reading, her father popped out to make the call. He came back looking relieved. 'Your mother is on the way home. She waited for the other tram on the opposite side of the road.'

She had to sit down. Her legs were shaking behind the wooden lectern.

THE KNIFE

DAUGHTER—

Most Friday nights, she still returned home to her parents' house. One evening, there was a new addition to the top kitchen drawer. It was the first time in ten years that they had had a sharp knife in the house, besides the cleaver. Her mother had decided it was time and went out and bought it because it was ridiculous how long it was taking to scrape the scales off a fish. The blade was about twenty centimetres long and five centimetres wide, and it had a pointed tip.

'Wah, look at that. If you slipped and fell while carrying this knife, you could kill yourself,' her father exclaimed.

'Anything could kill you, Dad,' she said. 'Walking down the street could get you hit by a car.' Down by the Maribyrnong River trail he had explained in great detail to his daughters three possible ways a person could die on the walk: they could slip down a slope and fall into the river and drown, they could get bitten by snakes hiding in the long summer grass, or an unexpected bushfire might come and incinerate them.

So 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. It took some effort, but finally the tip snapped off. But then he looked at what he had done and realised something. He realised that with the triangle of the tip gone, he had made two sharp edges instead. So he got out the knife-sharpening stone which they had had for thirty years and filed away at those two edges.

He emerged from the garage a short while later and went quietly upstairs. When he came back down, he had a band-aid on one finger. He hoped that no one would notice at dinner, but Alison did.

'What happened to your finger, Dad?' she asked.

'Nothing,' he muttered.

Clearly something must have happened, his daughters thought, or else there would not have been a band-aid on it. It didn't take them long to

connect the mishap with the knife and the forty-five minutes he had spent in the garage.

‘Dad cut himself while trying to cut away the sharp tip of a knife with another knife!’ became the family story they liked to pull out that week his finger was bandaged.

DOGS AND CATS

FATHER—

This was too compassionate a country, he thought. They were swept from the camps onto planes, and this meant that the lee-and-lah loiterers had also been swept on board. They became the gangsters, the drug addicts and the troublemakers. One evening, after he and his eldest daughter had locked up the shop and walked to the car park at the back, they saw a man sprawled on the gravel, face down. His daughter took out her mobile phone. Its backlit screen made her face the same shade of blue as the lights in the public loos that made veins invisible, made it impossible for men like the one lying there to shoot up.

‘What are you doing? Get in the car!’

Only after they had driven for three minutes did he let her call 000. She had not the faintest idea about the dangers of the world. Did she think that she could just stand there over that body and call the ambulance and wait with the man until they came? Sometimes he didn’t know what to do with his kids.

Children Down Under were a different breed. Some of them were like pets that would roll over waiting to be tickled, not realising that to lie squirming happily like that was to expose the softest part of your underbelly to the boot. ‘Tickled pink’ – that was an Australian expression. It meant you were extremely pleased. But they baffled him too, sometimes, with their jokes that didn’t make any sense.

‘Dad, do you want to hear a joke?’ his son had asked as a very young boy.

‘Okay.’

‘How do you know if your house has been robbed by a Vietnamese?’

‘How?’

‘Your dog’s gone and your homework’s done.’

He knew that his son had most likely been parroting something he heard in the schoolyard, but it was bizarre what his kids could joke about.

‘Funny, isn’t it, Dad? Isn’t it funny?’

Stealing, eating dogs, making fun of the people who liberated him from the Black Bandits.

‘I really don’t find that funny,’ he said.

‘That’s because you don’t *get it*, Dad.’

*

When they were still living in Braybrook, in their house behind the Invicta carpet factory, his wife had started to feed the stray cats that sometimes meandered into their backyard. As with humans, if you fed a stray, it always came back. Soon more cats came, until there were three or four at once, rubbing against their legs as they hung out the washing, or running towards the back door when they heard it opening.

The original cat had black and brown stripes and flecked green eyes. She was heavily pregnant when she arrived.

One afternoon she gave birth to her babies beneath the house. His children were enthralled by the kittens when the mother cat took them out to clean them. But she quickly smuggled them beneath the floorboards again, where they could not be reached.

The cats were given leftovers, and on the day there were no leftovers, the mother cat crossed the road. Such was life and the law of the suburban jungle. Glass on the floor, and blood on her paws.

For days the kittens mewed beneath the house. He’d never heard of the RSPCA, didn’t know that people existed to protect animals, and not just rare animals but domestics too. A few days later his daughter opened the door and found tiny skeletal parts – little legs extending to tiny claws, the connected bones of a tail. Skeletons of dead kittens that had been cannibalised by the older cats, their aunties and uncle.

‘They ate their babies!’ squeaked his small son. His daughter didn’t say anything, but she would not come out of the house for days on end.

Later, one of the cannibals had mated with its brother, and the kittens were weak things that lay on their sides in the grass. The only thing that moved were their stomachs rising up and down. For days they remained like that, and then one day his daughter came to look at them and they were not even moving.

‘What happens now?’ she asked. ‘What do we do?’

‘Nothing,’ he told her. ‘They’re dead.’

The first time each of his children saw death, their faces were smudged with surprise, and then, without fail, they would cry. Alina, the youngest, even cried over the death of a fish at a Chinese restaurant, one that she was watching moments before with squeals of delight.

He and Kien were doing their best to give the children a happy childhood, but he realised that with the cats they had replicated life as they knew it to be – filled with knuckle-cracking cruelties that were inevitable. His wife bought live crabs and prepared them. She would stab them in the centre of their chests with a chopstick. She would buy special duck eggs with the dead foetuses curled inside and boil them. She would cook live fish, smash them across the head with the side of her cleaver.

But those starving cannibal cats, they walked so soundlessly.

TIPTOE

DAUGHTER—
Slowly, signs started to emerge which made her suspect, in a dreadful deep-seated way, that her parents were not like other parents, and had never been like the parents of her cousins raised in Hong Kong or Singapore. These aunts and uncles were polite and calm and let their kitchen utensils be, without feeling the need to modify them for a household full of adult children. They didn't order the Australian Legal Will Kit two-for-one offer by phone as soon as their eldest daughter turned eighteen, so that she could fill in the blanks and write their wills for them. Before they went on 'holiday' to Tasmania (to look for more ramshackle investment properties), they would not have drawn maps for her in pocket spiral notebooks showing where they had buried the gold in the backyard. These aunts and uncles would not have gone on 'holidays' to look for ramshackle properties in the first place.

*

When she was nine, the son of a family friend, Tiptoe, had come over with his parents for a visit. Tiptoe had got his name because as a toddler he liked walking around on his toes. On the day he came over he had a little orange booklet with him, because he planned on doing the World Vision forty-hour famine. Tiptoe asked her dad for sponsorship.

'What's this about?'

'You have to not eat for forty hours.'

'What do you mean?' asked her father, mouth agape.

'Well, we can eat some things. Like, we can have water and barley sugar.'

'So you are going to suck on barley sugar and drink water for forty hours?'

'Yeah.'

'I'll tell you what. I will sponsor you if you eat,' her father negotiated. 'I will pay you to eat. I'll pay you fifty dollars.'

‘But that’s cheating.’

‘How is it cheating? I’m giving you fifty bucks, which is a lot more than you’ll get from your other sponsors.’

‘No.’

‘One hundred dollars.’

Tiptoe would not accept the offer. He said that it was against the rules. ‘It would be lying,’ Tiptoe told her father. ‘You have to not eat for forty hours, to see what it’s like for the kids who are starving around the world.’

‘Think of the poor starving kids you could be *saving* with the money,’ her father retorted.

Tiptoe would not take the money without starving. Her father would not give him the money if he starved himself for two days. Tiptoe starved.

‘What does that prove to you, huh,’ demanded her father afterwards, ‘going around for two days starving – sucking on barley sugar and drinking water? You could have damaged your stomach!’

*

Another time, her family went to visit Tiptoe. His house was filled with family, so she and Tiptoe sequestered themselves inside his room. They closed the door to play a game of Monopoly without babies sprawling across the board. Tiptoe didn’t want them tearing up his banknotes. They had the game board unfolded and just as she was choosing whether to use the top hat or the dog token, suddenly there came a loud banging on the door.

‘Why is this door closed?’

Tiptoe gave her a baffled look. *What the hell is happening? Why is your dad yelling like that? Is the house on fire?* He opened the door and her father demanded to know what they were doing. It was obvious – the game board was on the floor, the tokens were out, and Tiptoe had a bunch of coloured banknotes in his hand.

‘Why do you feel the need to close the door?’

‘We don’t want the babies mucking up our game.’

Her father dragged her out. ‘We’re going home,’ he said, mouth set in a low grim line.

She had no idea what was going on and neither did Tiptoe. They were nine and ten. To them, the birds and the bees were creatures that flew in the

air, and the only things they had on their minds in the moment before her father burst into the room was who would get to be the banker.

He could be crazy sometimes, her father. He saw depravity in places where other people wouldn't even bother to look. His world was peopled with paedophiles and perverts. He trusted no man or boy to be alone with his daughters – not even friends or relatives. In fact, both her parents were crazy this way. They operated like a joint haywire motion detector that went off when it sensed nothing but the rain.

She came from a family where the girls weren't supposed to venture very far, and every movement they made after school was tracked through their mobile phones. Once her father had bought her brother some dumbbells, and when he saw her lifting them one evening he told her to stop it. 'Do you want muscles like Madonna?' Yes, as a matter of fact, she had wanted muscles. Funny how innocent they were trained to be, these Southeast Asian girls, the ones who were meant to be good and supposed to stay at home. Trained to be tender morsels.

*

When she was seventeen, she sometimes came to her father's workplace to photocopy or print out assignments. The photocopier was in the little office out the back. It could fit two people at the most. The new employee at her father's store came from Indonesia and he was all gangly bones, but she saw him lifting heavy boxes for customers. He wore a loose white T-shirt donated by Tiger Rice Cookers. He was probably in his late twenties. He knew how to work hard, and he did this by skin and sinew.

He smiled at her, an upturned crescent moon that took up half of his face. 'What are you doing?' he asked her in Cantonese, because his English was a collection of poorly syllabled phrases with the stresses in the wrong places. He happened to be in the back office that day, folding up cardboard boxes.

'Photocopying this for school.'

'What is it?'

He stood close to her and pressed up against her a few times, pretending he needed to pass to the other side to get to the box cutter and the space was too small. His hands also wandered up to her chest. The feeling was fast and scuttling. Like tarantulas or something.

Later, she worried a bit about this incident. But not too much. She wondered whether she should tell. It probably wasn't a big deal. More visceral things had happened to her in this small office. When she was small, she got a staple through a finger. Someone brushing up against her was not that big a deal. A cheap feel across the front of her uniform dress was not a big thing for girls who went to underage clubs and who knew their place in the world, feisty girls who would let out with a 'What the …?!' and jab their cigarette into the stranger's straying hand.

But she wasn't one of those. Once, as children, when she and her brother were watching the rows of televisions after school, there was an annoying boy who kept changing the channels. They kept changing them back. 'This isn't your store!' the kid said. As a matter of fact, it was. But they didn't say a word. They just let the boy keep changing the channels. Surrender seemed to be their default mode.

Yet her parents noticed her sitting slumped in the back of the car when they drove her to school every day, and she knew things would be awkward if she needed to use the photocopier at work again. So she mentioned it to them one evening, the incident in the little office. She was hoping that he'd get a telling off. Or she thought that her parents would tell her to go back and slap his face like she should have done the first time around.

She had no idea what was to come: how her father would lie awake tormented for a week, thinking of ways to get back at the young box-cutter. Twisting his insides over how this terrible thing could have happened. Her father finally decided that the best way to get rid of him was to catch him in the act. So she was meant to go back to the shop in her school uniform after school and try baiting for a repeat of the scenario. Meanwhile, her dad and uncle would be protectors and spies.

When she arrived at the store, she had no idea what she was supposed to do, so she stood there photocopying pages from her biology textbook like she had last time. This time if he came she was meant to yell and the parents would call the cops and they would take him away. But he was in the back, cutting up boxes. He was never a real threat, she was never a seductress. They were two awkward young people who happened to have an awkward moment. He said hello to her when he saw her, and she said hello back, and then she stood in the office and waited for something to

happen. Nothing happened. What a waste of time. She was in her final year of school.

‘What happens now?’ she asked her parents as they drove her home.

‘We just wait,’ they told her.

‘Why don’t we just forget it?’ she asked.

‘Are you kidding?’ roared Dad. ‘I can’t sleep at night.’

‘But nothing happened that was all that bad.’

‘Do you want him to do it again?’

‘No.’

‘If we don’t do something about it, he will brag about it to all the other employees.’

She didn’t think that the boy would, but she kept her mouth shut while her father rearranged his plans in his head.

Finally, it was decided. There was to be a meeting at the shop, a confrontation, and she would have to be there.

There was no getting out of it. Her parents drove her to the store that afternoon, and her mum went away to do her grocery shopping in Little Saigon market. Her father told her to go upstairs and wait. Upstairs was the warehouse where they stored their boxed domesticity – the smaller appliances such as irons and toasters, the sandwich makers and rice cookers. In one corner was the tiny lunch space, which consisted of a bench, a sink, a microwave and three stools. She waited, reading through the tabloid newspaper twice.

Then she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Her father appeared with the young man. The young man said hello to her; she nodded at him. They sat down on the remaining stools in complete silence, waiting.

For what, she wondered.

But then, more footsteps, and suddenly she realised that a few other long-term employees like Ah Ung had also been summoned. Witnesses, said her father. Witnesses to what, she wondered. They weren’t there when the awkward act happened. Perhaps they were there to hear the sheepish apology that her father was supposed to extract from the guy. Well, she thought, this was embarrassing, but it could be funny in retrospect.

Except that it wasn’t.

She thought her father had gone mad. Here he was yelling in the upstairs kitchen at this boy who packed boxes, scaring the crap out of him.

‘How dare you! How dare you! I gave you a job!’

‘Stop!’ she said. ‘Stop, Dad, don’t!’

‘This will teach you to mess with my daughter!’ His limbs were flailing, and he was getting ready to whack the young man, getting ready to kick him, but his employees held him back. She’d never seen her father so apoplectic with rage. Here was a man of about forty-five kilos, looking ready to kill another man of a similar size. The boy looked terrified.

Her father would sometimes mention his dreams in the morning at the breakfast table, just in passing, almost as if he were recounting a vivid and intriguing scene in a film he had recently watched. ‘Last night I dreamt that I was working in the fields. The children’s army were heading back, and suddenly I saw one of the Black Bandits pulling a little girl away from the group. I smashed the back of his head with the back of my axe. It was terrible.’

‘Don’t think about it anymore,’ her mother would reply.

‘How can I not?’ her father sadly answered. ‘He just wouldn’t die.’

Despite being held back, despite his employees entreating him to calm down, her father could not be contained. It was as if this madness had to run its course. ‘I have my witnesses here!’ her father yelled, ‘witnesses to see what happens when you try and fuck with my family!’

It was terrible what happened to that young man, she thought. He lost his job. No wonder the witnesses had been summoned. He’d only been there for a few weeks.

He was crying when he left.

Her father’s defence mechanism, she realised, was a piece of precision engineering, but it was also an archaic machine, one that was not well oiled, one that was no longer used for the purpose for which it had been built.

SMILE LIKE A SICKLE

FATHER—
Once he caught his kids mucking around with plastic bags. How were they to know what it was like to live your last breath inside a plastic bag, with both hands tied behind your back? That was how they killed people at the meetings. Behind the bags their eyes would blur. Some people would seal the bag to the front of their face with each inhale, like cling wrap.

His kids had no idea how easy it was to die. If you went outside and crossed the road, you could die. If you stepped outside your house, you could die. If you played with a bag or a stick, you could die. So many different ways to die.

Yet they grew up, and nothing so bad happened to them, no bones snapped, no long-term illnesses, perhaps because he took the proper preventative measures: a glass of milk every day and a boiled egg for breakfast, fizzy orange vitamins. Every evening, in turn, each of his small children would sit in his lap and they would open their mouths and he would brush their tiny white kernels with a Colgate toothbrush. Sometimes, his kids would come home from school with badge-shaped stickers declaring ‘Fluoride at Work: wait ½ hour before food or drink!’ and ‘Watch Me: My Teeth and Gums are Numb!’ on their Kmart-fleeced chests, and he would have evidence of yet another gift from the government. When they opened their mouths and he saw the metallic daubs nestled in the craters of their back teeth, it would fill him with wonder. Under the reign of the Black Bandits he hadn’t brushed his teeth for four years. They hadn’t seen soap for that long either.

When his daughters were old enough, each one of their burgeoning adult teeth was carefully shifted through an awful wire and metal contraption that cost him a fortune. Yet he still worried that the steel wire which joined their teeth together was unsafe. What if they were playing sports at school and a ball hit them in the mouth? Would their teeth be ripped out in a row, like an industrial zipper coming bloodily undone?

*

One day he couldn’t find his eldest daughter at the university. He remembered yelling at her that evening when she came home. She wasn’t picking up her mobile phone. He shouted at his daughter and saw surprise register on her face. She was trying to be reasonable. ‘But it was only six p.m. and it’s summer!’ she protested. Then she started to cry. He didn’t have the words to explain to this daughter of his why he needed to know. If you don’t know where your children are, anything could happen to them, even in daylight. The newspapers told him everything that could happen. Because if it wasn’t true, why would they report it?

Her first boyfriend, Michael, had been a tall, kind, mild-mannered ghost of a boy who wore second-hand clothes. The first time he had met Michael, he had insisted on driving him back to his college because he could not leave a clean-shaven middle-class student stranded on the platform of Footscray Station, even at eight-thirty at night.

It had been years since she had broken up with Michael and she still didn’t have a boyfriend. This sometimes worried him. His daughter had flung herself into her first relationship but she had no idea what she was doing. In fact, they’d all jumped into that relationship without any practice – his daughter, Michael, himself and his wife.

He knew they should not have interfered so much – after all, it was between his daughter and her boyfriend. So what if she made a few mistakes along the way? The Australians would say that it was all part of growing up. And of course, he would never beat her for making a mistake or disown her or do the crazy things they did back in the old country. He hoped that she would understand that she shouldn’t let men shout at her, and if they did, that she shouldn’t take it.

But he could not forget the way she had stared at him in the Retravision lunchroom when she was seventeen, when he wanted to show her what he would do to anyone who tried to mess with his own flesh and blood.

The things he’d seen.

He’d seen a smile like a curve of a sickle.

If not on this face, then on another like it.

If not in this decade, then in the ones before.

Boys were not just boys.

And the things he had heard.

The young women who learned to move as quietly as prey through the night when they were summoned, but the whole collective heard about it the next day in the fields as the Black Bandits bragged.

The things he'd known, even before Year Zero.

The poor Vietnamese girls with their messed hair and cut faces, and their families leaving Cambodia carrying all their possessions.

The things he never wanted his children to know. He loved this new society where crying came so easily, and the young people were soft and beautiful like hothouse strawberries, so easily bruised.

Yet there was his daughter that afternoon in the shop, looking at him like *he* was the monster.

THE BUS

DAUGHTER—
It was when she was sick that she first realised her father would do anything for her. She must have been about five. She woke up in the middle of the night, and he made her jam on toast. Then, when she had heavy asthma at eleven and was housebound for two weeks, he bought her ice cream, the expensive kind, with real strawberries in it. But when she was really little, about four, she had the flu and had some idea about death. She whimpered on the couch and said, ‘Dad, I don’t want to die.’

‘Be quiet and drink this Milo,’ he told her, rubbing Vicks Vaporub on her chest.

Her father, she noticed as she grew older, never used the words death or die, unlike her mum and grandmother and aunties. If they dropped something, it was ‘Si oh!’ *Go die*. If they made a mistake. If they heard some bad news, such as their child getting less than ninety per cent in an exam. But her father never uttered it.

There were some things they would never mention again, like the box-cutter boy. And other things which he didn’t mind her finding out. ‘If you want to know about the time of Pol Pot, I will introduce you to people,’ her father told her a year after the box-cutting incident, ‘and they will talk to you and tell you about their lives.’

He took her to visit his friends in suburban houses with neat front yards in Footscray and Springvale, and they would tell her tales of survival. She remembered these moments, how at some pivotal point these older folk began to speak to her as if they no longer saw her as a child but as someone who would store these stories, and who might one day convey them to their own progeny, who were too preoccupied with building houses and bringing up babies to sit still and listen.

There they both were, she and her father, sitting on a couch in a strange man’s house. The man, a friend of her father, was a furniture-maker. He had made the couch himself. She looked at him, and then looked back down at the couch. How could a man as thin as that make a thing of wood and

leather as robust as the sofa set they were all sitting on? She realised her father and she sat in the exact same way. They perched on their tailbones at the very edge of the seat, as if to sink back and get comfortable would be to indulge themselves.

Perhaps this story was not meant to begin on a bus in China at all.

Perhaps it was meant to begin on another bus, in another place, during another time.

The bus, the man said. It loaded us on, and then it took us to the top of a mountain and dumped us there. The mountain was dotted with landmines. At the top there was no food or water, so we went down and exploded and died.

But the man was sitting in front of them, telling this story, so obviously he had not died. Neither had his wife, who was serving them cups of tea. Chinese cups were very small, she realised. You could not hug them in your hands and lean back on a couch, ready for a yarn. The size of a cup was probably the measure of a society's loquaciousness. You couldn't tell a longwinded story about a visit to the supermarket while holding a Chinese cup with two fingers. Its contents were two gulps. The end. So your story needed significance, but not the kind of tall-poppy significance that would upstage your friend. One thing those who came from Cambodia were good at doing was keeping quiet, and listening. Another thing was telling a story using the most direct route, like that bus carrying those people she would never meet. Depositing them like a dumpster at the precipice of a very high tip. Who was the first at the top of the mountain to start worrying, she wondered, and the first to make their way down?

She may never know what happened, but perhaps it was time for her to take a stab in the dark.

PART III.
CAMBODIA: YEAR ZERO

SALOTH SAR

In the beginning there was a man and a bowl. A piece of cloth for a covering, perhaps orange like the sunrise, or brown like the ground. He would go from door to door, and people would give him food. No one called him a beggar, they called it giving alms.

The madman looked like a benign grandfather, as they often do. He didn't have eyes like caves or hair on his face to hide a disturbing smile. In fact, when he smiled, it seemed sincere. But it was not a smile to make new friends, it was a smile to ward them off. It was the smile of the four-faced stone Buddhas on the Angkor Wat, after a rocket had been launched at it.

The madman, whose name was Saloth Sar, had once worn an orange blanket, had once carried a bowl. For a time there he chanted and lived a life of complete dependency on the grace of others. But then he started to realise that the order he belonged to was wrong when seen from the angle of a new world. Monks floated around like orange butterflies, and butterflies were creatures that were superfluous.

The madman took his new name of war not from a virtue like courage, or even from a creature like a snake. His name came from the coldest of places – a concept, *Political Potential*, and an ideal, fraternity. Brother Number One, or Pol Pot for short, had visions for a brave new world that would grow green over the cratered old one.

A few decades ago, the French had discovered the temple in the forests, the Angkor Wat. They were astonished by such a miracle, but it had always lain there, in wait. Meanwhile the carved stone pillars had coupled with the trees so that when the archaeologists discovered the lost world, nature and man-made history seemed to be conjoined companions. But this was a benign creation, unlike the new world to come.

In Pol Pot's godless prelapsarian paradise, everything was presumed perfect about the original man, the 'Base Person'. The Base Person was as if moulded from clay, emerging from the earth on which he stood. Sometimes his skin was even the same colour. The peasant who had tilled this land for hundreds and hundreds of years with self-sufficient stoicism

had no need for glasses, false teeth, walking canes, shoes. Only jumped-up city folk needed such things because they couldn't walk barefoot on the land without their soft soles bleeding. Some of them even died from walking on the land. They called it infection, but the revolution called it weakness. All those soft, soft soles. The only thing a person in this brave new world needed was a body fit for work and a clean mind.

That was what Pol Pot, once known as Saloth Sar, expected of his people. They were to start the world anew from Year Zero. It would be as if they were to wake up every morning with the past wiped out, their minds blown up clean and taut and soaring like balloons. Those who couldn't wipe their minds hard or fast or clean enough would be popped.

THE FACTORY

At the same time, another story is lived.

Once there was a boy, Kuan. This boy knew nothing of the man who came before, and who was to come into his world and turn it inside-out. When this boy was young, he slid down banisters, wore ironed white shirts and lived in a house with a grandfather clock. His father wore a real Rolex, and they had a chauffeur to drive him to lessons. He learned to speak French and English, and played the guitar and double bass in the school band.

He was born in Cambodia and grew up in its capital city, Phnom Penh, where no building was more than four colonial storeys high. French terraces snuggled up against their modern boxy counterparts, their sulky-jawed balconies jutting out. On these balconies after work, the people of the town would stand and watch each other and the street below. The heat made people's muscles feel melty, and their hearts beat slower. Men and women merchants would sweep the front of their stores in slow motion and jam the broom in between the slots of their roller-shutters. They would wipe down the metal and then sit outside and wait to hear the sound of crickets. The evenings stretched like coloured looms across the sky.

Kuan's house was one of the French-styled ones, and served, as most buildings did, as a factory, business and private residence. The ground floor of his house-factory buzzed when the reel of the plastic-bag-making machine was switched on. The machine rolled out undulating flat white tubes, which they carried, still warm like a limp bride, to the second floor. Here were the men of the factory, before they were sent off to war, wearing white singlets like cotton facsimiles of the bags they made, operating the cutting machine.

Bags were not the only things the factory produced. In fact, the bags were secondary to his mother's first business, on the third floor of the house. This was Kuan's favourite area, the Room of Letters, where the walls were lined with hundreds of thousands of words, each made of lead. Each Chinese character would be selected and loaded onto the *cliché*, a printing plate cast

from movable type, and then passed through the printing press. ‘All the words in the world,’ his mother told him in their native Teochew Chinese dialect, and this was how he learnt to read when young, helping his mother string together sentences. How he loved modern technology.

His father did not live at home with them, because Kuan’s father had two wives. Every time his father had an argument with his mother, he would move back to his first wife’s house.

Kuan’s mother was a woman who could read a face in a matter of moments to determine whether she wanted anything to do with its owner or not. After hopping off the boat from Chaozhou in China, where she was in deep trouble for writing articles denouncing landlords who abused peasants’ rights, she had found work as a schoolteacher at the local Phnom Penh Chinese school. That was when she met Kuan’s father, a Chinese man also from Chaozhou, and decided that he was red enough for her. Unfortunately, he was already married with two daughters, but that didn’t stop them. They had each met their intellectual equal. They had to be together, but once wedded, their minds were welded like a knife with a blade on both ends. Sharp and brilliant but bloody. They argued all the time, and their arguments probably started because of Kuan’s father’s house-jumping habits. ‘Why do you have to go back there to those dull-eyed worms when I’ve given you six sons?’ his mother used to yell. She had a special way with adjectives.

His father would heave a big gasping sigh and shake a thin finger at her, about to open his mouth and expel more words, but she always beat him to it. ‘You will be the death of me, I tell you!’

‘No!’ his father yelled, ‘I am telling you, Huyen Thai, *you* will be the death of me!’ And so it went, each accusing the other of plotting their demise until they were heaving with the effort of trying to detail their own ends.

Left for stretches of time to fend for herself and her ten children, Kuan’s mother became no-nonsense. When her nephew arrived from Long Mountain raving about the printing factory at which he had worked in China, Kuan’s mother told him, ‘Let’s no longer work for other people. Let’s start our own business.’ She entered into a partnership with her nephew, whom they called Chicken Daddy. That mysterious moniker was already attached when he arrived so no one knew its origin, but it was

probably a childhood pet name bequeathed by an affectionate grandma that had stuck, so much so that Chicken Daddy's own children were known as Chicken Sister, Chicken Brother and the youngest, Egg.

Chicken Daddy provided the capital, and Kuan's mother provided her labour. In the beginning they had a single pedal-powered printing machine, and when her children slept, Kuan's mother would sit up half the night at the machine, filling orders for flyers, advertising pamphlets, letterhead stationery. She even printed invoice books and made tear-off perforated holes in the pads with the unthreaded needle of her sewing machine.

Kuan was the fifth son. His earliest memory was of his mother taking him to a Charlie Chaplin movie once, by himself, when he got perfect marks in a school test. They rode in the back of a cyclo. At the cinema, Kuan watched the tramp twist his shoelaces around a fork and pop them into his mouth. By the time Kuan reached his twenties, his brothers and older sister had married and moved out of home. Some were living in Hong Kong, others in communist China. His parents had sent their first three sons to take part in the great proletarian revolution. Only his older brother Kiv remained in the family home after marriage.

Kuan's father decided that he should have a fiancée too. They found him a nice woman who had been educated at the same high school. Sokim had liquid black eyes and the first time they met, their parents sat between them. They were so shy they could barely look at one another.

As the world changed, suddenly so did the street signs. One day, on government orders, all the Chinese lettering on the shops was painted over. No more funny foreign writing on the streets. Soon enough, the ethnic Chinese schools were closed down.

A girl named Kien, who lived a couple of blocks away from Kuan in a rented house with her parents and nine siblings, found herself tossed out of her grade two class. She spent a year roaming the streets during the day, mucking about with a group of her classmates who had also been ejected from school. Once, for fun, they let the air out of the tyres of the Mercedes-Benz cars parked in the wealthier end of the city. Then she found work in a factory, and the money she got at the end of every week ended her seemingly endless boredom.

On the day of Kuan's engagement to Sokim, all the workers in his family's plastic-bag factory heard footsteps up above and saw flashes of

red. Double-happiness signs made of cut-out paper were stuck over the front of the store, and the girls in the factory were hoping for a glimpse of the bride-to-be in the afternoon when they had their midday break. One of them, Kien, the girl who operated the bag cutter, would be his future wife, but they did not know that yet, because she was only thirteen, and life had not yet been turned inside-out.

MENU USING WARTIME RATIONS

In 1969 and 1970 Nixon and Kissinger, names which made you think of cartoon characters with sweet puckered lips, bombed a neutral land without the knowledge of their own country-folk and called it ‘Operation Breakfast’. *Breakfast* was hanging by a thin strip of meat the colour of prosciutto, a boy’s arm from a torn T-shirt sleeve, swinging like a hock of ham, well smoked. Fried eggs in the womb of a young woman, fully cooked.

But breakfast was not enough. It was as if they could not find the cheap plastic toy in the cereal packet. Their B-52s could not dislodge the Vietcong from their bases, so they decided that a full ‘Menu’ operation was in order.

Lunch: slow roasted ragged folks thin as tarantulas, seasoned with sweat and the salt of the earth.

Snack: crackling skin with beautiful blisters, Lady Fingers, already peeled.

Supper: rare, medium or well done, small ones squealing like piglets, medium-sized ones bleating like hoary goats. There were no large ones.

Dessert: sweet young girls, blouses burst open, tender as pink cupcakes. Hundreds and thousands on top.

As the Vietcong moved deeper into Cambodia, so did the bombing. It sucked the air from people’s lungs. The ground shook, disgorging the visceral fruits of the earth. Split-open brains and sweet blood leaked from lives in a cacophony of colour. When the giant insects of metal buzzed in the sky, people had to act as though they were already cadavers. They crossed their arms, hugged their shoulders and lay on the ground. They taught their children to do the same. They lay like mummies and bred a whole generation of drop-dead-at-the-drop-of-a-bomb babies.

Sixty days later, when 11,000 were dead, Nixon declared this the ‘most successful operation of the war’.

From Beijing, the father-prince of Cambodia, Sihanouk, felt the sting of what was happening to his country. ‘Brothers and sisters,’ he entreated, ‘go to the jungle and join the guerrillas.’ No wonder the guerrillas emerged

from the jungles burning with hatred for technology: the bomb, the mine, the gun, the giant prehistoric insects in the sky.

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War pumped up business for Kuan's family, which his elder brother Kiv ran. Their factory was thriving. With all the men off at the war to fight the Vietcong, they hired children, girls of twelve to fifteen. Girls had nimble fingers and seemed more docile. They were filling orders from the overseas aid agencies, who needed plastic bags for food distribution. Peasant-farmer refugees who had lost their homes were now gathering at the edges of the city, starving, selling their labour, begging.

Every day an unknown and faceless black force seemed to be creeping closer and closer to the city. They were rumoured to be a nationalistic group known as the Khmer Rouge, the guerrilla army that Sihanouk, the good Prince of the Land, had summoned to defend the country. The land was theirs, they had been tilling it for thousands of years, and they were coming to reclaim it. Dressed entirely in black, they grew like mushrooms in the darkest dampest jungles along the Cambodian border, casting their spores towards the villages, slowly spreading towards the capital.

In the evenings Kuan heard the rockets screeching. He knew the moment they were launched, because there would be a whistling sound, whooooooo, like a kettle on its final wail before the stove was turned off.

One night a house a few doors behind theirs was hit, and another time, at midday, a nearby primary school. He went to the Buddhist temple afterwards and saw dozens of dead bodies lying on the floor. 'The four adults are their teachers,' he heard someone yell out. Blood was still slithering out of some of the children. It coiled thick on the floor like a snake sunning itself jerky-dry.

YEAR ZERO: 17 APRIL 1975

Kuan and his family were in their house. Huddled on the third level, peering out behind windows heavy-lidded with material, they stayed to defend their business. No one took stock of who was inside that day. If they had, this is what they would have seen.

They would have seen a woman in her late sixties, Huyen Thai, living with her unwed 26-year-old son, Kuan, and his sister, Kieu, a couple of years younger.

They would have seen Kuan's recently married older brother Kiv, Kiv's wife, Suhong, heavily pregnant with their third child, and their two other children – a girl, Huong, and a boy, Wei. They would have seen Suhong's mother, a gentle, wistful widow in her early sixties.

They would have seen the family of Kuan's cousin Chicken Daddy, who owned half the factory. They would have seen his three teenage children – Chicken Brother, Chicken Sister and Egg. His wife, however, was not all there. She spent her days loitering around the front door of the factory, clutching a red poly-vinyl purse, which matched her painted lips, muttering about going to the market. She never went anywhere, and when she did, one of her children would have to come and guide her back.

Kien, the girl from the factory Kuan would one day marry, was already leaving Phnom Penh. Her family watched everyone else pack and dash from their houses, and so they grabbed what they could and followed the human deluge. After all, there were soldiers with guns. And their house was rented. They didn't want to be left behind.

Of course, in Kuan's family they didn't believe that the Americans were going to bomb the city. It was the curse of the educated classes, to know too much, to not get caught up in panicked rumours, but to stall in the certainty of reason. An army-general friend had reassured them a few months back: 'Don't worry. The Americans have the latest poison-gas bomb. If the Khmer Rouge gets near Phnom Penh, just one of these bombs could kill people to a radius of several kilometres.'

But they were not entirely convinced. Kiv decided that they should depart in two groups. Kuan, his sister and Chicken Daddy's three children were to leave first, and then the rest of the family would follow once they had confirmed there was imminent danger, or else they would send news that the coast was clear. A guide was arranged to take them to the airport, where they would fly to Thailand and then to France. Plane tickets were booked. Bags were packed. There was no time for weepy goodbyes: the family was methodical and matter-of-fact. Kuan's mother gave them a dozen flattened sheets of gold leaf, each no larger than a cigarette paper.

That morning they met their guide in front of a local noodle restaurant as arranged. He was a man in his mid-thirties with far-apart eyes, which, according to Kuan's mother, was always a sign of trustworthiness.

'Bad news, my friends,' the guide told them. 'I went by Pochentong airport this morning, and it is closed.'

'Closed? What's happening?' asked Kiv, but the guide had no idea.

So they returned home, agreeing to return the next day to try again. The next day was 17 April 1975. When elements – flood, fire and quake – wipe out the material things that make up your existence, there is no one to blame but nature. When people wipe out your life, that's a different matter. When the government of a country declares that it will uproot time and start from the beginning of history, you know that there is indeed fear in a handful of dust.

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In the early morning it was very quiet, until he heard gunshots. Kuan went to the third-floor balcony and looked out onto the street. That was when he first saw them: dots of black in the distance that morphed into small raggedy soldiers. People started hanging white bed sheets, white towels and white T-shirts from their shopfronts and balconies. At last the civil war was over and the encroaching Vietcong had been warded off. Hooray for these young soldiers. People came towards them, cheering and welcoming, offering smiles.

They were an army of children.

They did not smile back.

Their skin was brown. Their hair shone orange. Their eyes were oysters in two moons. They looked around, moving slowly as if lost. Some of these

boys had never been inside a city before. They breathed in and they breathed out like people who had not been taught how to walk, eat, laugh, move or breathe, but discovered it by doing it – it was the breath of small animals in the night who walked on land. Every sense woke up when they reached the city. When they looked at something, they did not roll their eyeballs, they turned their whole head and shoulders. Every stimulus could only be predatory.

Some carried their AK-47s upright, as though they were going to set off firecrackers. They were children who had never tasted candy, so they didn't realise that this was the stuff you were meant to steal from the shops. Instead they smashed things up. They were like children in a fireworks factory. Children with guns, children with bang-bang-shoot-them-dead-I-kill-you-long-time-Mister minds. Kill was a long time, dead was even longer. This was the only truth they knew. When they looked up at the sky, they did not see the fingers of God; they saw the direct cause of death of their parents.

When you didn't know anything, how did you know that it was not a new sun that crawled up over the fields every day? How did you know that the earth was not flat? The only modern marvel they had seen was the stick of a gun, the iron bird in the sky and the green disc on the ground. But what was a stick of gum? A block of paper fastened at one end? What was a globe of the world? A tennis ball? What was a cinema? A grandfather clock inside a house? Baby shoes with little squeakers inside that made squeaking sounds when a baby toddled down Monivong Boulevard. Jip jip. Jip-jip-jip. Jipjipjipjip as they ran faster, the baby's arm a weak chain linked to the vice-grip of her mother's hand.

Clearing the city was harder than they thought; it was crammed with so many people. They had never seen so many people before. People with bundles on their backs, people with their cars and buckets of water. So much stuff.

The young soldiers tested out their new sentences like walking on an element they'd never encountered before – not solid and not liquid. 'The Americans are bombing you!' How many of them had actually seen an American? No, the Americans were quiet this time, there were not many here anymore. All they had left were their bomb craters swimming with fish.

‘Leave your homes! Everybody out!’ they ordered. ‘Leave your homes! The Americans are coming! The Americans are coming to bomb the city!’ They said that they would stay inside the city to defend it, and after that everyone could return.

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Inside the factory, Wei woke up, with half his hair squashed by the night into a startling shape – it was the only part of the toddler that seemed to have an inkling that something bizarre was going on. The rest of him was the way a baby should be, and sooner or later babies cried. His pregnant mother put him in the small space left on her lap that was not taken over by the swell of the unborn child and fed him his bottle of Nestlé formula milk. She feared that he could taste the difference, but he just sucked along. She had crushed sleeping pills in there so that he would not holler and reveal their hiding place. She could feel his little heart under her hand, and she felt sick to her stomach that it might stop working. When his eyelashes closed like the filaments of tiny flowers, she held her hand under his nose for a long time, to make sure she could feel the in-out breeze.

At around midday, they saw the boys in black breaking into the shops and taking things. The pharmacy at the corner of the street was the worst hit. Its shelves were knocked over and drugs spilled from the smashed doorway into the street like a mouth regurgitating bad medicine. Some shops were locked with steel shutters. The boys in black tied one end of a chain to these shutters and the other end to a nearby car. They drove the car and the shutters fell, pulled out like a plug but in clattering metal. From the smashed cars, tyres were slashed to make Ho Chi Minh sandals.

Forget about burning books. Fridges, televisions, washing machines and other electrical appliances were swept into huge piles in the scorching heat. Telephone wires were ripped out. Some dangled from posts like post-apocalyptic maypoles. The man who was responsible for this vision had failed his electrical-engineering degree in France.

Within a few hours it had become a strange world, but it would become even more bizarre: a world in which batteries were taken out of the clocks, and the clocks were stacked and smashed. Watches were worn upside-down on the arms of those who controlled them, and those who controlled them were children. But not children as one would ordinarily know children,

nestled in their families and schools and familiar pastimes of hoops and sticks, marbles and plastic pearls. No, these children were not part of any family unit anymore – they were atomised, separated and turned into the foot soldiers of the new world, a world bent on going back to the Middle Ages, uncoiling like the cogs of a defunct timepiece, to the beginning of time. Back to Year Zero.

In the beginning of time, there would only be the earth and the sky. And then the creatures of the earth with their backs facing the sky. And the creatures with their stomachs on the ground and the creatures with their gills filled with fluid and the creatures with their feathers scraping the air. All these existed to serve the Base Man. Nowhere was a country more green, nowhere did a land offer itself up with rambutans and mangoes falling from trees to serve his simple appetites.

So when the Base Man – or the Base Boy, to be accurate – entered the city, he saw things there that he had never known existed. And because he was unaware of their existence or function, desire for them had never been cultivated in him. What was this infernal hard thing that was shaped like nothing they had ever seen before, a wheel dotted with magical symbols, a tightly curled tail connected to a heavy mallet that rested on its head, and which screeched like a bird? He raised his gun to shoot at it.

‘No, it’s harmless, it’s harmless!’ cried the owner of the house who was a woman with white stuff on her face and pointed branches erupting from her heels. ‘It’s a telephone! Have a listen.’ She yanked the mallet, placed it at her ear, paused and then held it towards him. The coiled tail stretched like that of a dead thing.

He carefully put it near his ear. Sweet Bodhisattva, it sounded like a human being – a human trapped inside the tail end of the creature. ‘Who is this? Who did this?’ the Base Boy demanded. ‘Who would do this to another person?’

This was the exact question the city people asked themselves when they entered the end of time. What to call these thieves dressed in sun-soaked black in the tropics? They were Black Bandits. Yes, that’s what they were, and that’s how they would be referred to forever afterwards by those who came out alive, those who would never see children in an innocent light again.

On the second day the Black Bandits announced that they would shoot. Evacuate, or die. At the main hospital, doctors with scalpels poised mid-operation looked up and saw boys with guns. Nurses wheeled their patients outside. Soldiers of the former government donned their uniforms one last time and walked onto the road to meet their ends.

On the third day Kuan's mother led her family outside to surrender. It was no use staying and defending when everybody else was leaving. When they reached the main street, tens of thousands of people were walking. They saw a few hospital beds on wheels, drip bottles swinging at the bedpost, pushed by people dressed in white uniforms. Their mouths were a straight line of horizon. Kuan wondered how those kind-hearted nurses and doctors could survive, taking nothing with them but their patients.

As they walked out of the city, there were still Chinese street vendors by the roadside selling sweet red-bean soup from mobile carts. If the vendors had not boiled up their beans, they could have saved them to ensure their own survival, Kuan realised later on. Still, some people bought the desserts. When they did, the vendors would rest their carts and boil up the beans for them. Still working, his people, still seeking to earn a highly inflated buck, even at this hour.

His family had only taken a small amount of rice, all their remaining gold, the keys to their house-factory and two enormous shoulder-squeezing pails of water because they did not want to die of thirst. They saw the poor dumb folk who had brought all their earthly possessions – right down to their sugar containers and their MSG jars. At first they scoffed, but as they walked on, their shoulders ached. Carrying these buckets was backbreaking. They stopped and dropped their load when they realised that of course there was water. Streams were running with a noise like a little boy peeing to spite them. Why had they thought they needed water when they were being herded into the countryside, next to rivers and streams?

Not too long after, they ran out of rice. For a tiny pinch of MSG, you could buy tinfuls of rice. But they had no MSG. They were too practical, the Chinese. City people – always thinking their book learning would win out in the end.

Yet Suhong, his sister-in-law who was a midwife, had packed scissors, cotton cloth, everything she needed to deliver her baby. She knew they weren't heading home any time soon. Some people were carrying their

belongings by hand; others had stacked their things on bikes. Some lucky ones drove in cars.

He saw the old, the frail and the sick dying on either side of the road, with their families being forced at gunpoint to move on. ‘Leave me, leave me,’ an old man cried, sitting like a crippled insect on the ground with one leg folded under him and the other one sticking out. His son tried to lift him up, but he stubbornly made himself a dead weight, as if to prove that this was what he would always and forever be. And so they left him, by the side of the road, watching the exodus.

THE CAR

They didn’t make it into Vietnam because of a car. If not for that car, perhaps they would have been spared the four years of the fields. The car wasn’t even a flash one, it was a boxy yellow thing that someone had abandoned beside the road because it had run out of fuel, so they came up with the idea of sitting Suhong in the car and pushing her along. She was so large with child that she couldn’t even see her feet to walk. All the things they held in their hands were loaded in the car, and the two children crawled in next to their mother. ‘Ready for a ride?’ Kuan asked them before he closed the door. He, his brother and Chicken Daddy walked to the boot and pushed the car along from the back. Chicken Daddy’s three teenage children trailed behind.

Soon they came to a bridge that crossed the Mekong River. The bridge was teeming with people. Some of the hundreds of Vietnamese fishing boats that had moored beneath the bridge were peddling trips to Vietnam – he later found out that Kien’s family gave away some gold and that’s how they ended up in Saigon instead of living through Year Zero.

But they could not push the car over the bridge, so they kept following the other city exiles who walked straight ahead as the soldiers directed them, prodded along like cattle by heavily armed cowherds.

While pushing the car, he couldn’t see much in front of him except hot metal and glass. It was a sad little float made of a mother and her two children and all their earthly possessions, propelled by the muscle-force of three skinny men, and they kept pushing for many days.

When night fell, they would stop walking and find a place to sleep. When it grew dark, little Wei would cry about going home. *When are we going to go home? Why don’t we go home? I want to go home* and all possible variations on that dirge, even after he didn’t have to walk anymore and could just sit in the car. In the end, the wailing became comforting. It was as if the boy was venting all of their anger through a very thin reed. It allowed them to feel a little sorry for themselves.

Sometimes Kuan slept on the roof of the car after the metal had cooled down, because the heat of the days seeped into the skin and swelled inside his skull; and on the roof he could see the stars, which seemed to take him outside his head.

One day a Khmer Rouge truck was driving slowly alongside them. His sister-in-law stuck her head out of the window: ‘Ay, why don’t we ask the soldiers if they can pull us along?’ She hobbled to the side of the soldier’s vehicle and waved her arms. Because she was a woman with a sweet voice and a distended belly, the soldiers stopped for her. They tied the car to their truck and dragged them along for the rest of the journey. People weren’t monsters or gods. People were just people, he thought.

He, Kiv and Chicken Daddy had their hands free now. As they walked, they pushed their shoulders up to their ears and swung their arms to loosen those muscles that had been set stiff by pushing the car; it was a strange form of walking Tai Chi.

When they arrived at their destination village, the Khmer Rouge cadres got out of their armoured vehicle and helped them unhook the car. The soldiers wore rubber shoes made from car tyres.

‘This is where you’ll settle,’ they were told.

ANGKAR

This was the beginning of Year Zero. They were standing in line waiting to be sorted, and a Black Bandit shouted at his brother, ‘Take your glasses off, you capitalist!’ Pol Pot’s solution to the problem of teaching illiterate boys to identify counter-revolutionaries was simple: anyone wearing glasses was an intellectual, the sort of person who could sit for hours on end on their rear-end with a square block on their laps, just looking at it. So blocked by books that they could barely see the world and required others to handle its sharp edges for them, believing their blood to be more precious, their children more precocious. Let the others bleed, seemed to be their message. We have the brains. You never saw any Base Person with glasses. If they developed cataracts or went blind from illness, accident or eating the wrong thing, then that was their fate. A pair of glasses was two reflective discs with which to start a fire by using the sun.

Kiv removed his glasses and handed them over.

‘Give your watch to Angkar!’ A Black Bandit pointed to Chicken Daddy’s wrist. Chicken Daddy had no idea who Angkar was, but the watch came off.

The Black Bandit snatched it and put it on his own wrist. Kuan had seen people hand over their passports and birth certificates to the Black Bandits, who would study the documents in their hands upside-down, their brows furrowed with that distinctive fake-intensity of illiterates.

This first collective was called Preytawa, and the first inkling they had of their higher purpose was when they discovered that they would be divided into two distinct groups: the New People and the Base People. The Base People were those who lived in the collective before the city folk arrived. The New People were the city folk, and they were to live with the Base People and learn their ways.

The village consisted of dozens of thatched huts on stilts. No running water, unless you counted the river, and no electricity, unless you counted the occasional thunderstorm, when lightning would slash the sky, the dark wink of the celestial father’s nemesis.

Cows and chickens and ducks lived beneath the huts, and the humans slept up top, so there was always the smell of warm fur and damp feather. Yet there weren't enough huts for the new arrivals, so some of them had to go into the jungle with their sickles and slash away to build their homes. When they'd finished, they'd collapse in a heap, and some of their homes would collapse with them. They needed practice, these New People from the city.

At first, the New People saw the Base People as placid folk who seemed not to put up much of a fuss about sharing their land or farming skills. The city people were divided into work units – groups of men, women and children sent out to build dams, grow rice, make fertiliser. City women who had never lifted anything heavier than a child would collapse under the weight of bucket-loads of water, their bare feet bloating with blisters. The New People realised what hard work this all was, and developed a respect for the Base People, many of whom were equally baffled by the regime imposed on them by the Black Bandits. But at least the Base People were used to this type of work.

At the end of each toiling day, the people from the city would discover, through cramps and throbs and aches, muscles they had never known they had. The next day they would have to wake up and repeat the motions of digging a ditch or shovelling dirt to build a dam. Kuan was forced to dig a ditch each day that was ten metres wide and one metre deep. Each person – man, woman and child – had the same task, the same measurements. Then they had to carry the soil from the hollow of the ditch and dump it in the river to build the dam. It was an impossible task to do all in one day.

His first team leader had been one of the old villagers. This Base Leader knew that they could not finish, and when the sun set, he let them stop work to rest for the night, while the other collectives worked on. Kuan stood for a while and watched the old people and small children digging away deep into the hollows of the night.

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A month after their arrival, Suhong went into labour.

'My equipment!' she gasped. 'My equipment is in my hut.'

Did she really want to draw attention to the fact that she had modern medical equipment stashed away somewhere, her former city neighbours

wondered.

Two Base midwives heated up some charcoal under a raised rattan bed, where she delivered her third child, baby Hue. ‘A baby in the collective!’ the Base People cooed, as the proud but exhausted mother half-sat up, holding her new arrival.

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One day Kuan was working in the fields when a truck drove past. It was a Pepsi-Cola truck, with some Black Bandits standing on the back swinging their Kalashnikovs.

The man next to him stood watching the truck with his hoe in his hand and a look of absolute wonder on his face.

This must be a real peasant from the remote countryside, Kuan thought, never to have seen a Pepsi truck before. Yet it was absurd, and almost impossible, that in this medieval hamlet a Pepsi truck should exist, should whiz past them like a blast from the past, or a long-ago future.

Then his field companion whispered, ‘Kuan, that’s one of my trucks! That’s one of my trucks!’

Kuan looked at him. ‘So, you were a truck driver back in your past life, brother?’

‘No, not exactly.’

‘Then what did you do?’

‘You’ll never guess.’

‘You sold Pepsi?’

The man was silent for a while.

Kuan continued to loosen the soil with his own hoe, wondering what the silence could mean.

‘I was the boss of Pepsi-Cola in Cambodia.’

Kuan stared at the man next to him. ‘What?’

‘That’s right, my friend. The chief importer and supplier. That was my entire operation. And those are all my trucks. Just remember, every time you see one of those whirr past!’

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Another few months into their new lives and an old man died. There was a funeral and a proper burial for him. Everyone stood around as someone’s

grandfather, father and brother returned to the ground; a man they barely knew. Shortly after their arrival the city people had all been made to dye their clothes black, in big urns, so they were already dressed for the occasion.

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One night, almost a year later, the New People were crammed into military trucks and driven away like cattle to their next destination, hundreds of kilometres away, on the other side of Phnom Penh. Perhaps the leaders felt that they had not been sufficiently hardened up. Their soles were still too soft, and they were too friendly with the Base People. A revolution was not a tea party, to borrow the slogan from their red counterparts in China, the same people who had sent them their military trucks.

This was when Chicken Brother lost his wife. She was not there when they were rounding up people for the trip. She'd probably gone on one of her befuddled wanderings again. He and his children stood on the back of the truck, calling out to her, but it was no use. The trucks were about to depart and they were not waiting for stragglers.

As daylight broke and the trucks drove through their former city, the New People stared and stared, eyes raked with wonder. Cities made the stars and moon irrelevant. Who needed to look up at the firmament when a few metres above the ground there was light of such varied colours? You could be insulated from the elements. You never even had to think about where your food came from – the earth and its animals were other people's affairs.

When the truck drove through the periphery of Phnom Penh, a ghost town, all abandoned, suddenly they were looking at things that were too tender, that hurt too much. The outside of buildings could bring a stab to a man's heart. The empty streets brought about howling sadnesses. People clutched at their heads and at their sides and at their groins. This had been their city, and they knew her face before it was pockmarked. Even with the pockmarks and craters, they still adored her.

Their next village was called Phung Thmei, literally New Village. What was left of their possessions was confiscated. And their children were called, cleft into a separate children's army and sent out to work wherever this team of worker ants was directed: to build a dam or clear a forest miles away, or even to an entirely different part of the country.

The mothers and fathers watched with tears gelling in their eyes. Where before there would have been inconsolable wailing to let the little ones know you would pine for them and do all you could to reclaim them, this time the parents weren't allowed to cry.

All of Chicken Daddy's children were sent – the two boys, Chicken Brother and Egg, fourteen and twelve, and fifteen-year-old Chicken Sister. Kiv's children were too young and they were spared until the second year, when Huong was sent away too.

The city people were pushed further and further into the remote countryside, to do the hard work. They moved through the jungles as if expecting to see orang-utans with fangs and winged spiders. They were right to be afraid, but at that time they did not understand that nature only became wicked when it was wielded by people. Palm leaves were used to saw women's throats. Trees were for knocking the brains out of babies. Imagine that. A part of nature you saw every day was going to be used to kill you.

Meetings were held in an open field, at night, after their work. The Black Bandits told them that they were viruses, living corrupted in the city while the guerrillas had fought the long war against the Americans in the jungle.

'We don't care about killing all of you!' they shouted. 'Even if there is only one man left, we could still bring about a revolution.'

Their sentences didn't even make sense. If there was only one man left, there wouldn't be a 'we', Kuan thought. The meetings consisted of crazy men and boys at the front, yelling and waving their arms about.

The key subject of every meeting was Angkar, which simply meant 'Organisation' in Khmer. 'Angkar has as many eyes as a pineapple and can see everything,' they were told, yet they had no idea what kind of face Angkar had.

One day a meeting was called and every man was asked to write down his curriculum vitae. They were told that Angkar needed people with skills and knowledge to build the country. 'Even if you are former government officials or army members, Angkar still needs you. You have a valued place in this new society.'

He did not fall for that. Neither did Kiv or Chicken Daddy. This was not a skills audit. They wrote that they were factory workers because of what

had happened in China. They knew that being a worker was the safest thing to be in a communist country.

Not long after, they started to notice people going missing at night – the people who had written down that they were doctors, engineers, members of the former army, teachers, even students. Anyone who had brains to pop.

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Kuan could not understand it. There were about five or six Black Bandit leaders to each collective of a few thousand people. The leaders were easily identifiable because they were the fattest ones in the village. Six leaders to a few thousand people, and yet no one dared to revolt. Perhaps they were all thinking about Angkar's pineapple eyes, and believed that even if they did start an uprising, the leaders of the neighbouring villages would come over and crush it straight away.

The Base Person, of course, was the ideal man, and all other permutations were wrong if they could not make themselves fit the mould. This meant that Cham Muslims, Chinese and Vietnamese had to hide their backgrounds. To be sure of hitting the target, the philosophy of the Black Bandits was to fire first and call whatever they hit the target. But the boys did not like to waste their bullets. So they used other methods.

There was a woman who spoke Khmer with a slight Vietnamese accent. The Black Bandits picked up on it soon enough, and one night they picked her up as well and took her away with her three-year-old boy. The boy was beautiful in that lush, warm-blooded way of Southeast Asians, with black planet eyes. Everyone in the collective knew him well, not only because of his rare beauty but also his need to laugh, as irrepressible as the need to pee. When a water buffalo was getting washed, he chortled. When a cricket crawled on the ground and his mother grabbed it with the pincers of her fingers, he laughed. When he ran naked around and around the base of the stilted hut and one of his feet landed in a pile of chicken shit, he let loose with ineffable squeals of glee. Life could be no other way for this boy, because he knew no other life. Looking at that child against the backdrop of poultry and placid cows, and blocking off all other senses but the eyes and the ears, a person could even begin to believe that the world was still infinite. When they were both dragged away, his mother shielded him from the rain.

The next morning, the Black Bandits were leaning against the krasang trees, boasting loudly to each other.

‘Women are easy to kill,’ one Black Bandit said. ‘One knock and they fall still.’

They had made her dig. She was not scooping out her final resting place, but her final falling place.

‘You should have heard the way she was crying and carrying on!’

They had smashed her across the back of the head with the blunt end of an axe.

Once she was in, it was time to deal with her son.

‘I smashed the boy’s skull, but he wasn’t dead yet. His jaw dropped open and he made so much noise! Those little bastards always take longer to finish off. In the end I had to take him by the ankles and swing him round like this.’

The Black Bandit held his arms straight out in front of him, his two fists close together, holding an imaginary object that seemed as light as the weight of two cicada skins. He then spun his body around and around and around, and each time he came to the tree he was leaning on before, he whacked the imaginary object against its trunk. The labourers had now all stopped to watch, and this time they were not punished for their stop-work. The Bandits liked having an audience.

‘It took five, six times before I finished him off!’

He put his hands by his sides, unfurled his fists.

‘I was so dizzy afterwards.’

When Kuan walked back towards his hut that evening, as he approached the krasang tree he noticed that the thorns held strands of fine hair, like finger-combs.

*

Other collectives invented different torments, the stories of which survivors would later trade like salt.

Once, an old man was called to the front and his arms were tied up behind his back. His son was ordered to beat him with a bamboo stick. Because the son did not beat his father fiercely enough, he was accused of being an accomplice. They tied the son up too, and with a knife they slit open the father’s chest. The father was screaming. A hand went in there,

rummaging through the organs as if searching for stray cigarettes in a drawer. But it knew what it was looking for – out came the gall bladder with a yank. The organ was dumped into a jar of rice wine.

The Black Bandits announced to the people at the meeting, ‘Drinking gall-bladder juice makes people brave!’

Men and women were sitting in the open field, stunned sick. They weren’t allowed to look away. The ground was hot.

Then it was the boy’s turn.

Sometimes, the eyes can see too much.

BURIAL

During the wet season, when the floods came, they washed away the sweet-potato leaves, the wild weeds and grasses that people had come to depend upon for food. So many died that the corpses piled up. In the village next to his, a collective of over three thousand people perished, except for their four Black Bandit leaders. People were dropping like flies beneath the scoffing sun.

Suhong's mother had passed on during the last bad bout of starvation, and Suhong was pallid with grief. Kieu had been sent away with the adult working army, while his mother was left behind in the village to look after the village chairman's children.

There was an orange tree growing near the back of his hut. His fingers itched to pick the fruit, and one day he and another man scratched that itch. They were caught by a Black Bandit. Their oranges were confiscated. Their punishment was to bury the dead. 'One has just died,' the Black Bandit told them, 'in the hut down south.' They were led to that hut, their feet squelching through the floodwaters.

It was a young man. He lay on the floor of the hut with his eyes closed and his palms towards the ground. All his ribs were countable. His wife was softly weeping. All her ribs would have been countable too, but for her black shirt.

Kuan and his orange-thieving companion rolled the cadaver in a grass mat and carried him down the ladder of the hut. Tying the rattan mat at both ends with string, they stuck a bamboo stick through the loops. They each took an end of the stick and heaved it onto their shoulders. They were a living, walking hammock. One last free ride for the dead. Except that it wasn't a very stable ride: between the two of them they probably did not weigh seventy kilos, and they were so malnourished and weak they kept slipping and falling into the water. Each time they fell, the blanket would become more waterlogged and heavy. They had hardly any energy, but sometimes they would talk.

‘Sweet Bodhisattva, Kuan,’ his friend would turn to him and say, ‘I hope you’re not going to be this heavy when it is my turn to heave you out of the floodwaters!’

‘What do you mean?’ he would retort. ‘I am going to be the one dragging you out, and don’t worry – I will make sure you get a decent burial. Just don’t die with your mouth open.’

The years dragged, like the leaden legs of the bodies they buried that were too heavy to lift the hungrier they became; but each time he was assigned to another burial with a new man, they would repeat the same joke.

*

The children’s army was starving too. From sunrise to sunset they were forced to work. Chicken Daddy’s boys, Chicken Brother and Egg, had dug up some sweet potatoes they found in the ground. Vegetables the size of little tumours, which they hid in their clothes. If you scooped up a handful of dirt and someone saw you, you would be accused of stealing from the revolution.

Somebody had seen these boys. Somebody had turned them in. They were dragged away by two Black Bandits, deep into the jungle.

‘Dig,’ the soldiers said, handing out hoes.

The boys started to dig.

‘Chicken Sister, Chicken Sister, your brothers have been dragged away to be smashed!’ A young boy ran to tell their sister, who was digging in the field. She dropped the hoe.

‘Where?’ she cried. ‘Where have they taken my brothers?’

The young boy pointed towards the jungle.

She ran through the thick tangle of vines, hoping she would not be too late.

She found her brothers stooped over, digging the holes where their bodies would be buried.

She pleaded for their lives. ‘Please don’t kill my brothers please don’t kill them!’

She folded at the knees, knocked her forehead against the ground again and again, banging out her mantra. Please don’t kill my brothers, please

don’t kill my brothers, please don’t kill them! Praying harder to these boys in black than she had to any deity.

She even yelled out the obvious: They were hungry!

The Black Bandit stared at her. *Everyone is hungry*.

The Black Bandit then took the hoe from the younger brother’s hand. She looked up to see her brother wipe his forehead with his hand. A pardon!

But then the soldier handed her the hoe.

She took it, thinking it was meant for her.

You! the soldier commanded.

Yes, she whispered.

You dig their graves for them.

‘Sister,’ her younger brother whispered. ‘Don’t dig it too deep.’ Such conviction in his voice. ‘Sister, don’t dig too …’

He was shouted quiet.

His sister dug.

‘Do it properly!’

She dug some more.

‘Lie down, both of you,’ the boys were told. The boys folded themselves into the holes. Each brother lay flat on his back, looking up at his sister.

Don’t dig too deep, she was told, and she remembered, but she still had to bury them alive. Throw dirt over their breathing faces.

It was like killing one bird with two stones, three times.

REVOLUTIONARY MEDICINE

The commune hospital for the proletariat was death row for the defunct worker. The building was a hut, the doctors were teenage girls, and the medicine was a red liquid in a Pepsi-Cola bottle. These ‘doctors’ visited every patient and demanded, ‘What’s wrong with you?’

‘I have a fever,’ a boy with the flu would croak.

‘I have diarrhoea,’ a man with dysentery would moan.

‘I have stomach pains,’ cried a girl who had accidentally swallowed the poison of a cane toad.

‘He feels the chills,’ a deathbed parent would wail next to their death-rattling child.

To be at the hospital meant that your rice rations would be reduced. Your body was only a machine that was keeping you alive, and so long as that machine was in working order for the revolution, it had some value. After it was broken, you were just spare parts, the sum of which did not make a whole. The only thing of value would be the buttons on your clothes.

Red and black – when those two colours were one beside the other, he would always associate them with death. The black-clad girls would poke their syringes into the bottles and extract the red fluid, the ‘revolutionary medicine’, and then inject it into each person using the same needle. It was a one-size-fits-all forced euthanasia, because with or without this medicine, the patients died.

Most of the sorry lot in this sanatorium were teenagers or young children. The Black Bandits waited like hyenas at the work units to carry them away. ‘Hmm, they are too sick to work, they have to go to the hospital,’ they would say. By the time they carried you to hospital, you were a cadaver with working lungs and a beating heart.

There were two types of patients – those who were already past the point of no return but whose organs had not yet shut down, and those who were on the brink but not quite over the edge. They still felt hunger pangs.

The hospital gave out watery rice porridge. There was a bowl of the stuff next to a woman who was like a corpse with a chest that rose and fell. That

was the only sign of life left. She would be dead in a few hours. A young man with an impossibly yellow sick glow leaned over from the rattan mat next to hers to take the bowl from the dying patient. Just to move his few remaining muscles took so much effort that watching him was like watching a slow-motion wind-up skeleton.

The Black Bandit doctor saw this and walked over. Instead of giving the grasping man the porridge, she kicked him. The doctor kicked him to the ground, while his fingers still gripped the rim of the bowl. Even as he fell and the bowl tipped over, the man was still grabbing at the spilled grains and shovelling them into his mouth.

This was what palliative care looked like when Kuan first visited the hospital. He was at the hospital with Chicken Daddy, whose daughter was dying.

In her old life, her brothers had called her DeeDoo, which meant Spider, because they said she was black with angular arms and gangly legs. True, but this was only because she played in the sun so much when she was very young and had a sticking-out stomach. Then at thirteen, because she spent so much time indoors, her tan faded. Her hair was ink-black. She became lovely. All the adults reverted to calling her Chicken Sister, daughter of Chicken Daddy.

She'd grown up in the factory. For a time it had produced felt-tipped markers and pencils. Her great-aunt had given her packets of these, but taken out the black and white ones: the bad colours, her great-aunt told her, because they were the colours of death and funerals. Hers had once been a world filled with likes and dislikes. These preferences outlined who she was at ten, at twelve. She liked the colour orange, she didn't like green. She liked the smell of nail polish, she didn't like prahok. She liked her uncles but didn't think much of her aunties. Every day they told her a million things she could not do and should not do. Her brothers would also never shut up. When told off, Egg, the youngest, would thrust his chin out and up. Roll his eyes and stare you down. It was comic, the way he did it. 'Look at that little face!' It was because he was so skinny with such large eyes that you wanted to love him. Same with her – her very thinness and hunched concentration over coloured pencils made adults want to keep her away from sharp objects. Chicken Sister had grown up in the capital with nannies and minders and chauffeurs. She had spent her days studying and playing.

Now she was in a world where none of these things existed.

Still, she tried very hard.

She wasn't too tired, she had said in the fields. She could still keep working.

Keep working, then, they told her.

She vomited one day. Still not sick, she insisted.

She could still keep working.

But after her brothers were gone, she decided she'd never dig another hole in the ground, not even a thumb-sized hollow for little rice shoots to sprout.

*

Chicken Daddy was stroking the face of his daughter.

'Ba is here, Ba is here,' Chicken Daddy kept saying. But Ba wasn't there to stop them taking her away to the collective with the other children. Ba did not see when she fell sick. Ba did not see how they hauled her to hospital by her arms, with her legs dangling down and dragging on the ground, or how long she had been there. How hard she had tried.

'She was still able to speak a little when they first brought her in a few days ago,' the patient in the next bed said. 'She kept whispering, "Went back to find the place."'

'What place?' her father asked.

'How am I supposed to know? Perhaps she buried some food somewhere. "Went back at night," she kept breathing so quietly, "but couldn't find the place. It was so dark."'

At the end of the day, when these little revolutionary scouts had their survival skills tested, they were entirely alone. When the last breath slid out of her, she did not even open her eyes.

The patient leaned over and told them, 'You are lucky she still has all her buttons. Yesterday, the doctor wanted to take the buttons off the clothes of the lady opposite. We told her, "She is still alive!"'

These were the only words of consolation, from a dying patient in the next bed who used all his strength to utter them.

Chicken Daddy wanted to fold up his daughter in his arms and take her home to bury her at the back of his hut. But the Black Bandits would not allow him to do that. She was buried in the field at the back of the hospital.

FERTILISER TEAM

He had been a sort of doctor once. It mattered to Kuan that useless limbs should be restored, that the machinery of the body be made to work again.

His training had started when he was a teenager, when his parents took him on his first trip to China. He'd grown up reciting the poems of Chairman Mao, but on the day of his arrival in the Middle Kingdom his luggage was taken out of his hands by an old woman stooped over at a ninety-degree angle. He had read about young people helping the elderly in the agrarian paradise, but nowhere had he read about healthy young men's bags being carried by bent old people hoping to be tossed a few coins. Nowhere had he read about children so hungry that when he and his mother unloaded a few tins of cooking oil and set them on the ground, the oil leaked onto the dirt and the children lapped up the leaks like pups.

He saw tens of people rolling a round rock to flatten the road. This land was all dirt and ditches, not the beauty of *The Butterfly Lovers* and the *Yellow River*. When he was in the school band, the conductor was a die-hard communist sympathiser who told them that their thoughts of Mao Zedong had to be good and pure, otherwise they would not be able to convey the sentiment of the song. The conductor told them that they had to have *Lao Dong Ren Min*: the melody of the peasants, the harmony of the proletariat.

For the first time he heard what the harmony of the proletariat sounded like, right there in front of him, a collective mass of thin muscle heaving a massive rock to flatten a road. When they were pushing it, he heard them mutter *ooohh whooo ahhhhhh*. So that was the song of the working class. Even in Cambodia, they had vehicles to grade roads.

His parents knew a doctor in China who worked at the hospital, so they gave Kuan a blanket and a box of 555 cigarettes to take with him as gifts. 'Cigarettes and one measly blanket for medical training?' he had thought. But that was before he had seen the children lapping oil from the ground. Dr Tian was very happy about the gifts and let him come over to his house

in the evenings. There, he would teach the basics of acupuncture – where to stick the needles and what they would do to each nerve.

The doctor would also tell stories. He did this while sucking on a cigarette like it was a tube of oxygen.

'Once I cured a communist officer who came to me with impotence. All it took was a couple of needles, and a couple of weeks. This officer was so ecstatic that he invited me to a meeting held by the Party to celebrate his newfound virility. It was a big affair, with all the important hotshots there. The officer stood up, bursting with gratitude, and made a speech about what a great man I was. I swear this man had no shame about his flaccid past, because he then turned to me and asked me in front of everyone how I did it. What special skills did I possess that the other doctors did not? So I said the first thing that came to mind. I told them that I read Mao Zedong books and the potent writings of the Chairman inspired me to achieve extraordinary things.'

The doctor winked at him. 'But of course it was all bullshit, you know.'

On the third day Dr Tian took him to hospital. Kuan was sixteen and he stood around watching as the doctor asked a patient what was wrong. Dr Tian nodded and wrote a few things down. He then told the patient to go to the consultation table and lie down while he discussed some things with his intern. When the patient was out of earshot, he handed the paper to Kuan. A prescription. Then he passed Kuan the needles.

'But I've never done this before!' Kuan blurted out.

'Don't worry, he's a peasant,' explained the doctor. 'They don't feel as much pain as ordinary people.'

So the sixteen-year-old boy stuck the needle in the man's arm, but he couldn't find the right place. He took it back out and re-jabbed it. The patient didn't flinch or shudder.

See, I told you, the doctor's wink signalled. *These peasants are tough. They don't feel pain as much.*

*

'Brother Kuan! Brother Kuan, please please help. Please get out your needles!' Back to the world of Year Zero. He had found some wires on the ground in the first village: thick copper things covered in red and black plastic. He peeled off the plastic and sharpened their ends to a point. They

became his acupuncture needles. Soon enough, people in the collective knew all about them. They knew that if they had an ailment, they could go to him and he'd prod and poke them in the right places and bring limbs back to life. But he could not fix the ones who had eaten entire cane toads. Sight he could not restore, or limbs gone rotten from gangrene, or hunger. You couldn't make someone not hungry with a few insertions of the needle.

Some nights Kuan would sleep in a hut crammed with men exhausted from the field work and from sickness. He would be talking to them before bed, and they would trail off mid-sentence because he thought they were dead tired, but the next morning he would realise that they were cold-stiff dead right beside him. Sometimes their faces were still turned towards him, eyes slightly opened.

One evening, one of the Black Bandits bellowed from beneath his hut for Kuan to come out. He got up, stumbling over branches of limbs. It was a sticky human forest down there, exhausted and grunting.

'Come with me,' the soldier ordered, and led him on a long walk into the night. They arrived at the largest hut in the collective, that of the Black Bandit chairman. When he entered, he saw that the chairman was writhing about on his bed, as if someone had sewn live puppies inside his stomach.

'We heard that you can do acupuncture,' said the Black Bandit who had led him in.

He nodded. No use denying it now.

'Then get your needles out.'

He was sent back to retrieve his copper wires. If he did not fix this chairman's stomach pains, he would be done for. The man's belly was bloated not from starvation but by a layer of fat. Like a jellyfish wrapped around his midriff beneath the skin. Kuan stuck the first needle into his leg, and it was like treating the Chinese peasant when he was sixteen: the chairman did not make a noise.

The next morning, the chairman was sitting up and gulping down a bowl of rice porridge. The wires had worked.

'I would never go to the Khmer Rouge cadre hospital,' he told Kuan. 'The only time I went, they gave me a syringe of some shit or other. It caused my ulcer to swell and gave me fever. I almost died from that medical treatment, I tell you.'

When Kuan returned to the collective triumphant and smiling, people gathered around, mouths agape. ‘We thought you were dead!’ they told him.

For saving his life, the chairman transferred Kuan to the best job on the collective. He was sent to work in the fertiliser team. It was infinitely easier than working in the fields, and it was just him and another man and five single women. The women were hand-picked too, but where he had had to earn his job, they were city women hand-picked in the way a person would pluck the best flowers from a field to keep briefly in a jar of water until they wilted.

In the collective, there were two ways people could shit. They could do their business standing on two planks above a square hole in the ground as large and as deep as a bedroom, teeming from edge to edge with brown-yellow-green matter and squirming white maggots. Or they could crap in buckets in their huts.

Each morning, he would visit every waste hole in the village. He had a diesel-fuel barrel, cut in half, which he used to collect the contents. He had even fashioned a ladle from a tin container with a wooden handle attached, which he used to scoop out the shit. He felt great relief when he saw a full toilet: it meant he did not have to go to many more to fill up his barrel. Their fertiliser truck was a wagon pulled by two cows, which was also used to carry dead bodies, one on top of the other, with legs and arms swinging out through the wooden grates.

His team would collect the shit and mix it with water to make wet fertiliser for the vegetables. You had to keep the wet shit covered for ten days or so. There was a marked increase in the size of plants that had been treated with this human waste water. He marvelled that a dying cluster of people could still create life from their bodies, could make things grow even though they were being eaten away by hunger.

They also made dry fertiliser by mixing the shit with rice husks, ashes and ground-up termite nests. The mix would be baked flat on the ground by the sun and then stored in a hut.

He and his team eventually became experts in excrement. ‘Look at this green watery stuff. How long can that poor guy live?’ they asked each other. He could tell when a person had to scavenge for wild leaves and shrivelled plants. ‘Look at that beautiful thick yellow one; they must come from a well-off family.’ Being well off under Angkar meant having enough

rice to make your shit golden yellow. A man's contentment was measured by the sunshine coming from his bowels.

All the women on the team were unattached because the Black Bandits had severed their attachments at the roots. They had dragged Champey's husband away one night because he had worked for the former army, and she never saw him again. Champey had been a teacher. She could sing all sorts of songs, even English and French ones. She would sing a song by the Carpenters, with all the *sha la la la*s. The fertiliser team worked outside the village, in the open space. So they used to work and she used to sing, and when there was enough food, sometimes Kuan could forget where he was for a heartbeat. These women, they suspended him in weightless grace for a moment, in a certain unbearable lightness of floating even knowing the fall to come.

Champey had three living sacks of skin and bone she called her children, who were cast away from her during the day to work in the children's collective. Champey said that she could just bear it that her kids were thin, but she couldn't die herself – because if she died, all her children would be dead too. Her priority was to keep herself alive, and she made no apology for it.

When they were taken from the city and all the artifice was wiped away, women, he found, were much like men. Most of them worked in the fields just as hard. Eventually malnutrition worked its wonders until both genders started to merge into one type of body, one which seemed designed solely to show off the mechanical marvels of the human skeleton. Their kneecaps became wider than their thighs. Most of the men lost their sex drive, the women stopped getting their periods.

What made a woman a woman? What had made men want to continue the species before the invention of lipstick? Their snug eggshell curves, and the way they could dedicate their bodies to elegant movement even at the worst of times. When he stirred a pot of soup, it was just dumb sinew and muscle making motion. When a young woman stirred a pot of soup, it was a regal arch of the neck, a Khmer royal ballet with the wrists. These women in the fertiliser team were still women.

He knew that the Black Bandits trusted him to be a decent man. He knew that they would not have sent just any young man out to work alongside such gems. For this he felt proud: as if, although starved and a slave, people

still knew he was the type of man whose eyes would never stare, whose hands would never stray.

‘Do you know this one? This one we used to sing at school,’ Champey would ask, and begin the first lines of *Sur la Mer*. The leader of the fertiliser team would try covertly to give her fish that he had caught, but everyone knew what he was doing. Champey wasn’t particularly attracted to yellow-eyed, thick-fingered country men, but she had kids and if his love was getting them fish, who was she to turn him away? Yet the fertiliser team leader was also very proper with Champey. He knew that the penalty for love was death, and he already had a wife.

It was like that ridiculous Zen story of the man suspended on a cliff, hanging on to a tiny branch with a gaping-jawed tiger beneath, finding a strawberry and savouring its syrup. That was what lust was like in the camp. The Base Men kept falling in love with the girls from the city. There was a Base Man who had a massive stomach. People quietly joked that he was pregnant with a demon. The city girl he fell in love with was all by herself, twenty-five and without a family. He kept helping her and giving her things. Carrying her buckets of water when they threatened to spill. In the end, he told the authorities they wanted to get married, and when the authorities allowed it, it was just as simple as saying that they were married. Afterwards, the older women asked her, ‘How do you have sex with that guy? His stomach is so big it’s like he’s seven months into *your* pregnancy.’

But Kuan had also heard about the young Khmer Rouge Base Girl who had fallen in love with a city man. Forgetting that Angkar had as many eyes as a pineapple and could see everything, they had consummated their relationship. One night they were both taken away and smashed.

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The loveliest woman in the collective, Maly, worked on the fertiliser team with him. She had dimples and eyelashes like fans. Each hut on the collective housed four or five families, but her hut was reserved for her and her four-year-old daughter. In front of it was the village chairman’s hut. Her daughter was treated like the child of royalty. Her husband had worked for the former government, so one day he was called away and never returned.

Maly swapped gold with the Black Bandit hotshots. She would collect gold from the city people and help them trade it for rice and other food. In

return for her bartering services, they gave her a small share. The Black Bandits, too, gave her rice and sugar on the sly. She knew that her looks were also a form of currency. Maly was well connected. She knew a bigger hotshot Black Bandit in another village. She visited him a couple of times, and a couple of times Kuan went with her.

'Our family used to own a factory,' Kuan told her one day as they were both working. He wanted her to find him remarkable. He watched this woman pouring a bucket of shit into a hole to make the wet fertiliser, and she reminded him of a lotus with its roots all clogged with mud, but its head lushly clean.

Once she asked him to come to her hut during a break. She wanted him to blow a bamboo reed and make music for her. Another time when he came over, she wore a shirt with yellow flowers all over it that was almost see-through. Where on earth she had managed to get a piece of clothing that was not black was beyond him. This woman was searching for calamity. He had to be careful and leave immediately, or who knew what could happen?

The Economic Distributor was in love with Maly too. Everyone was. The Economic Distributor was the primitive equivalent of a middle manager, responsible for doling out the produce of their commune. He liked music, particularly that of the yangquing, which looked like a harp laid flat and was tapped with wooden mallets. One evening the village chairman asked Kuan to come to his hut and the three of them made music – the Economic Distributor, the chairman and he. They gave a concert for Maly and her little girl.

There was a bowl in the middle of the hut filled with pieces of sugar-palm rock, which Kuan kept looking at. At that time, at that moment, he coveted the sugar-palm rock more than he desired any woman in the world, but he was too embarrassed to ask for a few pieces. Because his family did not go begging for food, the Black Bandits treated them with a little more respect.

One day, Maly kept muttering that if anyone made her angry, she would spill their secrets. She screamed that she could reveal who was trading on the black market with her. She would tell each and every one of their names and they would be dead, and she didn't care.

Kuan's heart deadened for a few seconds. Then it started up again, like a dreadful but steady drum crescendo. He had told her that his family had

once owned a factory. Would she now go and tell on him?

But she was not angry with him. She was angry with the Black Bandits. Did they deny her something? Did they ask something of her that she would not do? She thrashed and raged and stormed through that day, until the Black Bandits were aflame too. They thought that she would give them away to their superiors, disclose their illicit trading with the New People.

The next day, she did not turn up to make fertiliser.

To the Black Bandits, perhaps it was like killing a dog that had gone feral. When you are about to kill a person, they are no longer themselves. Their face contorts with low animal feelings like stretched-mouth fear and runny-nosed supplication, and that gives you reason enough to kill them. The Bandits probably didn't see the girl who liked music in her hut or the one they had gazed at with tenderness, but the crazy apoplectic creature that seemed to take her place, and this was reason enough to do whatever they wanted with her.

To kill you is no loss, to keep you is no gain, the Black Bandits had told them again and again. How reckless of Maly to believe that she was the exception to this rule. How foolish of her to believe she had any sort of power.

Afterwards, her daughter pattered around the collective like a stunned, homeless creature. During this time there was food in the commune kitchen, and she brought a bowl along to collect her share of rice. Before, everyone had doted on this little girl, but now people pretended not to see her. They didn't want to be associated with the living remains of Maly, or what she had come to represent.

ALL YOU CAN EAT

He was caught stealing rice when he and two other men were assigned to work in the cooking shed. In four years, this only happened once. Wordlessly, they knew what to do. When they had served everyone, they scraped the burnt rice-crust from the bottom of the black cooking urn and shoved it inside their clothes. When they returned to their hut, they left the rice on the straw of the roof to dry out so that they could store it.

A Black Bandit boy walked by and found out. He must have been monitoring them all along, knowing they would pilfer.

'Why is this on the roof?' A sweeping motion of his hand knocked the rice crusts to the ground.

'We were hungry.'

'You were hungry, eh? You didn't get enough to eat?'

'We did. We did,' they protested. Once before, Kuan remembered, when they were eating in the communal food hut, the man next to him had muttered that his rice porridge was not cooked properly.

'Half-raw, eh?' asked a Black Bandit who caught his words. He motioned to two other soldiers who set upon the man and led him away. He was never seen again. You had to be careful about food. Even talking about it could kill you.

'We might get hungry later,' the man to his left now stammered to the boy soldier.

'Hungry, eh? Then come here.' The Black Bandit led them back to the kitchen. He filled a vat with scoopfuls of rice. He stacked it on. The three of them watched the white mound grow and grow. 'Eat this.'

'Now?'

'No, when you reach Nirvana. Yes, now! You said you were hungry! Eat this up, all three of you. When I come back and find that you haven't filled up, you will all be dead.' They sat down on the floor and began to fill their mouths.

Holes holes holes – a human being was all about satiating holes, he thought. Holes for the filling with food, holes for the smelling of danger,

holes for the seeing of which parts of your body might drop off from infection, holes to release excrement and holes for the expulsion of sex secretions, not that such a thing existed anymore in this world. Finally, holes for the hearing of Angkar dogma, because if you didn't listen, they might make you dig your own grave. This was the ideology that reduced a whole human soul to a single man's digestive tract. All that mattered in the revolution and all he wanted to do was to gorge, and now that the soldier had given him permission to do it – in fact, forced him to – he was scared of dying. A human stomach that has been starved for so long will not stretch so far.

The two other men knew it too.

'You haven't eaten enough!' the man to his left accused him. 'You're going too slow! Stop thinking about taking a shit and keep eating!'

Who knew that eating used up so many muscles in the jaw and in the face? In the throat too. Masticating could be as exhausting as working.

'What about you? The spoon has been far from your mouth for too long. I saw you taking it easy, taking a rest.'

Even having too much food could cause malice.

The Black Bandit had left, but they were watched by an old villager who was a constant in the kitchen, one of the Base People. It was impossible to hide any of this rice on their bodies. They would just have to eat and die, which to Kuan seemed better than being bludgeoned on the head with the back of an axe.

There was the unmistakable smell of something frying. They all sensed it, he and the two other men. The smell made them take in two more handfuls of rice. They could pretend that the oily scent and the rice were one, something new. Even when granted a reprieve in the middle of hunger, with more rice to eat than was humanly possible, after only twenty minutes all of them had begun craving something else. Were humans the only creatures whose desires could never be fully sated? The buffaloes in the field weren't craving chrysanthemums.

The old man in the kitchen walked over and put a small fried dried fish down in front of them without saying a word. Then he left. He had watched them squish the grains into the smallest possible balls and scoff them down until their eyeballs bulged, and he knew they could not keep going without a second wind. That fish was their second wind. They mashed it into tiny

crumbs and flakes. That feisty fish fought a battle with the army of bland grains. It conquered with every successful swallow until the war was over, the bowl was empty and they had won.

THE BELT

Once he boiled and ate his leather belt.

Kuan felt as though he was on his last legs: they were wobbly and prone to bending at unexpected times. Then he remembered his belt. He had buried it in a secret spot behind his hut. Those Chinese communists on their Long March ate the leather of their boots. He had read about it while in high school. Charlie Chaplin ate his bootlaces, too, in the first silent black-and-white movie he had seen with his mother. How strange, at a time like this, to be inspired by the antics of a white man who looked like a pretty girl with a moustache.

Why not a belt?

When the sky was dark, he dug it up. He cut the belt into thin strips and boiled it for hours and hours. His sister and his mother kept a lookout for him. When it was ready, they took pieces hot out of the pot and chewed. And chewed and chewed and chewed.

They kept the buckle.

The year Kuan ate the belt, Chicken Daddy's whole clan had been cut from him – his wife and his three children. His whole paltry family. Soon after his daughter was buried, Chicken Daddy started to feel a strange itchiness all over his body. Flakes of skin peeled from him, falling like scales from a snake. Kuan's mother swapped a condensed-milk tin of rice for diesel fuel and rubbed the fuel over his body, hoping it would heal him. Instead he jumped up and down in his hut, screaming, 'I'm burning! I'm burning!' before running to leap into the river. The water washed the oil from his skin, but did not cure him of the rash or the hunger. And nothing could cure him of the loss of his own flesh and blood, as close to him as his limbs. Now he felt like an amputee, and he took to lying on the floor of his hut, not wanting to move. Moving was hard work. He looked up at the slits of light on the thatched roof. Looking was hard work, too. He closed his eyes. And finally, breathing. Breathing was the hardest task of all. He decided that he just wasn't up to it anymore.

CATS AND DOGS

It seemed one evening that the Black Bandits had stolen away into the night. That was the evening when, all night long, they heard the *bom bom bom* sounds of distant manmade thunder that meant no good. Perhaps the bombs were going to rain down on them now, curtains on a final closing act of a dark and meaningless show that no one was watching.

The next morning when Kuan awoke, the Base People said that they had seen the Black Bandits running away through the village. The city people slowly started to wander, testing the perimeters of the sudden silence, marking its borders.

The village chairman and his family had also disappeared. The only sign that anyone had been living there was the meowing beneath his hut. The chairman had kept a cat as a pet. How could they keep such things alive when people could not even find food for their children? Of course, the first thing his brother Kiv did when he found out the Black Bandits had gone was find that cat and kill and eat it.

Nearby a group of men had teamed up to chase down a cow in the fields. The cow seemed to sense that something was wrong, that this was not the usual herding. No, this was predatory. There must have been at least a dozen people with sticks. When they finally caught the cow, they whacked it over the head, knocking it to the ground until it was lying on its side. Dozens more looked on, yelling out useless advice. He tried to beg for some meat but they paid him no heed.

It was a lie when Buddhism declared that all animals were created equal. All animals were not created equal; the only thing universal about the different species was their suffering. In the wild a lion doesn’t spare a deer, and the cat does not seek karmic bliss with the mouse. Hunger has priorities.

That night, people were talking, saying that the Black Bandits really had disappeared. The Vietnamese soldiers, who had burrowed in underground tunnels like hungry moles, had emerged and driven away their enslavers.

‘Let’s go back then,’ his mother decided. They did not want to be in this place for a moment more. They wanted to find their house in Phnom Penh, even though the keys had been lost long ago. They would return missing half their number and all their things. Now it was just his mother, his sister Kieu, his brother Kiv, Suhong and their three children.

They packed their luggage – their grass mats, some rice, their few remaining clothes. The following day, they started walking in the afternoon, and by night they reached another village. All the houses had been ransacked, and people were crammed into any hut they could find. They spent the night on the floor of an abandoned shop, and the next morning they kept walking.

On the road they met a local villager, a teenage boy who had a puppy curled in his arm. His brother swapped something for the puppy. They led the puppy along with them by a piece of string. Soon they came to a river, where there was a Vietnamese soldier. The soldier took a liking to the puppy and played with it. They waited patiently until the soldier had left.

His brother could kill the cat, but could not bear to kill the puppy, so he asked Kuan. But Kuan couldn’t kill the puppy either. He couldn’t bear to smash something into that happy-yappy face, or to puncture its neck with a knife. In the end he put it in a sack so that he didn’t have to see. Tying the sack with the piece of string that had been the leash, he drowned the puppy in the river. They cut it up, cooked it and ate it. His brother, who was the one who couldn’t bear to kill it, ate the most.

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Now that the Black Bandits were gone, the Vietcong soldiers were in charge of herding everyone back to their hometowns. Kuan remembered the discipline of these young soldiers. ‘Everyone back to their bases!’ was the command of their leaders before the sun set every evening and all the Vietcong would finish their conversations with the Cambodians and retire. There was absolutely no fraternising after dark.

Walking back to Phnom Penh, they were told that those who arrived first would lay claim to the houses. It didn’t matter that you had once lived there; it was now finders keepers.

On the road they swapped stories with others in steady deadened voices: ‘I saw babies thrown in the air and caught on the ends of bayonets.’

‘They thought my sister stole rice, and they sliced open her stomach to search for the proof.’

‘I watched my father die. They tied his hands behind his back and sealed a plastic bag over his head.’

Others were stone silent, since it took about seventy muscles in the face to mutter a single word, and they were exhausted.

Some men begged for a spare set of clothes to ‘walk the road’. This meant that they wanted to exchange their black rags for proper clothes before quietly finding a place to die. Others lost their minds and did not bother to retrieve them. He met a man who had feigned madness when he was about to be executed, so that the Black Bandits would not kill him.

‘Kuan, the night they were going to execute me, I pretended I was crazy. The Black Bandits had to test out whether it was for real or not, so they mashed up a bowl of hot chillies and fed it to me spoonful by spoonful. I had to laugh like a fool being tickled or else. The children used to hit me and I couldn’t even swat them off. I didn’t mind because I could wander away from the collective and no one really pried into what I was doing. I found more food.’

Madness, Kuan thought, seemed the appropriate response to the regime. To play the innocuous fool gave a man a better shot at life.

THE SECRET LIFE OF THE SENSES

The problem with suffering, Kuan realised, was that there were too many senses. In the evenings when they lay down from their days of walking in limbo, towards a place that might not exist on any map anymore, his mind was free to think. But all his thinking had come to a halt and he couldn't drag his thoughts very far. So instead, when he couldn't sleep, he liked to imagine that he were five different men, each only having to deal with one sense at a time.

Life of hearing

He came from the city, so the rustle of leaves sounded like the rustle of distant plastic bags. And the quiet of the night – it was like the sky was yawning and sucking in all the mosquitos. He knew that hearing was the last sense to go, so it was a terrible thing what Chinese families did about grief. Wailing and carrying on like that at a person's deathbed, when they should be listening to the breath of the loved one with every hair in their inner ear a-quiver. You would never hear such breath again.

There was the quiet slipping from words into a sigh of silence.

Then came that hour, the hour when the dead slept without a noise. It was that hour when they called for him.

'Come.'

'This way.'

'Over here.'

The sound of their rubber-tyre sandals through the dirt and the leaves and cow pats. His bare feet.

The sound of their in-out, in-out breath.

He would never hear breath again, he thought, the breath of these soldiers would be the last he would hear. He wondered if the animals in the forest were listening too, the birds and spiders and monkeys. Maybe, he thought, the first laws came about because man needed to sleep and so needed to be protected from his companions who might remember past grievances. But

now he was being led somewhere and he didn’t even know who had a grievance against him.

They took him into the hut of the village chairman who was having stomach pains. The squelching of his stomach could be heard like a throbbing planet-sac filled with disgusting dead ocean juices. It was as if all the fish and algae and molluscs in the world were sloshing around in the black sea and this was its yowl, this was its noise, the noise of one man’s stomach.

There are sounds the throat makes thinking that noise will block off pain. Arrrgh. Oooeeegg. Waaahhh. But nothing was as great a din as that infernal ocean.

He took out his needles, and the ring of the copper wire was like a singing bee-sting.

Life of touch

There was a ten-year-old girl who was punished by having both her hands bound behind her back for so long that when she was untied, they flopped uselessly by her sides. He took out his copper wires and gave her acupuncture. Otherwise, she would be sent to the hospital. Skinny people seemed to have nerve endings closer to the surface of the skin, so they felt more pain, but this girl didn’t feel a thing.

The man who punished her was the leader of the children’s army. He had a simian face, and he regarded the children as worker ants, or lice that lived in his hair and sucked out his energy.

Yet one time when there was enough rice, he taught the children to sing revolutionary songs and even started a school in one of the huts. In the morning the rows of children would trudge off to work and in the afternoon they would sit on a dirt floor and learn about Angkar’s visions. For these children, Angkar must have been the God of the Underworld, a nameless faceless force of reckoning with a thousand bloodshot eyes and a thousand axe-wielding arms. Angkar spoke indirectly through the adults in charge, and you felt Angkar in the back of your neck whenever you felt that you did something wrong, but you could not see Angkar; you could not touch Angkar.

Life of smell

At night before he drifted off, he often imagined a life only of smells. The hollows of their nostrils would seek one another out in the darkness. He thought of the way white people were the warm stink of cooked lamb, how south-east Asians were fish-sauce sharp, or how the French smelt like the salty insides of oysters. Perhaps that's what they meant by animal magnetism – you were drawn to the scent of the human who most resembled the animal that made up your diet. In the end, everything came down to food.

His mother used to smell each one of her children. That was how they kissed in a culture that did not have a physical-touch greeting. Cheeks were not made for blushing but for smelling. But the Black Bandit boys looked at the adults as if they were smelling them with their eyes and didn't like the odour.

Life of taste

He had once seen a parasite that ate out another fish's tongue and then lived in its mouth – two unblinking black eyes staring out of the host's open mouth. But the more he thought about it, the more he realised that the human tongue was like a primeval animal, an underwater sea-dweller. The teeth, two rows of stalactites and stalagmites forming a barrier in the cave where the tongue lived, letting it out to roam only when its curiosity could not be contained.

Only once in those four years were they given a taste of sweetness from their former world. One day a Black Bandit brought in a tin of unopened Nestlé Sweetened Condensed Milk. He asked the workers in the kitchen to fill the enormous communal vat, which held hundreds of litres, with water and bring it to the boil. Then, in an act of unexpected generosity, he opened the can with a knife and poured the contents into the vat. 'Milk!' he declared. 'Tonight Angkar provides you with milk!' Each worker got a scoopful, and when it reached their bowls it was almost clear in colour, but they were so grateful they could have wept.

Later, when he had escaped to Vietnam and all his senses were awake again, he wondered what glass would taste like. Painted wall? Wooden drawer? A piece of red cedar, a lump of yellow silk. A black key from an accordion. A used bar of soap, still warm from the shower.

But under the Year Zero regime, with nothing to swallow during the years of the Black Bandits, the tongue was used to move air around. One day he and another man were caught speaking their native Teochew Chinese.

‘What were you saying?’

‘Nothing.’

‘We were not saying anything, comrade.’

‘You were speaking in another language.’

‘No.’

‘You were speaking in Vietnamese!’

‘No! No!’

He remembered what had happened to the mother who had a slight Vietnamese accent in her Khmer.

‘Kneel down. Stick out your tongue.’

The Black Bandit boy unsheathed a combat knife from his waistband.

‘No, comrade brother, we beg you. We’re not Vietnamese.’

They begged and begged, because that was all they could do. At that moment he did not think of living without a tongue, but only of the possible pain of the wound and that detached mouth muscle squirming on the ground. It was the vision he most dreaded.

‘Don’t let me catch you speaking any other language again!’ the boy yelled.

‘Thank you thank you thank you comrade.’

Spared! He and the man looked at each other. They were allowed to keep one of their senses. They would never speak a word to each other again.

Life of sight

He used to think that blindness was the worst affliction a person could possibly have, until he imagined the opposite. Imagine if they had lost all their senses but sight. He imagined a life without eyelids. Eyeballs that would not be shielded from anything in the world.

The rest of the body would be peeled away from the eye, as if the eye were a grape and the body were the skin. And then the eye could look at what it had shed, because the human body had every colour under the sky. Red blood. Black pupils. Yellow intestines. Blue fingers. Inside the face the colour of curry over cooked shellfish.

But this was only five. There was a final sense, of course, the one that kept all the others at work.

Life of the mind

She had made it out alive too, he realised when they saw each other in Siem Reap. Her family tree had been burned down to a stump – all that remained was herself and a ten-year-old niece. When Kuan saw his fiancée Sokim again, he didn't make love to her. They sat up all night making melancholy. He couldn't even look at her face, so he spent the night staring at her left temple, staring at the blue-vein tree there.

Out of the wet clay of their recent memories, they moulded people back to life – her mother, his father, her siblings, his niece and nephews, Chicken Daddy. Chicken Daddy had no pockmarks, he found his wife again, she became sane and spoke sense, and they loved each other before they were separated.

Chicken Sister's skin filled up like sugar palm, her real palms opened and closed, she used her elbows to get herself up off the mat. The flies disappeared. 'Uncle, uncle, we need to look for rice.' No, that was still too tinged with what was to come, which was Chicken Sister squatting on the ground pressing her forefinger to the dust. No, she was back in Phnom Penh, in the pocket of her dress were a polyester ribbon and the rubber bands from her hair, and she was smiling her slice-of-watermelon smile.

The two nephews would dig themselves out of the dirt, their already-opened eyes would blink again, and they would think about catching the yellow dog with the swollen teats to follow her home to her pups.

It seemed like a ten-year night, and when it was over he asked Sokim to go away with him. Yes or no? Questions now were ultimatums. There were no decisions that you could answer with maybes. No, she replied. She wanted to see her home. She wanted to find out who had survived and who had died.

He sighed. The decision was hers. If he had been more in love with her, he would have pleaded. He liked Sokim, she was kind and pretty even after starvation, but he didn't care for her enough to push harder.

So they parted. That was the way it was with women. You didn't make love to them until they were yours. Yet he didn't know whether he could make like, let alone love, to anyone again for a very long time.

ICE

When they first entered Phnom Penh, the Vietnamese found a series of shop-houses containing strange items. One shop was filled entirely with left shoes. Another one contained thousands of right shoes, stacked to the ceiling. A store crammed with refrigerators. Another of half-smashed televisions. A building filled with chairs, a building of tables. There was a house of cooking pots. Year Zero museums of archaic modern technology. The only ambassadors of the modern world allowed entry into Pol Pot's Cambodia were the Kalashnikov and the electric wire around the fence of Tuol Sleng prison.

The air exhaled silence.

'There is nothing for us here,' his mother sighed.

They had found their old house, but they noticed a pair of blue shorts and a frayed shirt hanging over the balcony to dry. Some other family had already settled in their factory.

So they returned to Siem Reap, living in a communal house with many other families.

In the town, his brother's little girl Hue, who was now three, stood gaping at an ice seller. With his bare hands the street vendor pressed ice shavings tightly into a sphere around a centre of sweet red beans. He handed the cold ball to Kiv, who crouched down and placed it at his daughter's lips, to give her a suck. They all watched the face of this child, born during the days of slavery. Less than a year ago she was crouching on the ground digging up small spring onions and popping them in her mouth. A baby eating raw spring onions. They all waited to see the first signs of recognition of this small joy that they had lost for four years, and which they had thought was lost to them forever.

But the first thing she said was, 'Wah! It's so hot!'

He couldn't stop laughing.

The coldest thing in their world would be scorching to someone who did not know what it was like to taste cool. The sunrise they expected to see on her face was actually a fire-burn.

In Siem Reap, Kiv, who was always the innovator of the family, started up a gold-smithing trade. With nothing but a small mallet he made rings. Whenever they obtained a bit of gold, they melted it into tiny pellets. Kiv would flatten these pellets and make a hole in the centre, like a donut. Then he would use his little hammer to tap out a ring. It was slow work, shaping an amorphous gold donut into a wedding band. Every day he and his brother hawked around this jewellery in exchange for rice. A ring would be exchanged for five or six tins of rice. The more rice they earned, the more they could exchange for more gold. There were no scales, so Kiv made a set, with weighing plates made of condensed-milk-tin lids. The Vietnamese soldiers watched their burgeoning trade with quiet amusement. Sometimes they even came to exchange something, but they never came to snatch anything away.

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After two months, Kiv made a decision. ‘We have to go to Vietnam,’ he said. ‘We can’t do this forever.’ He said that he would go with his wife and daughters, and if things went well, they would send someone to bring over the rest of the family. He would leave his son Wei in the care of his mother, brother and sister. Kiv swapped some gold for a bike, and hid the remaining gold in its hollowed-out handlebars. There was no time for teary goodbyes. Kiv and his family set out when it became dark, he wheeling his bike with one hand and carrying Hue with the other, while Suhong carried their remaining bags and held the hand of Huong, their older daughter.

Kuan remembered the time Kiv came crying to him because they had caught Suhong bartering rice and locked her up in a hut by herself, to be executed. That evening, his brother had wrapped his ration of rice in banana leaves and stood beneath the thatched hut, the house of straw with pitch-patch light entering through its seams during the day. He poked the package through the floor, until he felt his wife’s tug. Her last supper.

Kuan had watched his older brother and learnt about keeping a family alive, about how to condense your world to the smallest possible unit so that you could keep it safe. In the end Kiv’s wife was spared. There was no reason why. A woman’s life was subject to the whim of sixteen-year-old boys. There was a nine-year-old girl they tethered to a tree. They told her that they were going to kill her the next day. She had to pass the night with

that certainty like a rusted spoon scraping at the inside of her stomach. They killed her the next day.

He thought about the scraps of his family. Him with his bad eye. His sister Kieu, whom they called Blackie because she was so dark from the sun. And his mother, keeping her adult children alive. He remembered the afternoon of his mother's birthday in the killing fields, when he had felt the whoosh of wings above him. He watched a bird fly past and dunk itself into the rice paddy like a falling sickle. It emerged with something in its mouth, which it dropped a few seconds later while soaring away. He walked over to the paddy and saw the splashing. A fish! He pulled it out and smacked it against the ground and hid it in his shirt, close to his chest. They would be able to celebrate his mother's birthday.

At the end of his twenties, his world, once so peopled with attachments, was down to this ragged walking cluster, a cluster he vowed to love and protect till the end of his days. And yet he wanted something more. He knew, without a doubt, that he wanted a family of his own.

Soon, true to his word, Kiv's guides arrived for them. He had sent two Chinese men who had lived in Vietnam, Dang Hai and Guang Hwei. When his mother heard the names, she declared it a blessing from Buddha. Back in Cambodia before Year Zero, she had once gone to a Buddhist shrine to get her fortune told and was given a small rhyming-couplet poem of four lines, with those very same characters.

Dang Hai gave Kuan a cigarette to smoke, 'like a Vietnamese, so no one will be suspicious of you'. When they left, he was standing in the back of an old Chinese military truck with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, looking backwards at a country he knew he never wanted to see again.

AFTER ZERO: SAIGON, 1979

When he saw his future wife Kien in Saigon, he remembered the child in her and that is what he loved. Knowing that she had spent the four years selling cloth in this new city, while he was in hell. Life had gone on here, while for him it had stopped. When he first entered the marketplace, it was so teeming with life that tears filled his eyes. These people had lived through a war, but they had not fallen off the edge of the world as he had.

'Old Aunt! Old Aunt!' He heard a voice calling his mother by her former title, when she was head of the factory. Two beautiful young Vietnamese women were heading towards them.

As they came closer, he realised their faces were very familiar. One was taller than the other and she was more outspoken. 'Old Aunt, remember us? We used to work in your plastic-bag factory! You gave us our first job.'

He remembered now. They weren't Vietnamese girls at all, they were girls from back home. The taller of the two was Ly, and the shorter girl, her sister Kien. But how they'd grown up! What a difference the intervening years had made. What luxury lay in a beautiful woman who had not been through what he had, the wonder in liquid eyes and the throbbing of life that was watchful and not half-wasted. He couldn't stop looking at Kien.

The next day, he fell so ill that his brother and sister had to take him to hospital. 'Malaria,' the Vietnamese doctors declared, because slave-camp survivors didn't succumb so soon to madnesses of the heart. He was in hospital for a week. It was a proper state hospital that gave free healthcare to refugees. He spent a week gazing up at the ceiling, alternating between feeling as though he were submerged in freezing water and being broiled in an oven, while his inflamed brain seemed to have a separate heartbeat.

During that time, Kien came to visit him. She brought some rice cakes and handed them to him, embarrassed. She was so serious, so quiet, a girl just a few years into her twenties. While Sokim's silences had reminded him of all that was lost, Kien's rectitude reminded him of what could be regained.

When he recovered, he spent the next few months courting her like crazy. He picked her up on the back of his fourth-hand bicycle and took her through the streets of Saigon. He bought her strips of dried squid to snack on, and cola the colour of fish sauce that had been made in a communist collective.

He took her to the zoo. They stood side by side, looking at the animals. There weren't many left. Some half-bald birds, stoop-shouldered primates and a handful of deer with dusty antlers.

'I can count all the ribs on that tiger,' Kien finally said, as they gazed through the iron bars at the cowering creature. 'How very sad to trap an animal like that.'

Looking at her in her unassuming yellow dress, feeling sorry for a scrappy sad tiger, he felt an indescribable tenderness well up inside. He could not believe that this was the child who had worked at his factory when she was thirteen. She had a scar on her leg from an accident with the plastic-bag cutter, which he pretended not to look at when they were together, but it was things like that little mark that melted him inside.

'Better that it's in this zoo and not roaming around in the jungle,' he said, 'because we don't want to run into such animals when we leave.'

By then, he'd won her over. She was going to leave with him. Of course there was a life after death. If there was anything he now believed in, it was this.

*

Already rumours were circulating like sugarflies about a new refugee camp run by the United Nations at the Thai border that would allow Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees to get into Western democratic countries. But to get to the camp, they would have to go back through Cambodia. What on earth made him want to go back into the country he had vowed never to see again? It was the only way out to the other side. Life in Saigon was becoming more perilous. In the evenings the Vietnamese authorities would come around to arrest and resettle the new arrivals. They would be sent into the countryside and given a plot of land on which they had to build a house. Rice would be distributed to them. But this way of life seemed suspiciously similar to Year Zero all over again, and there was no way he was regressing to that.

So, to evade the authorities, every evening his family left their rented house and stayed over with Kien's family, who had been in Vietnam longer and were not in immediate danger of forced resettlement. He and his mother and sister slept on the floor of Kien's tiny family home, in tight lines like salted fish.

They hired a guide to take them to the refugee camp – he, his mother, his sister and his new wife. Kiv and his family had already left. On the morning of their departure, they woke up and packed only a change of clothes so as not to arouse any suspicions. Kien sewed pieces of flattened gold behind the buttons of his shirt, and bid farewell to her family. Their guide arrived in the afternoon with two cyclos. He and Kien sat in one, his mother and his sister in the other.

The cyclos went as far as they could go, to the edge of the jungle. Then they had to set out on foot to cross the border between Vietnam and Cambodia. Although it was dark, they were not frightened – lines and lines of other people were also crossing, mostly traders. They walked all day and were exhausted, collapsing in an empty house. He slept at the feet of his mother, wife and sister, as their sentry. Throughout the journey the guide would take them to the houses of his relatives and friends, where his charges would be fed and have a place to sleep.

At one point they were smuggled into Battambang in cargo trucks covered with tarpaulin. Refugee women in one truck and men in the other. It was dark and suffocating. Kien later told him that her pregnant friend in the truck vomited on her.

Another leg of the journey involved sitting in the back of a cattle truck with other refugees, where he got the hairy eyeball look from a middle-aged Khmer woman because Kien was leaning her head on his shoulder. Khmer couples never showed such affection in public, but he and Kien were now on their first adventure together and they didn't care. It was exhilarating.

Sometimes they had to sleep in the open fields, on rattan mats with mosquito nets hanging from the trees for a covering. After they arrived in Battambang, a boat took them across the Tonle Sap Lake. The last stretch of their journey was traversed by bicycle, and then by foot. How many months had this taken? He had lost count of time. To him, it had just been one continuous honeymoon with his new wife.

When they reached the border, they saw thousands upon thousands of people in a flat field, with mosquito nets hitched up. This was Kao I Dang refugee camp. They lay down on their mats and waited for sleep to come. The next morning, a black-clad soldier came and took a long lascivious look at Kien, and at that moment it seemed that during the night the moon had seeped all its shade into her face. ‘Pale,’ the soldier muttered, ‘not like a Khmer.’

Kuan got up and ran to the Red Cross tent. He was not taking any chances. He stammered in French to the white woman there: ‘*Un soldat demande mon épouse!*’ Immediately she told him to bring his family over. That was how he got his family into the tent. It was staffed by kind white people, just like the future world into which he had delivered his family – his mother, his sister, his wife.

KIEN

What an exaggerator he had been. At first he had made it sound like such an adventure. Yet she had not imagined sleeping on forest floors, the mosquito bites, and nursing him through his malaria. The fear of landmines. Stepping accidentally on the swollen black arms and legs of cadavers when she least expected it. He barely noticed the dead bodies. ‘Bandits got to them, people say,’ he told her, and walked on like everyone else.

And maggots! At night the forest seemed to have teeth and she felt as if she was being swallowed whole. And then more walking through the jungle in pitch black, hearing the rustle of other footsteps, not knowing if they were benign or Black Bandits.

She finally encountered them for the first time one evening.

They were two slightly older boys who seemed to appear out of the leaves, their guns held like horizontal tree branches to block the path of her sister-in-law Kieu.

‘Where are you all going?’ one of the boys demanded.

Kieu stammered, ‘We’re a family. P-p-please let us pass.’

The soldiers hesitated, but then, miraculously, let them pass.

She, meanwhile, had hidden behind Kieu like a cowering rabbit. What was she doing with this clan of crazy half-starved people whose eyes burned with the desire of those who had nothing more to lose, who were now her new family?

She wanted to cry, but she didn’t want her new mother and sister-in-law to think she was a weak, un-courageous thing. She had swapped everything in her life for something else and yet this something else was just a man’s word. Perhaps the feeling of being singled out among her sisters by a man nine years her senior was what churned her heart. Because his family had given her and her sister their first jobs, she had trusted Kuan. She had found a man who could speak both English and French, who wanted to take her out of her suspended life in Vietnam. She was only twenty-two, and she followed him because he told her that this was their honeymoon, an exciting prelude to unimaginable glories. He had even bought her a new sarong so

that she wouldn’t be mistaken for a Chinese girl or, more dangerously, a Vietnamese girl. He had made her trek through jungles for months, back through Battambang and Siem Reap in the country that still gave him nightmares.

*

Because he could not stand up, she would crawl through grief with him, not realising until too late that grief was a narrow tunnel, barely able to fit one person. The dirt that he dug out from the tunnel, he threw behind him, into her face.

One night in the jungle his hands splashed across her sleeping brow like cold water and woke her up.

What was wrong? Who was there?

Nothing, no one.

There was just something in his ear. An ant. An ant in the ear distressed the inner hairs so deeply that it was like having spiders teeming in the brain. Tears came into the eyes. He had no control. None at all. It walked all over him. Every scratch of its six feet was a scrape of gravel, rocks rolling down on Sisyphus. He lay on one side, and he waited to die.

He remembered the honeyed face of the fourteen-year-old girl who had taken sugar palm from the storage hut. She was caught. Hands tied behind her back, they smeared what she had so wanted across her eyes, on her cheeks, down her chin and at her temples. They tied her to a tree, to wait for the ants. Throat swollen, eyes swollen, a head made for hurt. In the end she could not blink, her eyes were sealed shut.

You’re not going to die, his wife told him, stop making a big deal out of something so small. We’ll get some water and pour it in your ear, and you’ll be all right. You’re not going to die.

Instead of falling in love, she now had to rise to it, rise like a river. All sorts of sordid debris could float around inside her, but she still had to go on. This was the way it was going to be for now. This was how it was going to be forever, Kien thought, because she was so young and could foresee no future where the tide would ebb and lower her, cool her down. She was so angry with him sometimes. Sometimes, she could not help but feel cheated. But he was so thin and faded and so sad, and he had been so kind to her when she worked at the factory.

In the dark, with a man’s face cupped in your hands, you can forgive him anything, she thought.

PART IV.
CAMBODIA

DISMEMORY

DAUGHTER—

There should be a word for a memory that you had deliberately forgotten to remember: a Dismemory. This is what her father had. Dismemory sounded like a foreign country filled with heaps of miscellaneous cast-offs. And people in clusters, picking up the pieces, also called Dismemories. People wearing their Dismemories like armour, or perhaps sewn into a strangely coloured suit with small lapels. But maybe a person grew until their Dismemories became too tight and the seams could not help but tear. Had she ever walked around with an enormous hole in the middle of her back that she did not know was there because she could not see it? Or maybe another time her knee had been exposed, right in the area where doctors tested your reflexes with a small hammer, to make sure you still felt the feelings that kept you alive. Her Dismemories were small, but her father's were enormous.

What if it gets worse, she wondered, but never asked him.

What if what gets worse, he would have wanted to know.

Your dismembered memories. Your Dismemories.

No such thing.

But of course there was. 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. Dismemory in the secret glee he felt that his daughter could find a job where she sat in one warm safe room for eight hours a day. Dismemory in the way he loved innocence.

During her childhood, she found that the most difficult thing was to argue with her father. She could never win, because you could never argue with anyone who wanted so much for you, whose very arguments were

motivated by this love. As the years progressed, nothing seemed to have changed.

‘Why can’t I stay out past eight p.m. in summer?’

‘Why do you whinge so much? Why don’t we just let you wander the streets? See how far that gets you.’ Even in her second year of university they still imposed that ridiculous curfew on her.

He made her so furious sometimes. But you could never question the paranoias attached to this love, because to him it would mean questioning the love, which was unconditional. And what kind of ungrateful troublemaker would ask questions about a gift many families lacked?

So instead she asked him about those he had loved before. ‘What was Chicken Daddy like?’

‘He was a very hard-working man,’ her father would reply.

‘How did Chicken Sister look?’ she’d inquire, and he’d give her a blurry description of what colonised Indochinese considered beautiful.

‘She was very pretty, big eyes and pale skin. So perhaps you’d better not write that her brothers called her Spider when she was young or no one will have any sympathy for her.’

She understood how he thought people would respond: sympathy for beautiful and perfect characters only. But she couldn’t make any of it perfect. Perfection did not bring them back to life. She gave her father her writing to read, and he corrected only the factual errors.

‘Thanks, Dad, but do you have any other suggestions?’

‘No. I don’t know much about writing.’

‘Come on, Dad, just tell me whatever comes to mind.’

‘Do you think there’s too much suffering in the Cambodian part? Maybe white people don’t want to read about too much suffering. It depresses them.’

She didn’t know what to say about that. She knew exactly what he meant, though. Her first book had been filled with the sort of sardonic wit that came easily to a person whose sole purpose in life was to finish university and find her first graduate position, knowing full well that she was on her way to becoming comfortably middle-class. She had refused, just as her father did, to look beyond the here and now. If you looked at darkness through rose-coloured glasses, all you got was a congealed blood colour. A colour that should have a specific name, like *blug*, a clotty mixture of

mucus and blood. A word that was not in her father's dictionary. It was best not to look at all.

But now that she was older, she saw that in his quest for modernity and upward mobility, her father had given his children a completely different history, drilled into them that they were part of a Chinese culture that spanned centuries, which was true; made sure they were also aware they were bonafide born-in-Australia kids. But in doing so, he had wiped out the most significant part of their identity.

How could she forget the men and women who came to their house in Braybrook when she was young, who had no idea of privacy? They would poke and prod their heads into any room and 'wahhh' when she and her toddler brother were getting changed. Whenever they were expecting visitors her parents would hide the valuables, but they never failed to offer food, and as much as anyone wanted. 'We're having dinner! Join us! Join us!' And before the person could refuse, a bowl heaped with rice would be thrust into their hands and a chair pulled out. Her mother would cook Vietnamese food because that was what she was taught in Saigon: *Bánh hói, Bánh canh,* fish soup and rice-paper rolls with hot Thai basil and mint. Their fridge was filled with jars of homemade fish sauce; their bedrooms were guarded by glassy-eyed porcelain Buddhas. The Goddess of Mercy floating on her lotus had watched them grow up from her place on the mantlepiece, but gradually they ignored her as they dismantled their filthy former habits.

When one of her uncles first arrived in Australia, he kept a wastepaper basket beside his loo. He thought that flushing used toilet paper would block the pipes. Some migrants washed their hair with dishwashing detergent because they couldn't read the labels, but the pictures of lemons gave them a feeling of zesty succour. Others dried meat on flat pieces of newspaper in the living room, or pickled onions in empty Nescafé jars. They were always afraid of scarcity because they were not Mainlander Chinese but Diaspora Chinese, driven from place to place, destined never to feel a sense of belonging; knowing they would never be a part unless they kept themselves apart and hid what was most important of their heritage inside the home. In Cambodia they were the walnut-faced grandmothers selling boiled eggs in the marketplace, or the goldsmiths making jewellery for weddings. In Australia they were the model minority only once they

were no longer scrambling in the factories and picking fruit on the farms, and once their kids could speak English.

And when she and her brother came home from school speaking English, her father knew it was time. He wanted to whitewash their history so they could begin anew. No prying ways, no crap on scraps of paper lying around the house. Her father had named her Alice because he believed this new country to be a Wonderland, where anything was possible if only she went along with his unfailing belief. His patriotism rang truer and more annoying than any bogan supremacist's. 'Australians all let us rejoice, for we are young and free.' This to him was the most beautiful national anthem in the world. There *was* golden soil and wealth for toil. Who wanted to be anywhere else? In other countries, where their anthems were all about rinsing the land in blood of the brothers?

He would never let her go to Cambodia. 'You can travel anywhere in the world except there,' he told her generously, but still she would not relent.

When she reached adulthood, she kept at it. 'But Alexander went when he was nineteen!'

'That's different. Your brother is a boy.'

The boys were allowed to go back on holidays, and after the age of thirty if they were still single, they were sent back to find themselves wives.

'If you want to go back to Cambodia, you must stay with Uncle Kiv,' her father had told her. 'He'll look after you.' Uncle Kiv was her father's hero. Her father would show every visitor to their house brochures of Uncle Kiv's banks in Cambodia, shiny full-colour booklets designed to entice investors. These brochures clearly were not literature, but inside their pages her father found a story of success that he could not resist bringing out whenever any of her friends' parents came to pick them up.

'But I want to go with you, Dad,' she kept insisting.

'It's too dangerous still,' he'd reply. Finally, ten years later, he relented. He and her younger sister Alison were going to go with her. She was to return to Beijing for one week for a writers' festival. Afterwards, she would meet them in Hong Kong and they would fly to Cambodia together.

'I'll bring the best Panasonic camcorder that's on display at the shop,' her father told her, 'so you can remember the details of the place exactly as it is.' These weren't fields of golden wheat or barley they were going to see.

They were the killing fields her father was going to show her, the daughter he wouldn’t even let out to see movies at Highpoint mall in her early teens.

When she left her parents’ house, her father was waiting outside on the porch in his woolly old argyle jumper, black buildings behind him against the quiet sky, still dark but ripening for the day. He was watching her taxi drive away, no doubt memorising the numberplate in case the driver didn’t take her to the airport.

ARRIVAL

FATHER—

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. Minding your own business – that's what he had done all his life. That was how he had survived those years under Pol Pot, and minding his own business was how he'd made a living in Australia.

But his eldest children, Alice and Alexander, were unable to mind their own business. Their bookshelves were filled with spines that cracked with the weight of the history inside: *Year Zero. The Bloody Revolution. The Gate. First They Killed My Father. Stay Alive, My Son.*

When his eldest daughter was nineteen, his brother Kiv had visited Melbourne and offered to take her back to Cambodia; she could stay with his family for a week. Kiv – Kiv who had his glasses taken away by the Black Bandits, who had kept three small children alive, whose wife concealed rice for her family but was spared execution – was now the director of one of the country's largest banks. In the early 1990s he had gone back to Cambodia over the protestations of his wife and children. Why did he want to return to that bad country, they lamented. But instead of landmines, he saw goldmines. Instead of bad memories, he saw a country filled with children who would grow up to staff his offices.

Finally her chance had come, Kuan thought. His daughter would be so pleased about this invitation. He waited for her to get home from university, hoping that she would not have her boyfriend Michael with her in case he wanted to accompany her to Cambodia. How bad would that look? He just

didn’t want to deal with explaining to Michael that unmarried girls didn’t go on holidays with their boyfriends.

‘Are you coming too, Dad?’ she asked.

‘No, it’s getting close to Christmas sales. I have to be at the shop.’

But he had gone back once, with Kien, a couple of years ago. They stayed in Kiv’s villa and were treated like royalty, with a bevy of servants cooking their meals and bodyguards following them everywhere. They visited the Angkor Wat for the first time. He and Kien took a short trip to Ho Chi Minh City too, to visit the marketplace where they had reunited. He was secretly glad none of his children were with him. This was the history he shared only with Kien, before any of the four of them were born.

‘Lucky I held on, ay?’ Kien had remarked. ‘Otherwise Alice would have been born in the Thai camp. She wouldn’t be an Australian girl then. She’d be a refugee kid.’

Good god, he thought, if he took his daughter back to Cambodia there would be no end to her slack-jawed awe. She’d even think it was a proud thing to have come from such a bloody history. She’d probably cry for days on end, wasting energy on emotions that were vicarious.

But now they were going back together. She was an adult; she would know better. Admittedly, he hadn’t been this excited for a while.

When they arrived at Pochentong airport and stepped out into the sunlight, Kiv’s cars were waiting for them just as he knew they would be, and Kiv’s bodyguards came out to escort them. He could see his eldest daughter trying hard not to look too astonished. They climbed inside the black Mercedes-Benz with bulletproof windows and set off. A black four-wheel drive trailed behind them for protection.

They drove through the streets of Phnom Penh and then the entire convoy turned into a gated residency near the Thai Embassy, into the driveway of an air-conditioned double-storey brick-veneer house very much like their Melbourne home. This one was also in a quiet cul-de-sac, and each street was named after a different letter, in alphabetical order.

‘Just wait until you see your uncle’s banks, theme park and five-star hotel,’ Kuan told his daughters.

TREAD LIGHTLY

DAUGHTER—
After they dropped off their bags at the villa where they would be staying, they were driven to Uncle Kiv's office. In the car, she wound down the window and felt the sunlight on her face.

'Put on your sunglasses!' warned her father. 'You don't want to get wrinkles around your eyes!' After seeing advertisements for Oil of Olay on television, he had bought his daughters bottles of moisturiser from the moment they reached adolescence. He stocked up on anti-aging creams for them in the same way a homemaker would stock up on toilet paper or toothpaste.

She ignored her father and continued to look outside, watching women ride side-saddle in tuk-tuks in their best pink or red flannelette pyjamas. There was no distinction between sleep clothes and day clothes. The town went to sleep for the hour just after lunch. Shops closed their shutters, women and men hushed children beneath mosquito nets, students walked home from school, their feet ready to melt into the road. In the streets folks lay down like sun-soaked sponges and let their stomachs do the work of digesting. People slept anywhere and everywhere, their chins resting between their collarbones, their heads dropped downwards as a traditional greeting, a sign of respect or else a winking symbol of soporific defiance.

The foyer of Kiv's building looked like the entrance of a five-star hotel. They went up in an elevator to the guest lounge, where they sat on a white sofa suite that looked as if the plastic had been pulled off it moments before, in a room that looked as if it had been built yesterday. A bucket of charcoal was in a corner to absorb the smell of new paint.

She and Alison sat in silence while her father talked to his brother and sister-in-law. Children should be seen and not heard, girls in particular. She and her sister were both over twenty and yet they would always be children in this world where you accorded respect to experience. The quiet was a familiar quiet.

Uncle Kiv looked like a healthier version of their father. His cheeks were rubicund; he had more hair and a restless energy. Auntie Suhong had a calm, worldly presence. After a time the adults turned to her and asked how she had enjoyed Beijing, and she told them she had enjoyed it very much the second time around, when she was not so much alone and understood more about the culture. Returning to the city was like meeting a familiar foreign friend. The summer palace sparkled in the daytime, and she met up with all the Chinese friends she had made, and even her dear professors. In Hong Kong she took a ferry to visit her aunt and uncle in Macau. She slept in the same bed overlooking the bay, and realised that only a year ago she was in the same spot, lying awake, wishing she could let go and live a different life with her newfound lover instead of having so many hang-ups and anxieties. Yet all that seemed an eternity away. That evening, the last before she flew out to Cambodia, she had slept well.

And now, sitting in her uncle's air-conditioned lounge room, she didn't feel like she was anywhere far from home at all. Her father and uncle had made their family homes compellingly alike, with bay windows, muted drapery, tiled floors and white walls. And everything was new. Everything.

'This is your first time in Cambodia,' her uncle mused. 'One of my staff has planned a tour. But is there anything in particular you'd like to see?'

'I'd like to maybe find out more about recent Cambodian history,' she confessed hesitantly.

'Ah, there is nothing to say about those bad times,' her auntie sighed. 'Thinking about them only makes you feel sad all over again.'

'I will take you to my office,' her uncle told her, 'and you can interview some of my younger staff. In them, you will see the future of this country. They are very ambitious and …' He searched for the English word and could not find it, so inserted the French instead: '… *agressif*.' It was a positive thing to be *agressif* in this country.

It was then and there that she realised the difference between her father and his brother: her Uncle Kiv had gone back to Cambodia; instead of fearing it, he had planted his feet firmly on the ground and decided to rebuild. Her father had stayed in Australia and had started his own business, but he had inculcated in his children the need to tread lightly.

They tiptoed through Uncle Kiv's headquarters and downstairs to his offices. The managers were handsome men and women who looked barely

twenty.

Inside his office, her uncle had architectural plans and models of his latest investment projects. They spread across his table, across his desks, and some even rested on boxes. It was like an empire expanding to fill all the empty spaces of the room. Uncle Kiv crouched down behind his desk and opened a safe. He emerged with two blocks of newly minted banknotes, each the thickness of a novel and bound with white paper strips. He handed one to her sister and one to her.

‘We can’t take this much money, Uncle,’ she protested. She wasn’t being polite. She and her sister really could not take it.

‘Take it, take it!’ he insisted. ‘Just for a bit of fun. I’m going to make you both instant millionaires.’

It was a million Cambodian riels, the equivalent of US$250.

‘We really don’t want this, Uncle.’

‘Nonsense. What kind of children don’t want money? Put it in your handbags now, before you lose it all.’

BROTHER

FATHER—

Damn it, his daughters were so foreign. They shook hands with all the bank staff, and smiled at the wrong people. ‘There’s no need to thank the drivers or shake hands with employees. You’re in a different country now, with different rules to follow.’ But they didn’t understand hierarchy, he realised, and this was due to their soft upbringing in Australia. They’d also seen too much of the good stuff in life, so much so that they weren’t even particularly impressed by Kiv’s mansions and hotels. Or if they were, it was a fleeting, token interest. They seemed more interested in seeing old crumbling things, the museums and relics, the stupas and temples.

And they had even refused to take money! The thought of being instant millionaires did not move them. In fact, they had seemed aghast, and at the earliest opportunity had wanted to give the notes away in the street. What was wrong with these girls, he wondered. On the second day they sat around the air-conditioned house in the afternoon complaining of boredom.

‘Dad, there’s nothing to do. We can’t even step out the front door without the bodyguards.’

‘You can go for a swim in the pool out the back. You can watch the flat screen television in the lounge room.’

But they didn’t want to swim in the backyard. They didn’t want to watch the television. They wanted to go outside.

Didn’t they feel safe? Didn’t they feel lucky? These kids didn’t know anything. He remembered one evening when his son was in Cambodia a few years back. Kiv had called him up in Australia to laughingly relate the day’s events: ‘Your son and his cousin tried to run away in Angkor Wat. My bodyguard called me in a panic and told me he had lost them in Siem Reap. Luckily, twenty minutes later he found them sitting in a coffee shop snickering away.’ Kuan had been horrified. What idiots would do such a thing? Anything could have happened to them. And he could just imagine the panic of the poor man whose foreign charges had disappeared.

When their driver drove him to his old street, he could barely remember it. ‘This street used to be so clean and beautiful,’ he told his daughters. ‘People would sweep out front of their shops every morning, and in the evenings pull up chairs and sit outside to chat.’ They thought that it was just their father being nostalgic about his former home, which looked like four squares stacked one on top of the other, but he knew that he was not mis-remembering.

‘Imagine! We even brought along the bunch of keys from the factory with us when the Black Bandits came!’

He did not recognise the house on stilts where his brother claimed that he had lived during the time of Year Zero, or the river.

‘Why is the water so dirty in the stream?’ he asked his sister-in-law.

‘It was always that colour.’

‘I remember it was clear. We used to collect it for boiling and drinking. It was clear.’

But Kiv told him he was mis-remembering.

Oh, it was so good to be around Kiv again, Kiv who always knew what to do, Kiv who could make the hard decisions, and Kiv who could laugh about things too. Kiv was the innovator, the inventor, the let’s-take-action man. It was Kiv who got them to Vietnam, Kiv who hid the gold in the handlebars of his bike, Kiv who came back to Cambodia much to the chagrin of his fearful loved ones. In Kiv’s presence he felt like a kid again, under the protection of his older brother. It was so comforting that he didn’t care what his daughters thought.

Perhaps there were two decades when he was not so fearful – in his thirties and forties, when life seemed to spread out in a vast expanse of possibility. Anything could happen in Australia, it seemed, but only good things, and he was young and ready to make them happen, working seven-day weeks, ten-hour days. But then, compared to Kiv’s success here, his own seemed small.

So what if they worked until they stopped noticing that their homes were falling into disrepair, if it led up to this? Success of such dizzying magnitude, security to such an extent that it took your breath away? If Kiv wanted to build a medical clinic, it would be done. The same with roads and temples and schools. Everyone treated Kiv with such respect and fear, while back in his shop in Footscray he still sometimes got crazy customers who

would scream at him. Once, one even threw a telephone at him. He was still quelling the apoplectic rages of people who brought in twenty-dollar hairdryers six months out of warranty, still selling toasters to pensioners who pulled coin purses out of their vinyl handbags.

‘Why didn’t you go back to Cambodia too?’ his eldest daughter had asked him out of the blue one day when she caught him gazing at Kiv’s calendar. The calendar featured a picture of one of Kiv’s buildings on each month’s page. He knew his daughter scoffed at his ambitions, his love of franchises, his admiration of Colonel Sanders who had started Kentucky Fried Chicken when he was in his seventies, and his awe at Sir Richard Branson.

‘You kids were still too young, and there were four of you,’ he replied.

SAFE

DAUGHTER—

These were some of the sights she and her sister Alison saw in Cambodia: a leper with white on her face like talcum powder. A woman who sold them some books, her face melted by a long-ago acid attack. Landmine amputees. Children who squatted in the streets, brown and grotty. One tiny girl followed them all the way to their car and stood outside, tapping on the window. She had a baby on her hip, held there by a krama scarf. Tap, tap, tap. Little beggar children with no one to pull them away from oncoming traffic. A man who was so crippled he could only crawl on his stomach, lying on a flat board with wheels on the bottom.

Her family in Cambodia tried to shelter them from all this, in the same way Siddhartha was sheltered. ‘You will never see land this green,’ her father told them proudly. ‘This is the tropics.’ They were driven in a Mercedes to the holiday resort Cousin Hue managed in Sihanoukville. They had dinners of fresh seafood by the sea. The chauffeurs remained respectfully silent, and the bodyguards never spoke a word to them. But they were always there. When she swam at Sihanoukville Beach with her sister they watched from the shade of a tree, and when she ate dinner at a restaurant they stood outside. Her uncle kept sending them, three or four at a time. He was afraid his family would be kidnapped and ransomed off. A finger might be cut off, an ear. Acid on the face if there was no payment.

It wasn’t just the money and the hotels. Her relatives called every day, and often accompanied them on their trips. This is what it means to be a Pung, they seemed to be saying. You take care of your family.

She was taken to see the royal palace with its Bodhi tree at the front and its floor of silver tiles, its stupas commemorating the life of kings. She saw the Angkor Wat in Siem Reap, and the floating village on the Tonle Sap Lake. But not the genocide museum with its bloodstained floor and its racks in the corridors, not the killing fields of skulls and broken teeth.

Never get too close to cripples lest their cripple rub off onto you, was the way her parents saw their existence, even in Australia. The sense of

helplessness on leaving those behind – those on the stretchers with their IV drips warming like cordial in the sun. Crying crying waiting for them to die, wanting them to shut up.

*

Perhaps this was why her mother and father couldn't save the cats beneath the house. The mother cat was left on the side of the road, eyeballs out of their sockets, mouth open in one final noiseless roar, for the children to see. Her father didn't think to shield their eyes from it while he walked them to school. They did nothing – just waited for the council to clear away the death. Months later the bloodstains were still on the side of the road, the claw scratches on the curb.

'Give this dish of milk to the kittens,' her mother told her when the mewing became too much. 'Put it under the house.' But by the time she stepped out into the drizzle, on the front doorstep, the four older ravenous feral felines were there. There was no way to get beneath the house; the narrow wooden slits at its base would only admit small crawling creatures.

Those kittens mewed for three nights straight. They were beneath her room. She couldn't sleep. For three days and three nights she was at home in the room she shared with Alexander. There was nowhere else to go during the school holidays. No such thing as taking a walk down the street. For three days and three nights it rained outside and they heard the kittens above the rain.

Human life, like the cats' lives, was nasty, brutish and short. That was what she had been brought up with. It was not like on a farm, where the trajectory of life and death was laid out in matter-of-fact detail as part of the natural world. Her parents were working to give them better lives, but in those early years of arrival they worked until the curtains fell down, until the grouting on the tiles turned black, until the grass grew tall outside, and yet they could not see these things in their quest for an unblemished future. Work meant existence. In their minds, crippled soldiers: taken away and shot. Sick workers: taken away. Yet they could still work, and if you could work you could strive for something better, something cleaner. You had a future.

But the kittens were dying beneath the floorboards and there was nothing she could do. She could beg and beg and beg for their lives and yet her

parents would say nothing could be done. She listened for three nights as the mewing became more faint, till the mews became hoarse. Till it was no longer a collective mew, till they dropped off one by one. She listened until the final whimper, until the end of noise.

Later, other cats came. She fed them scraps from the kitchen, but she would not pat them.

THE FIELD (I)

FATHER—

When they came to the field where he had buried the dead, the trees seemed to be in the wrong place. He hadn't realised there would be such heat in the sky and on the ground, such blue and such white. He looked at his daughter revolving slowly, taking all of this in with her 360-degree vision – the sky so wide and the field so empty. He knew she was thinking that this was a sacred place, with spirits floating around, the place where he had buried bodies every single year during the floods.

How could she ever understand the waste of time it was, that loss of four years of his life? She couldn't imagine. She thought that if you told your story to the world, then things would change. Perhaps the world would stand still and wait, wait for reason to catch up. No, the world still spun, even if people believed it was flat, even if they believed it would heat up, or be blasted into oblivion. No, it didn't matter what people believed. The world spun on. The only thing that mattered was what people did. And before he came to Australia, he had done a spring-clean of his mind, brought a truck in there to haul out all the debris. It was part of moving home. He wanted to be sure that when he landed in the new continent, he could start anew.

The Australians had a funny expression: 'I wasn't born yesterday, mate.' He liked it a lot. Imagine being born yesterday, but with all your knowledge intact. He would wake up and there would be a new beginning, because all his feelings would be only a day old. He would pick and choose what emotions he wanted to test out. He would choose not to see the baby-blood patches on the trees but the miracles three years later. Like the day they found the stash of colourful clothes near the trunk of a tree. They were walking through the broken country and there they were, carefully folded in a cradle of leaves. If he hadn't looked closely, he would have missed it. To have been secretly blessed made them walk a little further that day. Who had left the clothes there? Good god, what a miracle that was.

And then, all those years later, his daughter telling him she wanted to know about Pol Pot. As if she could! But he bent to her whim and took her to interview some friends of his in a wooden house in suburban Springvale. The man and his wife had been stuck on top of the Dangrek mountain range along the Thai–Cambodian border. The refugees seeking asylum in Thailand had been driven back in buses and trucks and dumped there by the Thai government. The mountain range was dotted with landmines. This is what the man's wife told them that afternoon when he and his daughter came to visit:

'The buses that took us to the top were air-conditioned. We thought we were going up to meet the aeroplanes that would take us to America. We arrived in the middle of the night and slept on top of the rocks. In the morning, Thai soldiers arrived with guns. My husband left first with the rice; the children and I kept the pots and pans. We gave all our money to the soldiers. We thought that would pacify them, but then they started shooting. Thousands of people started running downhill, clinging to the tree vines; our children were clinging to our clothes. I was crying all the way down.'

But she had made it, and at the base of the mountain she helped to deliver the babies of two women who had gone into labour. Her children had made it too. They were forced back to Cambodia, those who were still alive. Later, as they wandered, these same people found a stash of cotton jackets and dresses and pants in some empty houses. They took what they needed and strung the rest from the treetops for other stragglers to find, in case any of their loved ones had survived the massacre.

When he looked back at the trees again, he could almost imagine the arms of a blue shirt waving at him, the bright eye of a button beckoning.

THE FIELD (II)

DAUGHTER—
Her senses became more stretched, as though they were working their hardest to take in the world. At first there was the field. And then there was the heat, when the sky breathed its fever breath over the field. Then back to the field and its unyielding dust. Nothing grew on it. ‘When the floods came,’ her father said, ‘this was raised ground. This was where I buried people.’

How could such a hot land be filled with water? ‘In Cambodia, there are only two seasons,’ her father explained, ‘Wet and Dry.’ Like he was explaining the latest Philishave razor. Wet and Dry. It had meant nothing to her until she stepped onto this soil.

When she imagined people dying like flies, what she saw in her mind was ice and snow and skin-thin sleet deaths. Too many movies about Stalingrad and the Holocaust and the Long March. Silly, she knew, because death here had hot halitosis that withered away the bodies much faster. Its rotting gums melted organs into miasmic matter. ‘The best fertiliser in the world,’ her father told her. ‘Besides shit, of course.’

And that was all her father said about that.

How do you feel about being here? she had wanted to ask him, but she knew what his answer would be.

Nothing much. It’s just a place.

Yet it wasn’t nothing much. It was nothing at all, and yet suddenly this flat stretch of nothing was everything. All that existed at that moment was this space. And she knew – all her father’s life had been about filling this emptiness. All he probably wanted to do after five minutes in the field was to climb back into the air-conditioned car and talk about Kiv’s buildings that spread across the city and rose into the sky, and the seaside resort that sprawled like a beautiful blinged-up woman across the beach, to lose himself in those generous sandy arms.

But in the middle of the field, with nothing, you had only your own body. And how treacherous your own body can be, she thought. How strange that

most people woke up each morning with the certainty that life would go on for them, when it was entirely dependent on the body, a body over which you had absolutely no control, a body that every once in a while would let loose with an awful surprise. You could vomit on a public bus. You could collapse on a dirt road because of a weak ankle. Exhaustion might blur your vision. Tinnitus could put a brake on your sense of balance. A migraine might make you taste tin in your mouth and bleed from the nose.

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. It stripped her of all certainty.

Dad buried bodies here, she realised, bodies that needed to be held, that once moved and exhaled and blinked just as she and he were doing. Bodies no one would ever talk about again. She looked around at her family. There were bones beneath their feet, souls between their breaths. The distance between the living and the dead was only a heartbeat's fade away. She felt a sudden need to grab them, her loved ones; to hold them close, to make sure they were not going to dissolve.

At that moment, her father was seeing something else. He pointed to the trees. There weren't many and they were skinny coconut or sugar-palms, huddled by the edges of the yellow field, as if afraid to step into the soil of a thousand souls.

She waited for him to tell her about the trees.

'Look at those bamboo ladders,' he said. 'They're used for climbing to the very top, to collect the juice of sugar-palm plants or coconuts.'

She grabbed onto the ladder and started up.

'Only the first few rungs,' he said, 'or you could fall.'

She let go.

They were surrounded by ex-soldiers who were now her family's bodyguards. Dressed in a khaki uniform, one of the soldiers carried a hessian bag of bullets across his chest. Another had a hoe and was digging a hole in the ground. This time it was not for burying a body – it was so that they could make a fire and burn their Heaven Banknotes for the memory of Auntie Suhong's mother, who had been buried in this ground. They had brought along two cartons, and each banknote was painted gold on one side and silver on the other.

‘When I was digging up the ground the year after your auntie’s mother died,’ her father said to her, ‘I unearthed the marker of her burial spot. Your auntie and uncle had written her name on a small piece of wood.’

‘Did you stow it away and keep it?’ she asked.

‘No, of course not.’ If you picked up a handful of dirt from the ground, you were stealing from the revolution.

‘People dug the graves up, over and over again, after the liberation,’ Uncle Kiv told her. They were looking for rings and gems looped around finger bones and wrists.

‘There was nothing,’ her father confirmed. ‘When I buried those bodies, they didn’t even have proper clothes.’

Now there were not even bones left. None of those people seemed to have existed, and yet her auntie was kneeling on the dirt in front of an incense urn, with three sticks of incense clutched in her hand. On the ground a rattan mat was laden with food – platters of roast meats, bowls of fruit and bamboo shells filled with rice and red beans. When Auntie Suhong rose up after her third bow and turned around, her shoulders were shaking with the memory of her mother.

The villagers were watching. They had been steadily growing in number, and some had stood for hours beneath the sugar-palms. A mother with a growth on her neck that gave her chin a thrust of stoic nobility. A cluster of naked children with faces she wanted to kiss. Her auntie and uncle handed out the food to the villagers. More children appeared out of nowhere, running across the field.

There was a man with them. An old man who had once headed the children’s army in their collective. Murderer of children! she thought when her father told her who it was. She could not believe that her father and Uncle Kiv were talking to him so calmly and casually, as if he were some ordinary neighbour with whom they had shared a street. She could not believe how, after their visit to the field, the man invited them back to his house, which was no more than an empty hut raised on stilts. He showed them a photograph of his daughter’s wedding.

‘Look,’ her father said to her, pointing out figures in the photograph. ‘This is his only daughter. That man standing next to her is his son-in-law.’

On the wall of his hut, alongside two family photos, was tacked a peeling picture of some movie stars. On the floor was a small used tube of teenage

make-up for face blemishes. How strange to see it there. This man also had children in his life, children he loved. He also had the grace of his community and their goldfish memory spans.

She felt that this country was something precious – as brutal, as split open as a pomegranate, with hot breath and a million red and buried eyes. A country she would never understand, but that had shaped her father and made him who he was. The real miracle in this, she realised as she watched him standing there in the heat holding a straw hat to his head, was not that he had lived. The real miracle was that he could love.

EPILOGUE

There's no vocabulary
For love within a family, love that's lived in
But not looked at, love within the light of which
All else is seen, the love within which
All other love finds speech.
This love is silent.

—T.S. Eliot, *The Elder Statesman*

CELEBRATION

DAUGHTER—
She had decided a year ago that they would have a big party when her father turned sixty. Her Korean friend's father had once told her that there were two important birthdays in a person's life: their first and their sixtieth. The first birthday was a celebration because the child had survived the perils of infancy. And the sixtieth signified that they had lived a long life. She had wanted to fill the house with her father's friends. Then she realised that all his friends were related to his business in one way or another, or people with whom he was on friendly terms at the Chinese Business Association annual dinners. 'Ay, Mr Kiang, how is business going, old boss?' he would say to them, shaking their hand in greeting, and they would clap him on the back and ask him the same. These were people you invited to weddings and funerals, but did not have anything to do with in between.

If you were to ask these men and women who had emerged into this new Wonderland from the Killing Fields what was most important to them in their lives now, in their fifties, they would answer, 'Health and happiness', but they probably would secretly think, 'Privacy'. They cherished their privacy because it was a kind of peace. But they liked to hear about other people.

'Needle came into the shop the other day. Her father has cancer, you know.'

'What, old Mr Ung?'

'Yes, it is quite late cancer.'

And of course, Needle's family would not expect help, not like the Australians with their constant visits and bringing over of food. One or two visits to old Mr Ung and then you would leave him to his family to look after. That's what they were there for.

But a celebration – surely these acquaintance-friends would love a celebration?

'Don't be silly. I don't need that kind of thing,' he muttered. 'Too much trouble.'

Instead they went to a small dumpling restaurant in Chinatown. Her father had had a cough for about two weeks and was huddled in a knitted scarf and his old brown leather jacket. She had bought a cake from the cake shop in Chinatown, a cream and mango confection that looked as if it might have been sitting in the chilled cabinet for half a day.

‘You should have got it in Footscray,’ her mother said. ‘It would be fifteen dollars cheaper.’

She looked at her family around the table. Alexander barely said a word because his mind was elsewhere, at some point in a law essay. Her mum had come straight from work in Springvale and was wearing her blue Retravision shirt. She had bought a pair of pyjamas from Target for her children to give to their dad for his sixtieth. ‘Don’t waste your money on useless stuff for your father,’ she said to them, and she would have said the same for herself if it were her birthday.

At school they were taught that generosity meant telling the other person: ‘I really want this, but I think you should have it.’ That would show your magnanimity of spirit. Her parents’ way was to pretend that they didn’t want it at all. That was how they showed their love, by not making the other person feel bad for taking something they might have desired.

‘The soup-filled dumplings are the speciality here,’ she said, ‘so let’s order four trays of them.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said her mother. ‘Just order one, for a taste.’

She had learned long ago not to argue with such reasoning, but she privately thought that if you went to a specialty restaurant, you ordered the speciality dishes, not the cheapest things on the menu; yet that was just the way her mother was. It made her feel a pang of sadness, for the things in life her parents had forfeited.

She looked around the table – they didn’t look all that sad. Exhausted from the day’s work maybe, but not sad. This meal was quiet, and focused on eating.

‘What’s it like to be sixty, Dad?’ Alina asked.

‘Nothing much.’

‘What do you mean, nothing much?’

‘I’m not an old grandpa yet!’

KIEN

FATHER—
His kids were keen on birthdays. He wasn't, at least not for himself. He didn't want to be reminded that he was aging. He and Kien had never celebrated their birthdays, but he remembered one year when he had wanted to do something for her.

When she turned forty, he took her to Starshots studio to have her picture taken. The make-up artists spent two hours on Kien. They styled her hair, and even gave her a set of false eyelashes. He'd never told her that she was beautiful. In fact, when he was younger, he'd even hoped that she would not think it of herself, because he didn't want her to leave him. She never wore make-up in her twenties, and before she turned thirty she got one of those old-granny perms from Veronica, the home-garage hairdresser. She told him it was easier to manage.

When the Starshots photographs came in, they both pored over the small sample prints, in order to choose larger ones. His wife looked a different person with all that make-up on her face. She picked out a couple of photos she liked, and he blew them up to the size of oil paintings. He had them framed in gilt frames and hung the largest one in their living room. There were barely any pictures of Kien in her early twenties. When he thought about it, he realised that their lives had never been about looking at themselves in the past.

'Lucky they all look like Kien,' he would say of his children, 'and not like me.'

*

Kien was always going on about how slow he was. 'You'd never come late to pick up your children, but you always come late for me and make me wait at the train station.' He was used to her complaints. Three decades of marriage and he could not imagine having such arguments with anybody else. Those Australians on television always made up with ten million apologies and flowers and sweets, but he and his wife never said sorry to

each other. They knew that they'd still be together. There was no conceivable way they would not be. Their love was a closed circle.

He thought about the few church weddings he had been to over the years, and how there was a part of the ceremony when everyone had to be silent while the vows were made. Love, honour and cherish. In sickness and in health. For better or for worse. People had to remind each other of these things because life was so comfortable here. Because they had been brought up expecting separation from their parents once they reached a certain age, these new adults had to learn to depend again.

What was wrong with dependency, he wondered. If you didn't depend on anyone, you died.

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My old man, Kien said to him, as she fed him a green leafy vegetable at the restaurant table. He was suddenly aware as he was chewing that his daughter was watching him. Crap, he thought, she might even write about this. He had only just turned sixty and already his wife was shoving bite-sized pieces of food into his mouth. But it wasn't that. It was that they were acting like lovelorn teenagers, he and Kien – that was what his daughter's astonishment-face was about. When had this happened? He had no idea until he saw it through her eyes. But when he examined it, it wasn't puppy-love playfulness. His wife wasn't a particularly playful person; she took things too seriously, which resulted in her taking tablets for her blood pressure.

It was just love, he concluded, love that could adapt and change. She was too careful, his daughter. She thought and thought about potential partners and never did anything about it. She weighed up the pros and cons, as if perfect adulthood were something to be totted up. She was never any good at maths. Why was she doing this? She was going to be thirty, but it was as though she couldn't wait to be sixty, and all the intervening years were just getting in the way.

He wished that his daughter would go out more, yet he himself had never set foot in a nightclub. Why did people want to romance in dark-lit places? Because in the dark, the other person's chins sank away in shadows and their eyes lit up like possum orbs. They could hide their shonky teeth and oily skin. Those women back in Cambodia bloomed at fifteen and their

faces rotted at twenty, at least the ones in the clubs and brothels, not that he had visited such places, but he had seen them during the day, buying fruit in Phnom Penh's New Market. Even the swanky bars in Melbourne, which his daughter assured him were absolutely safe, he felt wary of. Why sit around drinking a small glass of Coke through a straw in the company of drunkards? Even if there were no drunkards, even if it was in one of the almost-all-nighter coffee shops near his daughter's university, well, why did it have to be so dark? People were always keeping themselves in the dark.

Love was having all the lights on, and it was love at first sight with Kien. Well, no, that was a lie. He knew Kien when she was thirteen and working in his factory, of course, but he did not fall for her then. He was not a Happy Uncle. He was fond of the kids who worked there, although Kien told him that she had been scared of him. All of the little girls were – he was the foreman, he came down every once in a while to see what was happening.

So it was love at second sight, if you wanted to be precise about it. But how could you be precise about such things? It was first sight for him, because his life began when he was thirty, after he left the Kingdom of Hell. Bang! It hit him like that. If Kien had asked him why he loved her back then, he would have said *Because I can feel feelings again!* Singing it loud to her like the opening line of the opening number of a musical.

He had waited for Kien with the anxiety of a child. How young she was, and how she made his heart come back to life. How he fell for her. How high and how deep and how single-mindedly.

Sometimes he looked at his wife and thought, this is what I have done to another human being. This is what my love has demanded of her. Three decades and four children later, and she was a middle-aged woman who still could not read or write, but who commanded staff at his store, carried vacuum cleaners and food processors and laptop computers from the warehouse to the shop floor, and sold the most stock of anyone.

And now she was sitting there without thinking, feeding him with a pair of chopsticks. 'My old man, what are you thinking about?' she asked. Inside, he felt the same as when he was thirty. That was when he was born again. Not born to Christ or even to the Buddha, but just born and that was enough.

MIRRORS

DAUGHTER—
Her mum and dad, as they walked from the restaurant towards the car park, were holding hands. They had been doing this quite a bit recently in public, but the way they did it suggested that each thought of the other as a child whom they wanted to guide. And each believed the other did not detect this thought. A person was full of unexpected surprises, to themselves and to others, she realised. She had seen married couples habituate themselves to each other's small annoyances. 'Typical, he always gets anxious whenever we have to meet someone new.' Or, 'She's really shy, she'll never do that.' But how could you anticipate a person's behaviour two decades down the line? You couldn't.

She remembered the times when she had been particularly melancholy in China, and where she had gone. She liked to visit the Hou Hai district, with its stone bridge and still lake. Hou Hai meant 'The Back of the Sea', and it had once been a quiet place, before the bars crammed themselves into the streets like a line of contesting cancan dancers, leaving a small concrete area for the elderly to conduct their public lives. She liked to watch the old people dancing in this public square to music pumped through loudspeakers.

She had not seen any public kissing or embracing in Beijing, just a lot of spitting. But in Hou Hai she saw ancient men and women linked arm in arm hobbling down the streets, their austere army-green and brown padded coats blending in with the ancient trees. While the young people filled the expensive wine bars and claustrophobic nightclubs, these old people formed their friendships outside for free.

She stopped and watched them dancing closely and became suddenly teary for no reason. They really weren't even very good. Some of them just swayed like rickety branches. But she realised: these were people who had toiled together through the decades, through the Cultural Revolution, through severe times. This bright shining Beijing was beyond their wildest imaginings. They had stayed together through all the hard years and could

still come out and dance at night. These were people who had probably never worn make-up in their lives, but on their faces were calligraphy lines of experience and love. They were each other’s mirrors.

WAITING

DAUGHTER—

‘Your dad will pick you up from the university after work,’ her mother had told her over the phone, ‘if you want to come home this weekend for dinner.’ And she stood at the gate of her college, waiting for him.

After three years teaching at Ormond College, she was back at Janet Clarke Hall, this time as writer-in-residence. She had spent most of her twenties living out of her family home, and over the years the halls of learning had become her new home. Some of her students had become residential tutors themselves, and a few had travelled the world. They sometimes came back to visit her in her flat. She loved seeing them, their faces flushed with all the possibilities ahead. She loved remembering when they had first arrived as freshers at seventeen or eighteen. She cried every year at the valedictory dinners, as each group departed into the world, and vowed every year to dispense with this ridiculous sentimentality. But she found she couldn’t – when the end of the evening came, she would feel achingly proud of them; and here they were eight years later, sitting in her flat telling her that they were working at the Austin Hospital, or had just spent a year in Cuba learning Spanish or in Cambodia clearing landmines, or that they were teaching high-school students *Hamlet* in Warrnambool.

‘We didn’t think about a future when we were in our twenties,’ her mother had told her once, matter-of-factly.

‘No, we never made plans about how the rest of our lives would be until we came to Australia and learned that people here could plan their futures,’ her father added.

When her father picked her up in his trusty blue Toyota Camry (he had picked the model with the most airbags), the first thing he said to her when she climbed in was, ‘Guess what? Your land has gone up in value.’

‘Really?’ She hadn’t driven past it for a year or more. She had no interest in revisiting a patch of grass with weeds and dandelions growing on it. To her, the land existed only as a number on her monthly bank statement.

‘Yes, by such an incredible amount too!’ He told her how much. It was probably because her migrant neighbours from Turkey and Vietnam had started building their enormous mansions. Big Georgian pillars at the front, bay windows and two-toned rendered brick.

‘What should I do with the land?’ she asked her father.

‘Hold onto it,’ he suggested, ‘and perhaps you can build some townhouses and rent them out.’

She thought about building her future family home on the block, a house that might look identical to all the others in the street. The outside did not matter anymore. But she knew it was no fun doing this on your own, not sharing the marvel of seeing something rise from the ground with someone else. Independence was sweet, and it had kept her clear-headed and happy for the greater part of her twenties, but she knew that at some point she would bump up against the raw edges of her selfishness. Not being able to plan the rooms that would one day awaken the babies sleeping in her bones, not being able to build a life together, only thinking for one person – perhaps that was what the span of this decade was for, but now she wanted something else.

‘I don’t think I’ll build a rental property on it, Dad.’

‘Then what do you intend to do?’

‘I think I will wait.’

She would wait.

NIGHT-TIME AT HOME

FATHER—

He and Kien had bought the enormous black table a decade ago, at a warehouse sale. ‘Granite is harder than marble,’ he told the kids. Before then they had not known that granite was a slice of rock, cut off and polished. He wondered how these kids could not know that. At the warehouse, Kien had tapped the table with her knuckles. He saw that she still had black dust around her nails. When she first started working, she would get terrible injuries – scalpels slipping and embedding in her palm, cuts to her fingers, burns on her arms. But now the skin on her hands was as tough as that of the peasants who had lined up to receive acupuncture from him all those decades ago.

His wife’s hard hand, tapping on one of the hardest rocks of all: at the sight of this, he decided on the table. ‘Let’s take it.’

When they eventually moved into their new house, the family sat around the table for at least half an hour each day and ate together. They had built an open-plan kitchen, which meant that the cooking was shared – with his wife as task-master, and he and one or two of the children as sous-chefs. His kids would always complain that he washed the vegetables too slowly.

‘Don’t waste water, Dad,’ Alina would say.

‘You’re washing all the vitamins out of the lettuce,’ Alison would remind him, but they had got used to his careful ways, and they were affectionate.

‘A little bit of dirt in the food helps build up the immune system,’ said his eldest daughter.

As usual, his son did not say much, but he knew the boy had inherited his habit of cleanliness.

After dinner, they would all go upstairs. He and his wife would go to their bedroom, the kids to their separate rooms. It was different, this sharing a room with his wife and having no kids present. Kien would go to sleep at least three hours before he did, because she woke up at six in the morning to work. It had been her habit since she was thirteen. She would sprawl

stomach-down on the bed, head facing the television, with it switched on to some DVD drama or late-night movie, until she fell asleep.

He would read newspapers, sometimes cutting out a clipping of his oldest daughter to put into a big black folder of all the articles he was collecting about her. The daughter who had moved out of home and somehow found her way into the world. Sometimes he would look at the picture of her that they had on their dresser, her hair still tied with two ribbons that her grandmother had put in, on her kindergarten photo day. In that photo, she was cutting something out with a pair of yellow scissors.

She had brought back a Chinese edition of Barack Obama's autobiography for him from Beijing. She told him that it was the bestselling book in China at that time. He didn't see what the big deal about this book was, but maybe it was just a bad translation. Maybe it was a cultural thing and he did not understand good writing in America. His favourite English book that his children had bought him was *How To Win Friends and Influence People*. Sometimes he felt that he had raised four foreign creatures who were now cultured in things that he could not even begin to imagine. He liked that about his kids – how they said thank you to each other, and how they apologised if they so much as accidentally nudged one another. He liked the fact that his daughters were demonstrative with their affection for each other, how the oldest called the youngest one 'pet'.

He liked these quiet times at night, when he could get up and walk into any of the rooms of his children and see them on the computer, or rearranging their blankets for bed. Before bedtime, he would go back downstairs, and sometimes one or two of them would be down there, getting a drink, looking at one last snippet in the newspaper underneath a single light-glow. Sometimes his son would be there, reading, because of his insomnia.

'Go to bed,' he would tell them. 'It's late.' They would shuffle around, finish up their reading, talk to each other for ten minutes more. But they always headed upstairs, and he marvelled at this – that they were considered 'grown-up' in this country, but that he could still ask this of them and they would do it. Not because they felt a particular need to, but because they cared about his anxiety about their lack of sleep. It was a complicated way to care, and he knew – as he never knew before, never knew when they

were children – how much his children accommodated him, and accommodated his fears.

He made sure all the windows and doors were shut. He made sure all the knives and sharp kitchen utensils were in their drawers, and that there was nothing on the tiled floors that might trip anyone. One of his fears was that a robber might come into the house late at night and if he did not hide the knives, they would have a weapon ready to hand. He also did not want any burglars to trip up, because he had read somewhere that he could be sued if they injured themselves on his property. It seemed to him to be an insane legal system, but this was the price you had to pay if you wanted a system that put a person first.

Sometimes, when one of his children was out late, his wife and he conspired to stay awake. They did this by egging each other on in their bedroom.

'Aiyoh,' his wife would complain, 'why do you always let them go out so late? I told you that you shouldn't be so easy on them.'

'Stupid kid,' he would say, 'always doing this. Why are they always doing this? How selfish. Selfish kids.'

And so on and so forth they would go, fuelling each other's annoyance at the one kid who had stayed out late, so as not to be sleepy. So as to be awake to see the car pull into the driveway. It was only then that they could turn off the light and go to sleep.

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