

JONGSARAT: A NOVEL

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113, 544 words

Jongsarat (Abstract)

Jongsarat is a full-length fictional novel set in Brunei. It follows the lives of two cousins as they struggle with the same decision over the course of one summer. Rijal, the black sheep of the family, must try to come to terms with his fears and his troubled past when he finds out his girlfriend is pregnant. Hana, the family's golden girl and hope for the future, fights to keep her own sins a secret as she faces losing her boyfriend to his growing love for God. Set against the backdrop of a country in which reputation and religion are inextricably intertwined, and in which traditional values are struggling to stay alive, Rijal and Hana must find a way to understand the future that they are fighting for.

Jongsarat is fundamentally an exploration of the challenges traditional social and religious structures are facing as they struggle to shape modern-day Brunei. It is a study of how, when traditional culture is uninformed by the heart of religion, it leads to disenfranchisement and the hollowness of ritual. It is a story about the ways in which everyday families have to cope with the hopes and expectations each generation places on the next in an ever-changing world.

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Dedication

I dedicate the following novel, with love, to my parents.

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Prologue

10 years earlier

Rijal is having the time of his life.

He is sitting in the back seat of his cousin Sophie's sleek little black Mercedes – a gift from his Uncle Henry for her eighteenth birthday a few weeks ago. It still smells of new leather, and the dashboard and mirror are unadorned except for the license sticker. The license plates aren't exactly customised, but they read KL 188, Sophie's birthday, the eighteenth of August. Rijal had overheard his mother talking to Uncle Henry and Uncle Henry had revealed that it had cost over three thousand RM to "book" the number. His mother hadn't really liked it, saying that eight is an unlucky number, but Uncle Henry had teased her, saying that she was Muslim now, and shouldn't believe in luck anymore. Gina's joking reply had turned the conversation over from English into Hakka too quick for Rijal to keep up with, then.

Sophie glances back over her shoulder from the front passenger seat, her eyes laughing. "How you doing back there?"

He is tipsy, maybe more than tipsy, and drunk on both the sensation itself and the numerous beers he had had back at the club. The club that Sophie had insisted they try tonight. It is the first time he has ever gotten drunk so openly. Of course, he has had the occasional drink, snuck behind the school canteen and, after he dropped out, with his friends in private residential apartments, but he's never been able to drink in public before, not in Brunei.

But he is in Malaysia now, has been for the last month, and here, with Sophie beside him, his Chinese features and total anonymity mean that he can go into any club, any bar, and he will be served, without any fear that someone will recognise him as Pengiran Mahmud Jaafar's son. No one cares, in Malaysia. No

one knows he is Malay, or Muslim. All they know is that he has money, and he's with a Chinese girl and her boyfriend, and the rest is irrelevant.

"I love Malaysia," Rijal shouts at his cousin, and she grins. Her boyfriend, Adli, is driving.

"You should move here," Sophie calls, over the CD player. "We could go clubbing all the time!" It is blasting music – Adli wanted to try out the speakers – some rock music mix that Adli has made himself. Rijal has become very well acquainted with Adli over the last month – he and Sophie are inseparable. He is surprised that Uncle Henry doesn't seem to care that Sophie is dating a young man with a tattoo and a gold bracelet, but Adli is also young, rich, and plays at business as if he had been born to it. Which he had. Adli's father is one of Uncle Henry's business partners, and among the current richest men in Johor Bahru.

Rijal wonders blearily why he didn't get that gene. Since he dropped out of school two years ago, his father has been trying to get him interested in the family business, Ilham, which deals in stocks and shares of some kind – although all his father does is sign papers - but so far all Rijal has done is play errand boy for a few days. He doesn't know what he wants to do with his life, but he knows that's not it.

Maybe he will move to Malaysia, Rijal thinks, lighting a cigarette with automatic ease despite his not-entirely-steady fingers, and inhaling deeply. Sophie is starting university in a couple of weeks' time, to do a degree in business administration. He hasn't thought much about school since he dropped out, but Sophie seems excited, and when he'd gone with her to scout out the campus it had seemed...nice. And Sophie will be around – he enjoys spending time with his devil-may-care cousin, who is always teasing him into doing things he can't do in

Brunei and who laughs at the things that would make his parents frown. He supposes it's about time he started figuring out what he wants to do with his life. He can't do nothing forever. That's what his parents are always saying, anyway. Rijal is vaguely impressed by Sophie and Adli's drive, but is hard-pressed to feel any himself. Leave well enough alone, is what he thinks. Getting too involved when you don't need to just leads to trouble. Always.

Like this recent business of his parents, with Ilham, which is the reason they came to Malaysia. There's been some nastiness in Brunei with the company. He's heard more than they think – Rijal discovered a long time ago that if you sit quietly with a blank enough face, people forget you're in the room, and keep talking as if you can't hear them. Especially relatives, who always think you're too young to listen to grown-up affairs. The only one who doesn't ever slip up is Uncle Yunus – he always knows when Rijal is in the room, and never forgets to guard his tongue. But that's Uncle Yunus – he takes responsibility seriously. Rijal has no desire to be like him, but, as with Sophie and Adli, he is glad to know that there is a person like Uncle Yunus in the world.

“Light,” Sophie demands from the front seat, and Rijal tosses her the lighter from where he is draped on the back seat, giggling when she drops it and has to fumble around under her seat, her long hair falling everywhere. The smoke and the alcohol is making him light-headed. He chases his own thoughts like a tail. Trouble, he thinks vaguely. Something to do with embezzlement of government funds in Brunei. He doesn't really understand, but he knows that it's bad, and that his parents have come to Malaysia to talk to Uncle Henry about additional funds that they need. Something about going to court unless they can raise some capital...

Rijal coughs as Adli goes over a hump. “Where are we going?” he asks. He struggles to sit up, sways a little in his seat. He leans forward, in between the two front seats.

Adli and Sophie laugh. “We’re going to meet some of Adli’s friends,” Sophie says. “We’re here!”

“Here” is the middle of nowhere, a desolated stretch of road on the Johor Bahru highway. Follow it long enough and you’ll end up over the water in Singapore. Rijal stumbles out of the car frowning. The heat of the night makes his throat dry, and he clears it with some trouble. They have parked on the side of the empty highway, and Sophie and Adli, arms draped around each other, are walking towards a couple of other cars. Rijal follows after them, his head clearing a bit more with every step. There are a bunch of people waiting next to the other cars. They all look like Adli – like Sophie, Rijal realises with a start. Young, rich, restless. The cars, too, look as shiny and sweet as Sophie’s new one – a red Ferrari and a silver BMW. By the time he realises Adli is talking, he is being introduced.

“This is Sophie’s cousin, Rijal,” Adli announces.

Rijal nods, inhaling deeply. “Hey.”

“Hey,” comes echoing back to him, through the red-filtered darkness of lit cigarettes, with a disembodied lack of enthusiasm. “So are we doing this or what?” says one of the young men, who later Rijal will be unable to picture, except for the black sunglasses perched on his head. It is such an incongruous accessory, standing as they are in the middle of a pitch-black highway, jungle surrounding them on either side for as far as the eye can see. They are separated from the dense, tangled vegetation by a single road rail that looks flimsier the more Rijal looks at it. He swats at the air around him blurrily – mosquitoes. It is

surprisingly noisy out here – there is an unceasing buzz of insects that provides the background bass to the hum of the two other cars.

“What are we doing?” Rijal whispers to Sophie.

She turns to him, one hand hanging on to the arm Adli has draped around her shoulder. “We’re going to race,” she whispers back.

Rijal looks around, but he can see only the dark highway. He is starting to sweat just from standing out here – his arms and legs feel moist and are beginning to itch. “Here?”

“Shh,” she giggles. “Yes, here.”

Rijal swats at the air again. “Why?”

She laughs at him, and he notices again how pretty his cousin is. Even out here, with her makeup practically all gone and beads of sweat popping up on her little nose, Sophie looks pretty. Golden girl, Rijal thinks. He cannot seem to stop his sporadic coughs. He needs a drink, his throat is parched. He can’t help thinking how ironic that is – there is moisture in the air all around them. The air is drenched in its weight. He wonders if he sticks his tongue out, would he be able to taste the water, like rain?

“What are you doing?” Sophie giggles, slapping his arm. “You look so dumb.”

The conversation has been going on without him. With an effort, Rijal tunes back in. The group is speaking a mixture of Cantonese, English and some coarse Malay slang. He has picked up enough Cantonese from hanging out with Sophie and Adli in the last month, to follow, and of course he already knows English and Malay. Apparently not much of interest has happened while he was unfocused – the group is just shooting the breeze.

“So are we going to do this or what?” Adli says, taking a drag on his cigarette. Didn’t somebody else already ask that, Rijal wonders blearily, then his thoughts wander away again.

There is a murmur of assent.

Adli catches sight of Rijal taking turns on a cigarette with Sophie and chuckles, tossing something at him. Caught off guard, Rijal fumbles and by some miracle manages to catch it just before it hits the gravel. The keys to Sophie’s car. They are still weighty and smooth with newness.

“Hey,” Adli says. “You wanna drive?”

Taken aback, Rijal shakes his head. “No,” he says, confused. “I’ve been drinking.”

Adli hoots. The others are already going to their cars. “Who hasn’t?” Adli says breezily. “Go on, kiddo. It’ll be easy. We have them beat – Sophie’s car can do zero to a thousand in under six seconds.”

Rijal looks at Sophie, the keys still in his clammy hands. “Go on,” Sophie urges, taking the cigarette from him. She giggles. “It’ll be fun.”

Rijal shakes his head to clear it. “Really?” he whispers, confused. “But I don’t feel – I don’t know if I should be driving.”

Sophie shakes her head vigorously. “You’re fine,” she says firmly. “Really. Besides, it’s just down this highway. Straight line, ten miles.”

Rijal tags after them as they walk back to the car. “Aren’t you worried about other cars?”

Sophie and Adli exchange a look. “Don’t worry so much, man,” Adli says. It is a wholly new accusation to Rijal. “We’ve done this plenty of times.” He burps. “This highway is empty after midnight. This is a kampung town.”

Rijal relaxes. Adli and Sophie know what they're doing, he tells himself happily, a little nervously, as they get in the car, this time with him in the front seat and Adli at the back. He starts the car with a thrill, and the music, interrupted when they'd stopped, blasts with a shout out of the quiet. The air conditioning streams out confidently – another mark of how new the car is – and he lets Adli direct him to the designated starting point. He can only see to the edge of his headlights on the black road, the two streams clearly delineated before being eaten by shadow, that is how dark it is.

“How do we know where to stop?” he shouts over the music to Adli. He is about to turn down the music slightly, but he is distracted when Adli calls back,

“Don't worry about stopping! We're going to start in a few seconds! Get ready!”

There is hardly any time to think, just to turn back to the windshield and ready his foot over the accelerator. In the passenger seat, Sophie grins at him. She looks perfectly at home in the car, in this atmosphere. His cousin is a troublemaker, Rijal has time to think in the back of his mind, faintly amused, and then Adli is yelling, “Go! Go go go!”

Rijal jams his foot down on the accelerator. The car resists, ever so slightly, then it *springs* into speed. Rijal feels himself pressed back into his seat, and for the first few seconds, he is aware of nothing except the blur the landscape has become. The car starts to swerve – he locks down his arms, eases up a little, and laughs in sheer delight. The power of the car is wonderful, the vibrations of the engine shuddering through his seat. He glances over at Sophie, she is laughing something at him, but he cannot hear her over the music.

A red spot blazes past the window.

“Faster!” he hears from the back of the car, a shout that sounds like a whisper through the noise of the radio and the engine.

He pushes his foot down again, all the way. The pedal goes down smoothly, but for one second the car doesn't seem to respond, and he thinks with some dismay, *That's the fastest it'll go*, right before he feels it up his leg, that minute resistance. As if the car is getting ready to leap forward. The sharp excitement rips up his body -

The car *flips*.

They are airborne. Everything seems to slow and crystallise into clarity. His head comes away from the seat. His body flies up and out, suspended against the safety belt. His limbs are disconnected, he is flailing and falling and flying at once. He feels a scream tear out of his throat, his stomach dislodge.

The car crashes to the road, and the impact hurls through him. His head jerks, and his body snaps back into place with a sickening solid punch. There is the tinkle of chimes, millions of chimes, and the roar of burning silence ripping across his face. He is upside down, inside out.

The roar eats him alive, and he is swallowed by blackness.

* * *

He wakes, confused, to his mother's face.

She looks like she hasn't slept in a while, and for the first time that he can remember, she is not wearing any makeup. It makes her look younger than her thirty-odd years.

“Ma?” he croaks, and realises that his throat is burning. His head spins and he struggles to sit up.

“Don’t move,” his mother orders, and despite her naked face, her voice is familiar and strong. She reaches to the table beside him, and gently helps him to some water. He realises she’s been crying. That frightens him, his mother is the strongest person in the world. He struggles to understand. Is he okay?

“I’m in the hospital?” he realises. There is a needle running under his skin – an IV. His father comes into view, and looks as tired and red-eyed as his mother. “What’s going on?”

“What do you remember?” his mother asks, her voice uncharacteristically gentling.

He fights the fog in his head. “I don’t know.” He tries to remember going to sleep. He remembers Sophie laughing, drinking – shouldn’t mention that, he thinks belatedly – and they had gone out to a club. Then they had gone for a drive, right? A drive...and a race, maybe...

The horror leaps back, hand-in-hand with recall. “Is Sophie okay?” he sits up now, past the stiffness. He doesn’t expect any answer other than “yes” and in the moments between his mother’s, “No,” and her next words, he flies through a thousand scenarios. Sophie has broken an arm. A leg. Maybe her neck. Maybe she is paralyzed. How horrible if she is paralyzed. Nothing would be worse than that.

Nothing except... “She passed away, Rijal.”

It is like an internal punch. He cannot breathe. Everything from then happens in a daze. Uncle Yunus and Aunt Lily running in to make sure he is okay. Then to tell his parents gravely that the hospital is allowing them to see Sophie one last time. His Uncle Yunus asking if he wants to see her. His mother urging him on, “You have to see her, Rijal. Say goodbye.” Even while he cringes from her cruel firmness, he knows that it stems from a terrible, powerful love.

He is unbearably cold. That is what he remembers, later on. That sensation of cold, of shivering inside and out, to the insides of his bones. And then the temperature drops more the minute he steps into the morgue. His memories of this are always tinted blue and grey, like frost, like an ice cave. When he thinks back on this time, it always seems like a dream or a movie. Someone must have led them in, uncovered her, but all he remembers is looking down at her. Too briefly – his mother takes him away – he barely has time to see her. She looks cold, shrivelled, neat.

He doesn't remember the in-between times, but later he finds out that he is in the hospital for a few days. He must have slept most of the time, for why else would he not remember anything? Just snippets, half-buried memories that will emerge from time to time over the years.

His Uncle Yunus sitting with him, reading the Qur'an in a low voice, unceasingly, when he thinks Rijal is sleeping. His mother and father arguing, even then, over nothing at all, just past his hospital curtain. His father's title doesn't mean much in Malaysia. Not enough to get a private room. He will wonder later if it begins then, that long slow slide into divorce. Whether it begins at his hospital bed, over arguments on whether he should rest more, sit up, find a private room that degenerate into his mother's bitter comments on having to push his father to do *everything*, and his father's increasing refuge in silence. *Why do I always have to decide? Why do I always have to think of everything?* His mother's unceasing complaints. He doesn't remember his Aunty Lily being there. He doesn't think about that for a long time, but when he does, he wonders if she was with Uncle Henry that whole time.

He remembers coming out of dreams thinking, "I'm sorry."

He never says it aloud. They never talk about the accident, none of them. All they do is ask if he's feeling better today. He does not have to ask about Adli. He hears them whispering about him. That he's not doing well. He hasn't woken up yet.

He sees Adli once, although later he is never able to decipher whether he really did see Adli, or whether he saw another patient and imagined it was Adli. He will pick through his memories and try to make sense of when he would have seen Adli. Did he just imagine he saw him? The broken face, the wide swathes of white that turn grey and bloody, the parents grieving even before he dies? Was that Adli? Or was it just a dream that filled in the pictures to go with the words his parents gave to him, so gently. Everyone is gentle with him. It seems that everyone will never stop being gentle with him.

When did the screaming happen? He can never look back at the memory of the screaming too closely. Did it happen at the funeral, in Uncle Henry's opulent red-and-mahogany living room? Or before he goes into the morgue? Everything around Uncle Henry and his mother is blurred in memory. He only remembers that Uncle Henry is screaming terrible things, terrible because they are true. That it is all Rijal's fault. He was born a troublemaker, good-for-nothing. Does he imagine his mother's face, white and stricken and accepting? There is no fight in Gina at that moment, not with Sophie lying so close by. She had loved Sophie. They all had.

Then Uncle Henry screams that it was Rijal who should have died. That Sophie had everything ahead of her and Rijal had nothing and it was Rijal who should have died. And he sees his mother's face harden into white stone, into marble that will never yield a crack. Rijal hears Aunty Lily say sharply, "Henry!"

and knows that they can all see him now. He himself can see everything in the room. He wants to tell his mother that it's okay. It's a relief to have it out in the open. The words come, parched and scraped, to his throat. The scent of incense, thick, heavy, invasive. Buddhist fires lit to give Sophie all the luxuries in Heaven. Rijal cannot bear to think that Sophie will ever go without. "I'm sorry," he tries to say. It comes in a whisper. Uncle Henry hears it, he must hear it. He turns his back on all of them.

"Get out," he says, from very far away.

Is that when his mother comes to take him? It is like he is still in the room, surrounded by his parents, his aunty and uncle. Except they stay behind, don't they? He can remember that, Aunty Lily and Uncle Yunus standing in the middle, torn. Not sure whose side to take, who needs comfort more. Stay with him, Rijal wishes he could say. He knows his mother will take care of him. But there is no one to stay with Uncle Henry but Sophie.

Does he say it aloud? He doesn't think he does. Maybe Uncle Henry asks them, in that strange broken voice, to stay. To stay or to pray? Rijal knows Uncle Yunus can be depended on to do both.

And through it all, his mother's litany. *Don't worry about anything. We'll take care of you. Don't worry about anything. Everything will be all right.*

One

The cars are lined with festive regularity down the main road, half their wheels on faded grey tarmac, half on sloping grass that drops sharply off into wide ditches. Hana has always marvelled at the seeming unconcern of Bruneians at parking on the edge of these mini cliffs. Even more so when she began to learn how to drive herself, and how to navigate the rules of the road and of custom, which dictate the road is expected to transform into one long stretch of parallel parking on occasions such as this.

The wedding that she, her parents, and her sisters are attending is of her cousin Rijal's cousin - not really relatives of theirs, but Rijal's mother, Auntie Gina, insisted they attend. Her mother's brother – her shrewd and skewed Uncle Maurice is visiting from Malaysia with his children, her cousins. The unspoken understanding is that they will be having their own family reunion amidst the wedding festivities.

Her father manages to squeeze their bulky family Pajero, a solidly respectable silver vehicle, into a spot, with some luck, only about ten minutes down the road, as another car exits. When they get out of the car, they all get out on the side that is parked on the road – the drop down to the unlined grassy drain is too steep on the other side. Glancing down, Hana can make out some vegetables she recognises amongst the weeds and dirt – green leafy vegetables with names that she only knows in Malay that the market women would sell cheaply for a dollar per big bunch. She has never liked those vegetables, what her parents would call “kampung” vegetables, with the purple veins that run through the big flat dark green leaves. Even when they are immersed in soup, floating under the clear broth and thin circles of oil, boiled into softness, those veins retain a tough,

bent but still unbroken fibrous quality that sometimes emerges undigested. Putting them in her mouth seems to remind her of the filthy waters from which they spring, that thin single streak of DNA that separates them from weeds.

Her parents walk ahead of the children, perfectly matched in his purple *cara melayu* and her floral *baju kurung* and *tudong* in the same shade. Her three little sisters are chattering and squabbling behind her, so Hana walks alone. It is mid-afternoon, and the sun is high, the road dry. She can feel her skin softening and swelling in the oppressive humidity, her feet expanding in their pretty delicate sandals. She has a sudden image of pressing on her skin and having water gushing out like a fountain or a sponge, that is how absorbent she feels. The thin silk of the *baju kurung* that remains cool and swishes around her moving legs and against her arms feels like a blessing. The silk headscarf she wears shades her face against the throbbing heat of the sun. She is aware, as she walks, of a pleasant consciousness that she looks pretty. Her *baju kurung* is new – she likes the pattern, purple flowers blooming against a pale yellow background, her headscarf purple and blue flowers against a black border. She had it made for her graduation ceremony, along with two others, just so she would have a choice of which one to wear, but she ended up wearing a different one, a red one that matched her black and purple graduation robes better.

Thinking of her graduation is a pleasant memory. Her parents had come to England to attend her graduation with her little sisters, and they had met Khalid for the first time – formally, that is. They had also met Khalid's parents, who were there for Khalid's graduation. Khalid had even been in her family graduation photo. She can't wait for it to arrive in the mail – six weeks after the ceremony, the photographer had told her, and it's been a month already. Two more weeks.

The picture, the inclusion of him is significant, she thinks – it is a sign that he is significant. She can't help smiling at the thought of him. He will call her tonight, he always does, and she will tell him about the wedding, and he will ask what she wore –

They arrive at Rijal's house, where what seems like hundreds of shoes and sandals are piled up on the shallow front steps, the shoes of guests. The thick wooden front doors are wide open, and air conditioning is blasting out through their arch. The doors open straight onto the crowded living room, in the traditional architecture of a Bruneian home, although the floors of traditional homes, Hana thinks wryly, aren't normally marble-tiled and covered with thin silk Persian rugs. Inside, people are packed onto the different sets of rosewood and leather furniture, walking around and talking to each other, so her family's arrival goes unnoticed.

Except by Rijal, who is leaning against the polished marble banister, green cara melayu top untucked from an absent sinjang, his head uncovered. He nods when he sees them, and slouches agreeably over. "Hi Aunty Lily," he says by way of greeting. "Hi Uncle Yunus."

Her father automatically holds out his hand, and Rijal just as automatically takes it and bends over to touch his forehead to it. A request for respect fulfilled. For all his faults, Hana thinks, for all his devil-may-care attitude and however far he's strayed from it now, her cousin was brought up in full knowledge of the traditions and customs of his forefathers. It is second nature to him to salam his uncle, even if he never prays or fasts. She has even heard rumour amongst her aunties that he has a tattoo, although she has never seen it herself. It would not surprise her though, Hana thinks, as she takes in her cousin, the complete antithesis of her father. Her father is, as always, neat and complete – black

songkok on his greying head, purple cara melayu uncreased, and fastened at the neck with silver and blue studs, his green and purple patterned sinjang folded just so – he had her little sisters, earlier, place their hands at either side of his stomach so he could fold it into place; she remembers when he used to ask her to do that, when she was a lot younger, maybe six or seven, before the rest of the children came along. His socks are a discreet black.

In contrast, Rijal’s hair is full and uncombed, although it does look clean, and there is only one stud at his collar. His sleeves are rolled up and his feet are naked. Yet the cara melayu he wears is of a good weight of material, and has clearly cost a lot of money.

“Uncle Maurice is in the dining room with everyone else,” he tells her parents.

They follow him past the kitchen and the maid’s room – Hana catches a glimpse of Auntie Melissa, the Filipina maid who has been with her Auntie Gina’s family since Rijal was a baby – which are both packed with the maids and drivers of the other guests, and down to the closed doors of the dining room. As soon as Rijal opens the doors, the stale smell of cigarette smoke slides out, accompanied by the laughter of her mother’s relatives.

“Lily!” Her uncle Maurice calls from the rosewood dining table, where ashtrays, open cans of soft drink and half-drunk cups of coffee and tea stained with lipstick are littered around the systematic stacks of playing cards. If there is one thing her mother’s relatives respect, Hana thinks, it is gambling. It is money. It is the reason that Uncle Jaafar, Auntie Gina’s husband, fits in so well with her mother’s relatives. He, like them, treats money with the carelessness of someone who has never really thought about it one way or another. Unlike them,

however, Uncle Jaafar has always had it. Her mother's relatives, on the other hand – Hana knows as well as the back of her hand, from aunties pulling her aside over the years and whispering it to her, “secret, ah, Hana, secret,” the story of her grandfather's rise from extreme poverty to fortune, and back again a few times over. No one in the Kwang family has ever managed to hold on to money for very long, no matter how much of it they have had at one point. They live perpetually as gamblers, always on the verge, in business and at play. The trouble is that they don't seem to know how to draw the line between one and the other.

Hana has heard, too, whispers over the last few years, that the Kwang curse has touched Uncle Jaafar's family. There have been whispers, rumours among the public that Uncle Jaafar's family company, Ilham, the source of their wealth and inherited from Uncle Jaafar's father, taken over by Uncle Jaafar and his eight siblings, is not doing so well. Hana also knows, however, that the rumours are belated. Eight, ten years belated. And that if they are coming to light now, it is not a good sign for Ilham, or for Uncle Jaafar.

“Hide the cards,” Uncle Maurice declares loudly, jokingly throwing his hands over the piles of coins and cards mixed together, “Haji Yunus is here!”

“Hey,” Aunty Gina scolds, just as loudly, just as jokingly, “You don't need to worry about him. It's Hajah Lily you should be worried about!” Her mother's relatives have always thought of her parents' honorifics of Haji and Hajah, bestowed after they performed the pilgrimage to Mekkah, as a great source of amusement.

Her mother, used to these comments, just rolls her eyes and goes over to her brother, who sets down his cigarette and gives her a smacking kiss on her cheek. “Hey, you can take this off now, you know,” he tells her, tugging playfully

on the flowered scarf her mother is wearing today. “You’re with family. That’s the rule, right?” he says suddenly, turning to Hana. “Have to cover around other people, but family is okay. Right?”

Put on the spot, Hana doesn’t know what to say right away. She doesn’t know how to answer. Her uncle is joking – does he expect a joking answer? How can he joke about religion? She thinks, and resents his playful implication that the “rules” can be changed, bent. In the face of her uncle’s smiling irreverence, she is silenced, however, bumbling and awkward and stupid, just as he thinks they are for believing what they believe. You’re the stupid one, is the childish answer that comes to her burning lips, but she can only smile foolishly, pleasantly, patiently and duck her head as if in shyness. She glances sideways at her father, and recognises the same patient pleasant look, except Yunus’ is sincere. So everlastingly patient, Hana thinks, and feels a bursting warmth in her chest, a blooming of admiration.

“So, you’ve graduated now,” Aunty Gina says, coming next to her to give her a quick squeeze about the shoulders. She smells of coffee and cigarettes and a heavy floral scent. “So clever,” she says, both to Hana and to Lily, but more to Lily. Tributes are always due to the parent, not the child. “So clever. So hardworking, one. Congratulations.”

“Oh, you’re a graduate now is it?” Maurice laughs. “Well done! First one in the family?”

“No,” Lily says, quickly, sternly. Her pride is firmly tamped down, but Hana recognises it for what it is and smiles inside. “That’s your daughters, lah.”

Maurice waves a hand, a modest admission of pride. “First graduate from the UK,” he amends.

There is a murmur of approval around the table, and for a moment, the aunties and uncles pay attention to Hana. She can hear snippets of Chinese and English intermingled, discussing her prospects. “Ey, so pretty one ah,” one of her great-aunts, who will only answer to Aunt Mary, saying she’s too young to be a great-aunt, calls, her voice loud, projected, as if she is an actress in a play. “You got boyfriend or not?”

“Got,” Aunt Gina snaps, grinning. Hana feels her cheeks strike warm. “Good boy, right?” she says confidently, “Your mother told me. Also graduated this year,” she adds, lifting her voice to be heard. There is a cacophony of teasing catcalls more suited, Hana thinks, stoically embarrassed, to her little sisters’ pre-pubescent friends than to this group of middle-aged Chinese relatives. The usual teasing that soon they will be paying for a wedding just like the one they are attending today is directed at her parents. In the robust fullness of the family present, it is almost easy to pretend that everyone is there, that there is no one missing -

“You’re doing well,” Uncle Maurice states from nearby, as the commotion dies down, his gaze assessing, as if seeing her for the first time not as the little kid who used to play with his daughters, but as a grown-up. “What are your plans next?” Without waiting for an answer, he directs his question at Lily. “What is she doing now?”

“She applied to do her Masters,” Lily says, accepting a drink from the silver tray Aunt Melissa, who has entered the room silently, offers. Hana takes one too, her limbs still feeling awkward under the scrutiny of her elders. When will being around adults stop turning her back into a gawky child, she wonders.

Will it ever? “Waiting for the scholarship now. If she gets it, she’ll leave in September, in three months.”

Uncle Maurice waves a hand. “Of course she’ll get it. So clever.”

“We’re hoping,” her father interjects gently, and Hana knows that that is his secular way of saying, *Insyallah*. If God wills. Her father has become adept over the years at translating his personal declarations of faith into articles that can be understood, at least linguistically, by her mother’s family. She used to be suspicious of the switch, she remembers. In car rides on the way back home from visiting her mother’s family, she would be wary and slightly disdainful of the way her father would refrain from saying *Insyallah*, *Alhamdulillah*, *Masyallah* when with them. She remembers being impatient with it, wondering why he wasn’t firmer, didn’t just say the phrases that rolled off his tongue at home. A few years abroad, she thinks wryly, has cured her of that disdain, and made her ashamed of it. It only took a few months, really, those first few months of living in university halls amongst tall white people who left their beer cans out on the kitchen table, and stumbled back at night giggling and smelling of sweet stickiness and sick, to teach her how to avoid their polite, puzzled stares when she tried to explain why she didn’t want them using her pan to fry bacon, and why she was a vegetarian when they cooked, but not when she went to the local kebab takeaway. With some people, she understands now, it is just easier to accept, to assimilate, to slide under the radar rather than confront. These are the people who don’t want to understand, not really. Like Uncle Maurice, they recognise difference, but have no desire to make the effort to bridge it.

The attention has turned away, and Hana is half-relieved, half-thankful that she’s passed their inspection. She’d had a similar reaction, she remembers,

from her father's relatives, the congratulations, the pride, her parents' fielding of compliments and teasing, "How'd you do it?" Even her little sisters have not been exempt from the scrutiny; they are sitting quietly in the corner now, in their matching bajus, but she knows that they have been getting their fair share of "You have to be like your big sister, ah"s. She doesn't doubt that they'll get them today. That's the nature of big families – competition, comparison, jostling for attention.

She stands where she is, a little restless. She could go sit with her sisters, but something is going on outside the dining room, although it is hard to hear over the thick insulating hum of the air conditioner and the closed wooden doors. She touches her mother's arm, and gestures towards the doors, and as expected, her mother, who is being talked at by Aunty Mary, just glances and nods.

The air outside is a few degrees warmer, and it is a welcome change. Thin silk is suited to the Brunei heat, not the filtered cold of air conditioning. Hana draws in a deep breath, and the air enters her lungs with an almost sluggish shock, its humidity has such a heaviness. The hallway is filling up quickly with people coming in from outside – she spots a space on the stairs and slides in between the incoming bodies swiftly. She finds herself standing next to Rijal, who gives her a nod and clears a space for her next to the banister. He is quietly eating a chicken wing off a paper plate. They have an excellent vantage point of the living room and the kitchen. Not for the first time, Hana marvels at the lush, rich décor of her cousin's house. Everything about the house says wealth – she takes in the detail of the set of plush white leather furniture mixed in with the shine of red silk pillows on the hard lustre of the dark rosewood set. The glass cabinets filled with gold and gilt trinkets, wedding plates from the royal family, crystal that sparkles and sings when light streaks in. The veined marble floors, covered in thin, fine Persian rugs

– even the crystal glasses that some of the guests are holding instead of plastic cups. Hana has seen the array of small crystal glasses in the kitchen, row upon row of washed glass set carefully by Aunty Melissa on top of absorbent towels to dry. And yet there is something a little decayed about the wealth that is on display – there is nothing new in the room. There is nothing modern or just-bought...they are all left over from an earlier era of decadence. Even the green cara melayu Rijal is wearing, whose weight she had assessed earlier - she has seen it many times before. For all its value, it is ever so slightly worn at the cuffs.

“What’s going on?” Hana whispers.

“The imam is going to say something.”

“Is the wedding over?”

Rijal nods.

The imam has made his way to the front of the living room, framed by the huge flat screen TV, quietly resplendent in voluminous white robes and a white swirl of cloth around his head. The room quiets to a natural hum, and he begins speaking.

He speaks in Malay, in that peculiarly mind-numbing way which Hana remembers from religious school. Slowly, and pausing after every few words, as if to let the magnitude of what he is saying seep in. The first few minutes of his speech are simply recitations of the names of the bride, the groom, the parents and titles of the bride and groom, and the VIP guests who have attended the wedding. There is a respectful, but inattentive silence. He begins speaking of marriage as an institution, and Hana can feel her eyes ring with boredom. She is startled by Rijal saying quietly, “So you’ve graduated now, huh?”

She nods, wary, cautious. She has seldom spoken to Rijal in recent years – she and Sufjan, his little brother, used to be inseparable as children – playmates and friends, and when they went to visit Malaysia on school holidays, they tagged along with Bella and Ana, Uncle Maurice’s daughters. But Rijal had always been a little older, and even then they used to skirt cautiously around him. Rijal has no interest in small talk, and even when they were children at family functions, he would do exactly what he is doing now - find a quiet space, and occupy himself until it was time to go home. He used to do it with handheld electronic games, but now he does it with food – continuously and quietly taking small bites. He always has a paper plate on hand. It discourages conversation. Not that any of them talk much to Rijal anymore. There is nothing much to say. Not after Sophie.

She shies away from the thought, uncomfortable to even think about her name around Rijal, when she has never mentioned it aloud. No one mentions Sophie to Rijal. Or to Aunty Gina and Uncle Jaafar. Not anymore. She hasn’t had much to do with him, she supposes, since Sophie died.

She wonders if that is why he stands out here now, apart from the family gathering in the enclosed dining room. She wonders how the relatives treat him. She heard lots of whispers, of course, after the – accident, they call it. The horrified, hushed whispers of the aunties, half in grief – Sophie had been beautiful and beloved – and half in shock at Rijal’s part in it. She had never really found out, herself, what Rijal’s part in it had been – as much as the aunties whisper, the volume never rises above a scandalized murmur. She remembers her mother and father, faces drawn in grief, packing to go to Kuala Lumpur, telling her there had been an accident involving Rijal and Sophie. When they had come back, they had said nothing except to gently tell them that Sophie had passed away...

“Congratulations,” Rijal says now. He pauses, and asks, “What’s your degree in?”

“Chemistry,” she tells him.

His face is unreadable. “So you’re going to be a teacher?”

She nods. Casts about for something to say. She cannot bring herself to ask him what he is doing these days. She cannot ask him so many of the things which she would ask any of her relatives on her father’s side. The usual innocuous questions – what are you doing now, are you dating anyone, how’s work – are so imbued with the flickering shades of knowledge that she has from her mother’s conversations with Aunty Gina that she cannot ask them, knowing as she does the answers. And knowing as she does that the answers are – not pleasant.

He smells of cigarettes, and cologne, like the rest of their relatives in the dining room, but it is not an unpleasant smell on him. On the contrary, there is something very pleasant about Rijal, she thinks, unaware that her assessing gaze is almost identical to that of her Uncle Maurice’s. He is not exactly good-looking, but he is attractive, and has all the boyish charm of his father. He is very thin, but it looks young on him, almost unbearably young, in the clean pure line of his cheek and jaw and neck. He speaks softly, his voice mellow and a little scratchy and hesitant, as if he is unused to speaking a lot, but there is no insecurity about Rijal. He is not openly confident, but he is not unsure of himself either – his upbringing has ensured that he always knows exactly what to say, what to do – those exquisite manners – he is very likable, she decides.

“So, Sufjan’s still in Australia?” she asks, finally, after a too-long pause.

He nods. “He’s coming back next week.”

“He must be graduating soon as well,” she says. She wonders briefly how Uncle Jaafar and Aunty Gina are paying for Sufjan’s overseas education. She and Sufjan were in the same year at school, although she went to the prestigious government science school and Sufjan went to the private international one. Rijal would have gone there too, but it hadn’t been built yet, so he’d gone to a private Catholic school, dropping out after Form Five. That was when it began, she thinks now, the beginning of Rijal’s drifting.

“Next year.” There is a ripple of laughter and they both turn to see what is happening. The imam’s speech is apparently over, and a young man is being ushered to the front. “What are they doing to Farid?”

“Is he a cousin of yours?”

“Kind of,” Rijal says. “Through marriage, I think.”

Farid looks embarrassed, Hana sees. He is what her mother would call a very nice-looking boy. He has a clear open face and is about her age, and, like her father, she notes, he is dressed perfectly neatly, despite the heat. He lowers his gaze to his hands, casts one last look at the imam, and lifts them. His voice, when he opens his mouth, is nice as well, steady and clear.

He has been asked to read the final prayer, Hana realises – an incredible honour seeing as how the imam is standing right there. He is reading it without notes and without hesitation, pausing in just enough places to make her think that he understands the Arabic that everyone else does not. He closes his eyes briefly, takes a deep breath and seems to focus, and his last invocation of blessing on their prophet is heartfelt. He seems surprised when everyone echoes, “Amin,” solemnly after him, as if he has forgotten they are there.

“Who is he?” Hana whispers to Rijal, as the crowd begins moving. “Is he like a junior imam or something?”

Rijal grins, a swift slash of teeth and blackened gum – from smoking – across his fine-boned face, and it is such an endearing grin that Hana has to blink, she so seldom sees it. “Junior imam? No. Farid is just –“ he tries to think of the right word. “He’s just a good guy. He did go to Arab school, but he’s going to the national university now. He’s in Sufjan’s year.”

That is all the conversation they have time for before the crowd sweeps between them, separating them and buffeting Hana towards the closed dining room, but she has a chance to glance back at Farid, who has gone back to being embarrassed, standing at the corner of the room as the imam speaks to men around him. A good guy, she thinks, and wonders what kind of guy Farid is that Rijal would say that about him.

* * *

It is past dusk when her parents make the move to leave the house.

The house has long emptied – after the final prayer, people began to shuffle slowly out towards their own houses and cars. Aunty Gina and Uncle Jaafar had had to excuse themselves from the dining room in order to start saying goodbye and salaming their guests, and had returned an hour later. The steady flow of food and drink – leftovers from the wedding - into the dining room had continued on unceasing, carried by the faithful Aunty Melissa and a few of the other maids who Hana’s relatives had brought with them.

The lizards still their brown bodies against the white ceilings as Hana and her family step out onto the front veranda, but their full, shrill voices chirrup on.

Frogs bloat out their belly calls unseen from the drains and grass that line the front yard. Otherwise, the night is quiet, except for that electric trill of overhead light. There is a brief pause as everyone searches for their shoes – the only ones left, but scattered over the steps so that Lily’s black pump is paired with her little sister’s plastic sandal.

It is warm, and Hana suddenly feels tired, even though she has done nothing for the last few hours except watch TV and eat with her little sisters. Not for the first time, she thinks of how exhausting family is. “Where’s your car?” Aunty Gina asks Yunus.

“We parked it down the road,” he replies, making a hand movement into the black night.

“Is it far?” Without waiting for an answer, she calls over her shoulder into the house, “Kumar! Come take their car for them!”

The Indian driver, small and dark in his short-sleeved white shirt and dark pants rolled up at the ankle, comes out to the front veranda from around the house. “They parked down the road,” Aunty Gina says. “Go take their car and bring it here.”

“It’s okay,” Yunus protests, “It’s not far.”

Aunty Gina waves his protests away, in her autocratic, Aunty-Gina way, and thrusts the keys into Kumar’s waiting palm. Without a word, he starts walking off down the dark road, leaving them to wait for him to come back with their car.

“Your mango trees are doing well,” Lily remarks, gazing at them, lined up against the driveway, heavy with fruit. She slants a look at Uncle Jaafar, who has lit a cigarette and is standing, one hand in his pocket. “I remember when you planted them. You always did have green fingers.”

Uncle Jaafar chuckles around the cigarette, taps it into the air so that glowing red ash falls to the ground before flickering dead. He looks so much like Rijal will in ten, twenty years, that Hana has an eerie feeling, standing out there in the night, that she is looking into the future. The red-rimmed eyes, the darkened gums, the boyishness, despite the rumpiness that is as much a part of Uncle Jaafar's nature as his clothes. They begin talking about some incident twenty, thirty, thirty five years before, when they were all living in Bandar, in flats in the city, something to do with a barren compound and Uncle Jaafar's wooing of Aunty Gina with planted rambutan trees, her favourite fruit.

Not all, Hana amends in her thoughts, noticing that her father is silent, and not paying attention to the conversation. She forgets sometimes that he was not a part of her mother's childhood in the same way that Uncle Jaafar has always been – that he was not around for the escapades of pushing the family car down the drive before starting it to avoid waking parents, too-short school skirts and midnight smokes. A memory, unbidden, comes back to Hana of a time when she was a child, her father trying a cigarette when they were at one of these family gatherings. She jolts a little, startled, and explores the memory more seriously. Yes, she remembers it, a little fuzzy around the edges, but real – sitting on the dark wood-and-floral-brocade furniture that has long been replaced with the white leather of Uncle Jaafar and Aunty Gina's current living room. Her father trying a cigarette, then putting it aside with quiet distaste. Aunty Gina and Uncle Jaafar laughing a little – where is her mother? Not present in the memory.

She turns a look on her father, a little betrayed, a little more understanding. He is staring off into the distance, and he looks so tired, she realises with a pang. For years she has just accepted the difference between her family and Rijal's – has

been quietly proud of her decent father and obedient mother, who started wearing a headscarf so long ago that it seems she has always worn one. Until they gather at these events and she realises afresh how different it could have gone. Both her mother and Aunty Gina converted to Islam, but only her mother embraced it – neither Rijal nor Sufjan completed religious school. She has watched, fascinated, at Rijal and Sufjan's lifestyles, at the way Uncle Jaafar smokes serenely on when her father quietly excuses himself to pray – always, always the only one to do so. What does it take to keep holding on to belief when it would be so easy to let go, she wonders. Stubbornness? Habit? She doesn't know.

They are standing there on the bright, lit veranda, the easy familiarity of family around, the sharp golden points of stars above, when the car pulls up.

Two

It is a small, sporty red Mazda which is gleamingly clean. A girl gets out of the car. No, not a girl, Lily corrects herself, a young woman. She is older than Hana, and Lily has to strain to make out her features in the darkness. Shadows bob and dance and flicker around a good nose, dark, dark eyes with long lashes, a full mouth painted a dark pink. She is very pretty. Long, thick black hair that flicks, full-bodied and straight, over her shoulders. Jeans as tight as her pink top, she looks – foreign, almost. She is unmistakably Malay, without the strain of Chinese that rounds and refines Hana’s face and sharpens Rijal’s –

Even as she thinks her nephew’s name, Lily realises who this young woman is.

Gina’s face has tightened and Lily can almost hear the hiss she imagines Gina is making on the inside. Everything about Gina has gone on edge, as if, like the cat Gina has always reminded her sister of, her fur is standing on end, back arching, tail and eyes narrowed and alert.

The young woman stands for a moment by her door, looks at the group on the front steps. She smiles, waves, slams the door shut and takes a step forward. The veranda has gone quiet, so the young woman’s voice rings out too-loudly when she calls, “Hi!”

She is stepping towards the veranda when Rijal comes out. He has changed from his *cara melayu* into a polo shirt and the khaki shorts and Japanese slippers favoured by his father. He moves swiftly past them and down the steps. “Let’s go,” he says.

The girl pauses uncertainly, but Rijal is already moving towards the car. “Okay,” she says with a shrug. She waves at them, but she is looking straight at Gina, as if expecting something. Acknowledgement, maybe.

“When are you coming back?” Gina calls out curtly, her voice clipped.

Rijal is already halfway into the car. He shrugs, his gaze as opaque as if he were wearing sunglasses, and closes the door without answering. As the car pulls out of the driveway – the girl is a good driver – there is a brief hesitation at the gate as their own silver Pajero pulls in. Kumar gives way, of course, and the red Mazda takes off, smooth and silent.

“Okay,” Yunus says. “Salam your aunty and uncle,” and the girls do, one by one, Hana leading the way as the oldest, before they get into the car. As soon as they are in, Yunus turns to Gina and Jaafar. He says his thanks, gives Jaafar a salam, and is in the car, leaving Lily and Gina to their goodbyes.

“Did you see her?” Gina finally hisses. Her hand is furiously steady as she lights a cigarette. “That’s her. That’s the girlfriend.”

Lily wisely sticks to comfort. “Don’t worry,” she says gently. “It’s probably just a phase.” Yunus’ oft-used “patience is half of faith”, she thinks wryly, would probably not go down too well right now.

“A phase,” Gina grits out. “Rijal’s been in this phase since he dropped out of school,” and Lily flicks back to Rijal, the nephew she and Yunus have loved and grieved over as their own son. His quiet face, his gentle and steady refusal to do anything after he dropped out of school, and then the accident. After which no one has had the heart to push him much more. None of them understand him. He looks so much like Jaafar, she thinks, but he is so much more lost than Jaafar ever was.

But then, Jaafar had Gina, she realises, and can feel her sister practically vibrating in the dark. So strong and alive – Jaafar has had Gina almost his whole life, since he was Rijal’s age, to push him into the family business and into the social role Jaafar vaguely accepts rather than enjoys. Maybe that’s what Rijal needs, a strong wife, but Lily does not think that it would be smart to even joke about that right now.

Lily embraces her sister, inhales that druggingly attractive scent of smoke and powder, and pats her in a friendly way. “It’s just a phase,” she repeats. She smiles. “You’ll see.”

* * *

“Your mother hates me,” Mariana says bluntly, as soon as they are out on the highway.

Rijal slides wearily down in the car seat, flips the switch so that the cold air abruptly stops blasting on his side of the car. He hates air conditioning, the artificial chill of it. He doesn’t know what to say to Mariana’s accusation – her observation, rather. It is, after all, true. His mother doesn’t like Mariana. “Maybe not hate,” he tries.

She shoots him a look. “She hates me,” she states again, but he can tell that this is his cue to reassure her otherwise.

He tries. “She doesn’t like any of my friends.” True enough. “Don’t take it personally. It’s nothing to do with you.”

“How could it be,” Mariana mutters. “She doesn’t even know me.”

He is tired. It has been a long day. He escaped after Farid’s prayer, and had cocooned himself in his room to wait for Mariana to come and pick him up.

He would have driven out himself, but that would have caused too much of a stir. He causes that enough, he thinks, just by being.

She slants him a look when he doesn't respond, and he can feel her gaze through his closed eyes. "How was the wedding?"

"Long."

"Food?"

"Good." Plentiful. He discovers that nevertheless, he is hungry. His stomach feels empty and weightless.

"Who was there?"

He knows what she wants – Mariana is endlessly fascinated by his relatives, by the titles and the gossip and the grandeur of new cars, new watches, new things. Brunei is a country old in history and so young in wealth that it has become greedy, acquisitive. His relatives, as relatives of the monarch, have a share in more wealth than most. "Everyone."

She begins quizzing him about aunties, uncles. Are they married? What are they doing now? So-and-so's son, so-and-so's daughter...Rijal is able to answer automatically, and part of his mind shuts off in relief. After all, the things she wants to know are the things his relatives talk about amongst themselves, although they would never reveal them to an outsider. If it makes her happy to know, to be in on the knowledge – well, he has seldom found it so easy to please someone, and it is a novel and not unwelcome sensation. Everyone always wants something from him that he can barely even understand, and Mariana is the only one, it seems, he is able to give to. Mostly because she asks so directly, and the things she asks mean so little.

His mind drifts, and he finds himself thinking of the relatives Mariana does not ask about, Uncle Yunus and Aunt Lily. Why would she? They are the untitled branch of the family, even the novelty of a mixed marriage dusted over because Aunt Lily plays the part of Muslim wife so well, and is uninvolved in the fascinating, scandalous lifestyle – for a Muslim wife – that his own mother is constantly embroiled in. He thinks of Hana and her three sisters, how they were all wearing matching sets of purple silk. Not identical – Aunt Lily has retained the horror his own mother has at the very idea of wearing family-wide fabric – but all within the same colour family. Hana standing beside him, quite obviously bored at the imam’s speech. That had made him smile, that one of Uncle Yunus’ perfect and perfectly educated daughters had not been paying the proper respect to the wise and elderly.

Funny, though, that the relatives that Mariana is uninterested in, are the only ones who he was close to growing up. When he thinks of cousins, and uncles, it is Uncle Yunus and Aunt Lily, Uncle Maurice – *Uncle Henry, Sophie* - that he thinks of, and not the swarm of relatives from his father’s side, whose family village his own house is in the middle of.

They pull into a dingy back alley and Mariana stops asking questions. They’ve arrived at one of their friend’s apartments – Ji Lung, at whose party they first met. It sits dark above a neon DVD store that sells all manner of things pirated. It is quieter now, but not quiet. People are hanging about idly smoking, chatting in the hot night. You have to go up two flights of fluorescently lit stairs lined with bored lizards and grime to get to Ji Lung’s place. It was in there that Rijal had been sitting, sprawled on the couch, watching a movie idly, when Mariana had come in, that first time.

The apartment had been packed and strewn with contraband beer cans and pizza boxes, Styrofoam cartons with the dregs of noodle soup and empty, oily plastic boxes with untidy, unwanted beansprouts clinging to the sides. The dining table had been sticky and crowded with a cacophony of cards, chips, mahjong tiles and ashtrays. Ji Lung's big screen TV had been playing a movie, volume turned blastingly high to compete with the booming bass of the store below.

She had come in with a whole bunch of girls – all stewardesses, just back from a long-haul flight, giggling and flirting with Ji Lung and friends. He hadn't taken much notice of them at first – Ji Lung was always inviting stewardesses over – but then she had come to sit next to him.

“Hi,” she had said, confident in a response, over the loud TV. “You're Ji Lung's friend Rijal, aren't you?”

He'd nodded. “And you?”

“Mariana,” she'd said. “Having fun?”

That was how it had begun, that first encounter segueing into Ji Lung's bedroom two hours later. She had been surprisingly generous in bed, generous and confident. He had been attracted to that, to that air of knowing what she was doing. Over the next few months he'd gotten to know her better, and that air had only attracted him more. She had plans – plans that would have been unrecognizable as such to his Uncle Yunus, his own parents, in their scope and dismissal of education, but she had plans. She wasn't going to stay a stewardess forever, she had told him.

He looks over at her now, sliding decisively into a cramped parking spot, and feels a wave of affection. She is so loud and – crass, he thinks, comparing her to Hana – it almost makes him laugh to think of comparing the two girls, the

perfectly respectable Hana and the thoroughly unencumbered Mariana – but Mariana is sure of herself. He is not sure that that isn't her most attractive quality after all.

She looks over at him, smiles. “What are you thinking about?”

“How much I like you.”

Her smile grows, with sudden sweetness. He is struck again by how easy it is to make her smile. “Let's go have some fun.”

* * *

A few days later, Rijal is lying on his bed at home, blowing slow circles of smoke into the air above his head, when there is a knock on the door. It startles him, because the house has been quiet up till that point. His parents have gone out; to work, maybe. He is not quite sure what his parents do nowadays. He thinks his father goes out to Ilham to sign papers, and his mother goes out to play golf or have lunch and drinks with friends. Sufjan is away in Australia – he thinks of his little brother with the smallest of pangs that he is so far away. The house is too quiet since he is gone. His parents seem to feel it too.

He barely has time to say come in when it swings open. “Your girlfriend is here,” Aunty Melissa says, looking down at him. She is in shadow, the dimness of the hallway behind her a faded outline of grey. She is old, Rijal realises, with a start. Strands of shiny silver have threaded through her thick, wavy black hair. He knows the smell of that hair better than his own – the faint tinge of cheap shampoo a thin, fading overlay of scent over the warm musk of her scalp. He could pick the touch of her hands out of a line-up of similar hands – soft and crinkly and dry, with rough edges around the fingertips. She used to paint her toenails, on hot sunny afternoons while waiting to walk Sufjan back from school –

she has – had – a set of nail things, small silver instruments that she used to shape and buff and smooth. He would watch, fascinated, as she worked on her toenails with brisk and economical care. Sometimes she would tell him about her own son, back in the Phillipines. He still remembers, faintly, little snippets about him. He is three or four years older than himself, and his name is – is it Manuel? Or Emmanuel? And her husband – he only knows that her husband is old, much older than her.

It was a long time ago. When he was young – maybe six, seven, eight or nine. Before everything. Before Sufjan finished the requisite six years of ugama school and they no longer had those afternoons alone. Before – before everything.

But he does remember that in those days after Sophie died, and he would stay home all day, she would stay with him in the living room as he played video game after video game. She would be doing her own thing – maybe beheading the translucent white taueh for dinner, or kneading something in a bowl. Sometimes she would even set up the ironing board next to the couch while they watched TV together in silence. They would not talk though, except maybe to comment on one of the subtitled Cantonese serials she always chose to watch.

A lifetime with Aunty Melissa. When she looks down at him now, he is aware of a deep hollowness that is eased by her presence. A lifetime, Rijal thinks, and still he knows so little about her. Maybe you never really do know that much about the people closest to you. Maybe there is never any need to ask, as if factual knowledge would dim and distance instead of bringing them closer.

“Who?” he asks.

“Your girlfriend,” she repeats. Even now, he cannot read her. “She’s downstairs in the living room.”

“Okay,” he says. “I’ll come down.”

She nods and disappears down the hall. She is carrying a pile of freshly folded shirts, he notices belatedly, so she is probably going into his parents’ room.

He hoists himself up, suddenly realising how stale he is. He has not showered yet today, is in a sleeping shirt and pants. He gets up without changing anyway, although he does make a quick detour to rinse out his mouth and splash some water onto his face. The eyes that glance back at him from the bathroom mirror are slightly bloodshot, probably from peering through the dimness of his room all day.

Mariana is looking at the picture frames that sit on the end tables, a mix of solid silver frames and cheap plastic ones – gifts, mostly. “Hey,” he says.

She turns around, and a smile flashes onto her face, quick and genuine. Something in him turns, is lifted. Seldom is someone so easily pleased by his presence. “Hi,” she says. She wrinkles her nose as he comes closer, half-jokingly. “You haven’t showered yet?”

“Do I smell?”

She laughs. “Yes. No, I’m kidding.”

“What’s up?” he asks. Her sunglasses are perched on her hair. Both are shiny and black.

“Are you mad I came over?” she asks, knowingly. “I wanted to surprise you.”

“I’m not mad,” he says. He looks at her, all made-up and groomed and well, if cheaply, dressed. Her handbag is designer – kind of. It is a knock off that she bought in Thailand, during one of short-haul flights as a stewardess. It is the kind that has the logo boldly proclaimed all over the plasticky “leather”. So

obvious, so Mariana, almost endearingly so in its' aspirations and claims. He is not stupid – he knows that Mariana likes him mainly because of his father's title. There is no way that someone as pretty as her would be interested otherwise – he doesn't have a job, or any prospect of – or even interest in - getting one, and he is no prize, lookswise. But he thinks part of her also really does like him, a little. Not enough, maybe, for her to pursue him if he didn't have a title, but maybe they would have been friends. They get along all right. "Is everything okay?"

She tilts her head, playfully. "Can we sit down?"

"Of course," he says, quickly, appalled at his own lack of good manners. "Sit. Do you want anything to drink?"

"A Coke would be nice," she says.

Aunty Melissa passes by the living room door just then and he calls her. "Can you get Mariana a Coke please, Aunty?"

"Okay," she says, without breaking stride.

"So what's up?" he asks, when he is sitting down across from her in an armchair that faces the windows. Her face is darker when framed against the sunshine, even though its brightness is filtered through the tinted glass. Suddenly the mood - her mood - seems to shift and change, although he can't tell whether it is the lighting or his imagination.

"I've never been inside your house before," she says.

"Really?" he says, but it is out of politeness. He knows she has never been to his house. He never invites anyone to his house. What would be the point?

"Really," she echoes. "But I guess you've never been inside mine, either."

The realisation seems to make her thoughtful, Rijal isn't sure why. "Mariana?"

“I have something to tell you,” she says, her voice turning serious.

He smiles. “Good news, bad news?”

She thinks. Shrugs. “I’m not sure how you’ll see it.” Sudden, unexpected nerves vibrate through her and make her fidgety. She glances around the empty room, her gaze lingering for slightly longer on a posed portrait - one of those studio photos - of him and his family, taken when he was much younger. Sufjan is grinning crookedly, and you can just about make out a missing tooth in the corner of his mouth. “I think I’m pregnant.”

It comes out with more than a touch of defiance, and it is the last thing he expects to hear.

He can’t quite believe it straight away. It is something from a movie, a TV show, another person’s life. She is teasing, playing. It would be like her. But if she is serious, and he laughs - it is like he is on a bad candid camera show; not wanting to take the impossible too seriously and risk looking a fool, but also not wanting to take it lightly and hurting her. He wades through it all as if he is ploughing through a thick muddy drain, clutches on to the one certainty in the pool of uncertainties which she has presented him with – she’s not sure herself, is she? She hasn’t said for sure that she’s pregnant, only that she *thinks* it - he is dizzy with all the possibilities. “You think?”

Aunty Melissa comes in just then and he clamps his mouth shut as she serves Mariana her drink on a tray. He notices, as if from the edge of his mind, that Aunty Melissa has used the everyday wooden serving tray instead of the silver one they normally present to guests. The ritual gives him a precious few moments to gather himself, which he tries frantically to do, but still, everything is swimming around him. They are both quiet even after Aunty Melissa leaves the

room, by mutual understanding giving her enough time to move out of earshot, both suddenly so cautious.

He repeats, then, quieter now bit more quietly , “You think?”

“I’m ninety-nine percent sure,” she corrects herself. She laughs, and a little of her natural vivacity returns, although she is still thronging with suppressed nerves. “I took three tests.”

“Okay,” he says slowly. He wants to ask, *is it mine?*, but refrains. Of course it’s his? Again he is stumped. What is the right reaction? What do people normally do or say in this kind of situation? What is the conventional response? All he can come up with is questions. He doesn’t have any answers for Mariana. For anyone.

“What should we do?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you,” Mariana says. She looks strangely young in that moment, maybe even as young as Hana, and for a second he glimpses how immature she really is, underneath the makeup and the flashy, branded clothing. She doesn’t know any more than he does, really. This isn’t a test, she doesn’t know what his responses should be either, any more than he does, does she? “What are you thinking?”

He scrubs his hands over his face. “Have you talked to anyone about it?”

She hesitates, as if unsure what his reaction will be. They both know that the pregnancy has to be a secret thing. Unspoken, unhad. “A couple of friends.”

“What did your friends say?” he asks, more out of curiosity than anything else.

She hesitates again, but this time he cannot tell why. “This and that,” she says evasively. They probably said nothing flattering about him. She leans forward. “What do you think, Rijal?”

What does he think?

It is such an unfamiliar question that for a few moments, he really cannot think at all.

The silence hangs. Rijal works his mouth open and closed a few times, but no words come out.

“I’ll give you a few moments,” Mariana says, getting up. “I need to use the toilet.” She glances around questioningly, and he remembers that she has never been inside his house. For all that she has picked him up numerous times, she has never gotten further than the front steps. There has never been any need.

He gestures. “Through the doors on your left.” For some reason, he doesn’t offer to let her go upstairs, to the family bathroom, which his cousins routinely use, knowing that the downstairs bathroom is only for guests.

He watches her leave and hears the bathroom door close behind her, and he stays where he is, struggling to digest. It just seems so terribly unreal. There is shock, horror that he could have been so stupid as to let this happen. A cold shame climbs up his neck, and he feels like a child, coming home with bad test results.

The front door opens and his heart jumps with the suddenness of it. His mother closes the door and turns to find him sitting in the mid-afternoon light. “Rijal?” she says, clearly surprised.

“Hi,” he manages to get out.

She comes more fully into the living room, still looking at him curiously. “Why are you sitting here?” She glances at the TV, which is ominously off.

He is too used to his mother's interrogative tone to take offense, especially now, through the mounting wariness. Before he can say anything, though, Mariana is coming back from the toilet, and both women stiffen immediately. It is almost humorous how alike they are at that moment, heads drawn back carefully, the hostility jumping into their eyes.

"I see," his mother says coldly, not even bothering to hide the disdain. It constantly amazes Rijal how his mother has no qualms about being rude to someone she does not like. He himself, like his father, shies away from confrontation. But they have both – they have all, he amends, thinking of Sufjan – learnt to stay out of the way when his mother goes on a rampage, for she has enough wrath to go around.

"And what are you two up to?" his mother inquires now. He and Mariana glance at each other, and something of the guilt and trepidation must communicate itself to his mother, for her eyes narrow, and he can practically feel her mind stretching and expanding, reaching out tendrils of suspicious mother inquisition.

"We were just about to go out," he says, grasping for the first thing he can think of.

Mariana gives him a look. "Actually," she says, and that earlier defiance comes back into her voice. "I was just telling Rijal that I'm pregnant."

Three

Gina breathes in sharply, and her eyes go wide. There is pure shock on her face, wiping out the suspicion and animosity of moments before. She recovers her composure quickly, and snaps her eyes and voice on Rijal. “Is this true?”

“It’s true,” Mariana says, thrusting her chin out. She is deliberately antagonizing Gina, Rijal sees, but can’t figure out to what purpose. It is his turn to flick warning eyes at her. She meets his gaze squarely and opaquely. He is suddenly unable to read her, Mariana who has always been so easy to understand.

“I just found out myself,” Rijal says, attempting to keep everything calm.

They all hear the car pull up outside at the same time. His father is home. They stand, all still, each unwilling to make a move. They are standing like that when his father lets himself in. He is wearing a shirt and dark pants – his work clothes. He looks surprised to see all of them just standing there. “Hello,” he says. “What’s going on?”

“Your son,” begins Gina, her voice trembling, “Your son’s girlfriend says she’s pregnant.”

Jaafar’s head actually goes back, and he blinks, he looks so surprised. Like Gina, there is the pure neutrality of being caught off-guard. He also recovers quickly, and he rubs a hand over his mouth. “Okay.” He glances around him, helpless, and falls back on protocol, on manners. “Well, why don’t we move into the dining room to discuss this?”

They all move jerkily, all, Rijal suspects, relieved that Jaafar seems to be taking the lead. That someone seems to be taking the lead.

They sit in the dining room. Mariana and Rijal sit side by side in chairs across from his parents, although there is a careful distance between them. Jaafar rubs his hand over his face again. “How far along is the pregnancy?”

“We don’t know,” Mariana replies. “I just took the pregnancy test this week.”

“Maybe its wrong,” Gina suggests, a touch of hope in her voice.

Mariana keeps her gaze steady on Gina. “I took it three times.” Matter-of-factly.

Gina doesn’t even look at her. “Are you sure its yours?” she asks Rijal.

“Ma!” Rijal protests.

Mariana lifts a lip in a snarl. “It’s his.”

There is a brief silence. Jaafar looks helpless, wondering. Gina’s lips are drawn tight over her teeth. “You want to get married, is it?” she fires at Mariana, accusing. His father sighs, as if in relief, *oh yes, that’s the solution*.

“We can’t get married!” Rijal blurts out, shocked into speaking. He doesn’t know what has prompted the automatic recoil, but he knows, instinctively, bone-deep, that they cannot get married. Whatever the solution, it is not marriage. The idea of it yawns like a gaping abyss...he would not drag Mariana down there with him.

Mariana looks at him, says nothing, but her eyes are assessing. She holds her peace. “We can’t,” Rijal repeats. He tries to articulate the jumble of feelings within him, but words slip away like fish. All he can think, horrified, is *no*.

* * *

The news shoots through their household as if fired from a gun. The first inkling that something is in the air is Aunty Gina's arrival on their doorstep, shaking with anger, red lips tight and trembling against each other, each black hair carefully, ominously in place. Uncle Jaafar is a few steps behind her, his eyes worried. "Are your parents in?" Aunty Gina bites out.

Hana blinks – normally Aunty Gina greets her with a big, catlike smile and an opening sally of some sort. "Yes," she says quickly. "Come in. I'll call them."

She finds her mother upstairs, sitting with her father on the sofa and watching as they do every night, the national eight o'clock news. "Ma," she says. "Aunty Gina and Uncle Jaafar are here."

Both her parents look up. "It sounds pretty important," Hana adds.

They exchange looks and get up. Hana stands to one side as they move past her. She knows that look, and recognises it as her cue to make herself scarce. Her little sisters are already in their rooms, and Hana removes herself to her own. Curiosity, however, has her leaving her door ever so slightly ajar. The acoustics of the house are such that sounds from the living room downstairs will drift up if people start speaking loudly, which, judging from Aunty Gina's expression, is more than likely.

Hana is online on her laptop, chatting to Khalid, when the voices begin to rise and she starts hearing fragments of the conversation. She catches Rijal's name and listens more carefully. Her cousin has flickered through her mind more than once in the few weeks since she saw him at the wedding.

Aunty Gina is speaking in a raised voice now, angry and fast, Uncle Jaafar's a low timbre in the background. It sounds almost like they are fighting with each other, and she recalls that six month period when they were kids and

Rijal went to Malaysia and Sufjan came to live with them because Uncle Jaafar and Aunty Gina almost got divorced. Or did get divorced – she has never been too sure about that, and the information has never been volunteered – but if it was divorce, it was only the first level of divorce, the single *talaaq*, because after six months, Aunty Gina took Uncle Jaafar back, or the other way around, and Sufjan went back home. It had been a messy time, and it had never been explained, the reason why Aunty Gina and Uncle Jaafar got back together, only that it had been wrapped up in their own arguments, and Ilham’s initial troubles, and Rijal’s accident in Malaysia...

She is thirsty, Hana decides. She types that she’ll be right back, to Khalid and stands up. There is water outside her room, big bottles of water for when they get thirsty in the middle of the night, so they don’t have to go downstairs to the kitchen. There’s no harm in going outside to take a drink.

She steps outside her room, and the sheer volume of the discussion going on is startling, like a TV suddenly turned up high. Aunty Gina is talking now, fast, furious. “She’s a golddigger – you can tell from the way she acts. How can a girl like that like Rijal? What else would she like him for? She’s ambitious, that one.” A quick inhalation and the smell of tar and nicotine – Aunty Gina is smoking inside the house. Aunty Gina must be really upset – her parents would never let her do that, otherwise. “So clever, trapping him like this...but what can you expect? That’s what they become stewardesses for.”

Uncle Jaafar’s voice now, weary. He has the voice of an old man, Hana realises, now that it is unaccompanied by that boyish face, ragged and a little creaky, as if lines and bumps of age over his larynx slow and roughen the flow of his voice out of his mouth. It must be his constant chain-smoking, or maybe

something else. Does he always sound this way or is he just upset? It is so unusual for him to be upset – normally he is the quiet absorber of all Aunty Gina’s turbulent emotions. “He won’t even tell us *why* he won’t do it.” There is an appeal in his voice, and Hana can tell he is speaking not to Aunty Gina, but to her parents. She can practically picture all of them, sitting around the dining table, as they have done so many times before. Whenever they are having a problem, Uncle Jaafar and Aunty Gina come here. That is her father’s role, her mother’s role – her parents are teased playfully and treated with joking respect at family gatherings, but this is where Uncle Jaafar and Aunty Gina always return, in the end. “All he’ll say is he can’t marry her.”

Hana’s ears perk up and she freezes in the act of pouring water from the bottle into a glass. Marry? Has Rijal –

“He won’t budge,” Uncle Jaafar again.

“She’s no good,” Aunty Gina’s voice, angry, worried. “Low class little piece...but she’s clever. He has to marry her now. Well, if she’s marrying him for money, she’s going to get a nasty surprise, isn’t she?”

“Things are not going well with Ilham?” That is her mother, of course. Her father stays clear of discussing Ilham.

She cannot see him, but she hears Uncle Jaafar’s sigh as he answers for Aunty Gina. “The court case has gone on for too long,” he says grimly. “It’s been ten years. They’re threatening to go public with it now, to lift the gag.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that one way or another, what happens to Ilham is going to be decided in the next few months. The government will either accept our settlement or...”

“Or?”

“Or we’ll go bankrupt,” Uncle Jaafar says bluntly. But he does not have the same stoic indifference to the vagaries of fate as the experienced Kwangs, and his voice is not entirely steady.

Hana’s heart is pounding, she is breathless with shock. Bankrupt. She has known, they all have, that it is a possibility. But it has been so long – ten years – and it has all been kept so quiet, Ilham going on about its business as usual – her aunty and uncle going about their business as usual - that she had not really thought it was possible...at the back of her mind, she can’t help thinking, *poor Uncle Jaafar*. One always pities him more than one pities Aunty Gina. Aunty Gina is a Kwang, after all – she knows how to roll with the punches, survive in any situation. Uncle Jaafar, one can’t help knowing, would be lost without her. He might muddle through somehow, through sheer luck, but Aunty Gina would never be satisfied with leaving things to luck. She takes things into her own hands. That is why she has always been so frustrated with Rijal, with her inability to move him.

They are back to talking about him. Aunty Gina is saying, “I bet she’s planned this for a long time. Probably didn’t even use protection. On purpose.” Angry puffs to punctuate her words.

“Trust me, it was no mistake...that little bitch knew what she was doing...”

Say it, Hana commands Aunty Gina in her mind, her mouth still agape, still holding her breath. Family drama has never hit this close to home – it has always been about uncles and aunties, a generation ahead, far removed, but this is

Rijal, Rijal, not the usual endless, circling complaints her aunty and uncle have about him and his vagabond ways, but something serious, grown-up and real –

It is from her father, though, quiet and somber, that the words come. “When is the baby due?”

Hana lets out her breath. She is almost lightheaded from the confirmation. She has heard that tone in her father’s voice before, that sad weightiness that comes when he’s had to deal with a particularly bad day at work – he is a discipline master at a government school – when there’s been a lost cause, a drop-out, a pregnancy. He takes each case so personally, and will spend an extra half hour on his prayer mat that night, seeking answers, comfort, solace in supplication, in the ancient, worn Arabic that he doesn’t understand but loves all the same. It is worse now, she knows, instinctively. Her father loves Rijal like a son, always has. Just like the Qur’an, he loves even though Rijal baffles him. There is nothing in her father’s makeup that can truly understand what is not good and true – what is not himself. He can empathize – the few times she was disobedient or lazy as a child, he would discipline and speak softly to her, but she could always see the confusion behind his gaze, the wonderment.

She has missed some of the conversation – when she focuses back, Aunty Gina has lost the anger in her voice, and her hard voice is trembling on worry. “I’m not saying he shouldn’t provide for the child,” she is saying. “And I’m not saying he shouldn’t get married to her. If it’s his –“

“If?” her own mother interrupts.

“She says it’s his,” Aunty Gina says. “And he’s just accepting it.”

“Rijal says it’s his,” Uncle Jaafar says. “When he says anything at all.”

“If it’s his, of course he’ll – we’ll – provide for it,” Aunty Gina says. “But it doesn’t have to be a real marriage. They can get divorced after she has the baby.”

“But what about the girl?” her father says gently. “If she has this baby and then gets divorced – you know what it’s like here in Brunei. It will be very difficult for her.”

Aunty Gina’s voice turns vicious. “She should have thought of that before she went sleeping with every Tom, Dick and Harry -“

Hana slips back into her room then, her heart pounding. For a few moments, she stares blindly at the screen. The chatbox is flashing - Khalid is asking where she is. She takes a few breaths, willing her her heart rate to slow, as if someone is watching her. I have to go, she types to Khalid, and abruptly logs off so he cannot reply.

It is only a while – maybe forty-five minutes or so, before she hears the front door close and her parents come up the stairs. Her parents are murmuring, and her mother pads over to her door, knocking before pushing it open. “You’re still up,” she says. Her mother looks tired, her face bruisingly soft. She comes and strokes Hana’s head where she is still sitting at her table. “What are you doing? Chatting to Khalid?”

“I was,” Hana replies, not looking at her. “Is everything okay with Aunty Gina?”

There is the faintest of sighs, and Hana glances at her mother out of the corner of her eye. She looks – resigned. Sorrowful, but not sorrowing. That acceptance is the difference between her mother and father. “Just a problem with Rijal,” she says after a hesitation. “They want your father to go talk to him.”

Inexplicably, tears rise to Hana's eyes. The disappointment of a parent, she thinks, her heart aching. If a thankless child is sharper than a serpent's tooth, a disappointed parent makes a different kind of wound. Duller, deeper, lodging inside to make you question yourself, unable to shake free. She hurts for her parents. "It'll be okay," she says reassuringly, deliberately keeping her voice light, unconcerned. "Abah always makes things right."

Her mother gives her a final pat. "Yes, he does," she agrees, but Hana cannot tell whether her mother is humouring her or if she really believes it. "Don't stay up too late. Good night Hana."

"Good night, Ma."

Four

Rijal is playing a video game alone, half-heartedly, when his uncle comes to visit.

He has been expecting the visit for a few days, ever since his parents dropped the subject when talking to him, and after they hared out of the house that evening. There has been an uneasy truce in the house over the last few days – each of them going about their usual business, with only a touch more avoidance than usual. He has known that the reprieve was only temporary, but he has been grateful for it anyway. He has the odd feeling that they are all tiptoeing...not just around each other, but around a canyon of something unknown. More than that, that they have been doing this for years. The unchanging living room he sits in, the way his parents go to work and social events every day, just as they have for as long as he can remember, just as if there is no court case looming that remains unsettled. Just as if he is still eighteen and doing nothing is just for now, just until he figures out what to do with his life.

The room is dark – the curtains are drawn to keep the glare of the sunshine off the TV screen, and he is in the same shorts and T-shirt that he slept in. Uncle Yunus must just have come from work, Rijal thinks, casting about for the nearest clock, which is a tiny decorative desk clock a few side tables over. It is hard to find time in this house. It never seems important, until someone like Uncle Yunus comes, bringing the time with them. Four-thirty.

His uncle's tie is loosened and his sleeves have been rolled up, but otherwise, the day's rigours sit well on him – the rumples are on his tired face, not his clothes. What must it be like, Rijal wonders, not for the first time, to sit so easily in starched and ironed clothes, neat and belted in for the whole day. He

imagines it is incredibly uncomfortable, yet it is he, not his uncle, who is not entirely at ease.

“Rijal,” his uncle says, coming into the room. Rijal pauses the game and takes his uncle’s right hand between his own, touching it to his forehead. “It’s okay,” his uncle adds. “No need to get up.”

Rijal stays seated, but doesn’t unpause his game. He sets aside the controller. He doesn’t even remember what he is playing. There is a short silence.

“I guess you know what I want to talk to you about,” his uncle says.

Rijal says nothing. Partly because he feels hollow, like there are no words to come up his throat.

His uncle sighs. “Your parents came and told me about Mariana.”

The name sounds wrong on his uncle’s tongue – Rijal recoils, inwardly. There is a tiny burning shame in the pit of his stomach, the dread that has lived there since Mariana came to tell him about the pregnancy. He knows if he was to meet his uncle’s eyes now, he would see that combination of disappointment and question that his uncle always seems to look at him with.

How long will it take for his uncle to give up today, Rijal wonders. He wants to speak, he does, it is so petty not to. His uncle asks so little of him. He just doesn’t know what to say.

“How is Mariana?” his uncle asks gently. “Is she healthy?”

Rijal swallows. This, at least, he can answer. “She seems fine,” he says scratchily. It would be churlish not to give more. “We’re going to Miri next week,” he says haltingly, naming the Malaysian town that borders Brunei to the west. “To get a private check-up. We can’t get one in Brunei –“

He half expects his uncle to ask why, but when his uncle waits, still listening, Rijal remembers what his uncle's job is, and that his uncle probably comes across cases like this every day. Unexpected, unwanted pregnancies that ruin the futures of the teenagers who, by national law, are never allowed to come back to school. The shame of immorality found out, families that have to brave the evidence of their failure and inability to keep their members on the straight and steep. His uncle knows better than Rijal that it is not possible to treat pregnancies out of wedlock in the local government hospitals. That even if it was, it would be unwise to parade the fact of illegal conception amongst local doctors, who are also daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, wives and husbands. That within a population of less than half a million, everyone is related, and everyone knows everyone else.

“You can't do that forever, Rijal,” his uncle says, softly. “You know that.”

Rijal swallows again and nods.

“Are you going to marry her?”

His uncle's voice is insistent, in its quiet way. Is this how he treats his students, Rijal wonders as if from very far away. “I don't know,” he says, honestly. He feels like he's been saying that his entire life. What can he say to his uncle? Doesn't Uncle Yunus see? Doesn't he see that the three of them, him and his parents, have been living in the quiet and the still for the last ten years, and that that is the only way they can survive? That bringing Mariana and newness and change will just topple them over the precipice that they've been so perfectly balanced on, and nothing good can come of it?

He doesn't have the words to tell his uncle that he's just trying to survive. Me and my parents, we're not made for the future, he wants to say to Uncle

Yunus. We're not even made for the now. But all he has is "I don't know." Just as all he has, against the drumbeat of his mother's frustration and the anger of his father, is silence.

Everyone seems to think that the answer is marriage, when they know, Rijal thinks, that familiar taste of bitterness like ashes in his mouth, that everything he touches turns bad. Limbo is better than disaster. The confines of the grave are better than Hell.

"You don't have long to decide," his uncle persists. "She's going to start showing in two or three months, and you know Brunei –"

The words batter at him, mercilessly. His uncle is the most merciless person he knows, Rijal thinks. His very kindness is merciless.

"- I'm not just thinking of her, Rijal. I'm thinking of you, as well. And the baby. Your baby."

What is it like to have all the answers, to be so sure, Rijal wonders. His uncle's words are like waves, keeping him off-balance, pounding him, shoving him little by little, never giving him a chance to stand straight. He wants to pour his fears and doubts into his uncle. Uncle Yunus would know what to do, what to tell him. Give me a few seconds, he wants to say. Give me time to form the words that will tell you how I feel -

His uncle finally sighs. "I can't make you marry her," he says, and the words fall away from Rijal. "No one can. But you know what the right thing to do is." He waits for a response, but Rijal has none to give him. "Can you tell me why you don't want to marry her?"

How can he tell his uncle that he doesn't know? That his family is a mess and he is a mess and he can't bring another person into it? That it is more than

logic, more than knowledge, it is a deep fear of making a new tie, only to hang himself - or her - with it later. If he stays quiet enough, still enough, maybe it will be enough to keep everything around him from moving as well.

“Are you okay?”

Rijal nods jerkily, and meets his uncle’s eyes for the first time. He feels his way carefully. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“What are you sorry for?”

Rijal’s shoulders twitch involuntarily into a shrug. “For everything,” he says. He is always sorry.

“It’s good to have regret,” his uncle says. “But its only purpose is to stop us from making the same mistakes in the future. To try to correct the mistakes we’ve already made.” He stands up. “I have to go. Think about what I’ve said. We’re all here for you, Rijal.”

“I know.”

His uncle nods. “It’s good that you know that.” He lays a hand on Rijal’s shoulder. “Come by the house sometime. You know you’re always welcome.”

Rijal jerks his head in acknowledgement. His uncle leaves quietly, and it is only a few minutes after he is gone, when Rijal has been sitting alone in the room for a while, that he realises that he has forgotten to salam his uncle.

* * *

Hana catches sight of the entrance to the football field and pulls the car in across the opposite lane. It is mid-afternoon, a blindingly hot day, and gravel and dust kick up and around her tyres, rattling briefly and tinnily. The glare is strong

even through her sunglasses, and the part of her arm exposed to the sun through the windows is burning. She is thankful for air conditioning.

She sees the boys coming off the field, Khalid walking with a young man that looks familiar. Khalid sees her, his face breaks into a smile and he waves. The young man who is with him looks up at the interruption to their conversation, and she recognises him as Farid, the guy from the wedding at Rijal's place.

"Hi," Khalid says, as he reaches the car, that soft smile on his face that she loves, that he has specially for her.

She can feel the answer to the smile break out on her own face, and they stare at each other, lost for a moment, until Farid shifts, maybe in discomfort. Khalid coughs. "This is Farid."

"I know," Hana says unthinkingly. Both the boys cock their heads in surprised inquiry. "I'm Rijal's cousin," she hurries to explain. "I saw you at the wedding a few weeks ago."

Farid's face seems to warm. "Ah."

Hana smiles. "I saw you read the prayer."

He coughs. "Yeah," he fidgets. "They made me do it."

"Eseeeh," Khalid teases. "Imam Farid."

Farid shakes his head and quickly changes the subject, obviously embarrassed. "You're cousins with Rijal? On his mother's side, I guess?"

Hana nods. "Our mothers are sisters." She has an urge to reach out her hand for him to shake, but already knows he is the kind of religious boy who won't take it, who believes that a touch between an unmarried, unrelated man and woman is a grave sin. "My name is Hana."

“Nice to meet you Hana.” He nods at Khalid. “So,” he says, his turn to be teasing, “when is it going to be your turn?”

He is referring to a wedding. Khalid slaps him on the back and walks around the car to the passenger seat. “Don’t worry,” he says easily, “you’ll get an invitation.”

The idea warms Hana, as well as the fact that he is so willing to state their commitment so publicly. Khalid gets in the car and Farid waves goodbye. “Do you need a ride?” Hana asks.

Farid’s face seems to heat up again. “No, no.” he says hurriedly. “My car’s over there. See you later, ‘Lid. Hana.” He waves again and takes off.

“How do you know him?” Hana asks Khalid, curiously.

Khalid places his hand over hers on the stick. It is warm and comforting. Hana loves these moments in the car with Khalid. There are so few chances to be alone, really alone, in Brunei. Not like back in the UK, she thinks wistfully. No one cared, there, if Khalid came over to spend the night. Everyone accepted it. It was like a big unspoken secret. Things are different in the UK. Parents don’t have to know anything.

He plays with her fingers. “I know him from religious school,” he says idly. “We were classmates.”

“He’s really religious, huh?”

“Yeah,” Khalid says. “He invited me to this study circle this weekend.”

Hana shoots Khalid a look. “A religious study circle?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to go?”

“I think so.” Khalid rests his head against his seat. “Why not?”

“Why not,” Hana echoes. She brakes at a traffic light. “Are you hungry? Shall we go eat?”

Khalid turns to look at her, and his eyes darken. “I’m not hungry for food.”

Her heartbeat quickens, the blood flows slow and thick in her veins, a heavy anticipatory thumping. “Where do you want to go?”

He is watching her, his hand still warm on hers. “Let’s go to Meragang beach. It’s usually pretty empty at this time.”

“I don’t know how to get there.”

Khalid bursts out laughing, and he kisses her cheek, quick and affectionate. “Stop the car. I’ll drive.”

* * *

Rijal has been driving around aimlessly – he likes the timeless feel of moving in a car with no end and no beginning - for a few hours when he ends up on Meragang beach.

It used to be a favourite hang-out spot for him and his friends back in his secondary school days – it was always deserted in the afternoons, the perfect place to park and smoke and laze around on an afternoon that would otherwise have been spent sweltering, bored in an open-air classroom with only two big industrial fans to dry the sweat of fifty students. St Georges was notorious for its overcrowded classrooms and excellent exam results. He heard recently that it had received an influx of cash from a wealthy church patron – maybe they’ve finally updated the fans and wooden building. In any case, Meragang no longer seems to

be the beach of choice for teenagers cutting class. It is almost innocent in its desertedness.

He parks, is about to turn off the engine and light a cigarette when he notices the car at the other end of the makeshift parking lot, partially obscured by low hanging palm trees. It is eerily familiar – it takes him a few moments to realise it is one of Uncle Yunus' cars, unused as he is to seeing it outside of its spot in Uncle Yunus' driveway. Curiosity has him peering out the window. What is Uncle Yunus doing out here on a Tuesday afternoon? There is only one reason to be out on a deserted beach – his mother's cynicism has taught him that much. The disappointment, the betrayal, is already crawling up his spine, when he realises that the man in the car is not Uncle Yunus, and it is the girl that he recognises as his cousin Hana.

Just as he recognises what they are doing.

The shock reverberates through him, and he is thankful that they have not seen him. He is also thankful that he has not switched off his engine yet, and he is able to reverse quickly and quietly out of the secluded beach area and back onto the highway, his heart thudding as swiftly as if he is the guilty party. His phone rings as he goes, making him jump. He irrationally expects it to be Hana, that she has seen him leave.

It is Mariana. He hesitates before answering. They haven't spoken much since the incident at the house – she texted him coolly to let him know that she was going to a doctor in Miri, and he'd cautiously texted back to let her know he'd go with her, but other than that, this is the first time she has called him. "Hello?"

“Where are you?” she asks. Her tone is casual, which makes him even more wary. It is as if Mariana is biding her time, waiting for something.

“I’m driving,” he says, in the careful tone he has been using around her.

“Why haven’t you called?” she asks, almost conversationally.

He is silent. He doesn’t have an answer. “Are we still going to Miri tomorrow?”

“*I’m* going,” she says. The words are ambiguous, but the silence is expectant. Everything about her puts him in mind of a cat, curling deceptively, waiting to pounce.

“What time is your appointment?”

“Three o’clock.”

“I’ll pick you up in the morning?” he asks, cautiously.

“Okay,” she says, not uncheerfully. “See you tomorrow.” The phone call ends as abruptly as it begins.

The air conditioning is off, but he is still cold. He rolls up the windows, and, free from the loud, moving air outside, the temperature inside the car quickly rises. He can feel the clamminess of air condensing into warm water begin on his skin, and he welcomes it.

His mind goes back to Meragang beach, and to his cousin. Poor Uncle Yunus, he thinks, unexpectedly, and the sorrow and pity is as real as it is sudden.

Five

Even though it is a private doctor – or maybe because of it – the waiting room is dull and dingy, after a climb up anonymous concrete stairs that are the exact replica of Ji Lung’s apartment block back in Brunei. The floor is scarred cement covered with a pointedly cheap rug, and the receptionist is a curious Filipina who Rijal has no doubt was originally brought into the country as a maid. She acknowledges their appointment with a “Just wait a moment, mam,” gestures at the flimsy wooden sofa set, and goes into the back room, presumably to inform the doctor that they are there. The whole clinic is about the size of a small flat.

They sit in silence, as they did on the ride over. As soon as she had come into the car, Mariana had turned up the radio station and stared out the window, seeming unusually happy to drive without talking. Once they’d reached the border, she’d spoken only to give him directions to where the doctor is. She seems perfectly pleasant, but Rijal retains that sensation of watchfulness. He is happy enough to let it be for the time being, though. Let it be. Everything is still perfectly balanced. Maybe it is possible that it can stay that way. Indefinitely.

The doctor, a small Chinese man, beckons them into the consultation room, and they both get up. Once in the room, which, much to Rijal’s relief, is as modern and up-to-date as it is possible to be, in stark contrast to the run-down waiting area, Mariana climbs up onto the green gurney and answers the doctor’s questions about her health.

“Have you had any other check-ups yet?” he asks. Rijal takes a look at the badge he is wearing. Lim Tock Hee. Doctor Lim. He wonders briefly how Mariana found out about this clinic – whether it was through the network of stewardesses or some other friend.

Mariana shakes her head. “Okay, lie down,” Doctor Lim says. He is brusque without being rude. As if he has done this many times before.

He performs a few manoeuvres, and when he gestures at Mariana to pull her shirt back down over her stomach, and takes a seat on a nearby stool, Rijal understands the examination is over. The whole thing has taken less than twenty minutes.

“We’ll need to wait for the results of the blood test to be sure, but I can tell you that you’re in the first few weeks of the pregnancy, not further along than your first month.”

Mariana nods. Doctor Lim rifles in a drawer for some pamphlets. “I can give you some information on how to maintain a healthy pregnancy, and you can make an appointment outside for another check-up. My rates are a hundred dollars per check-up and -”

“What are my other options?” Mariana interrupts.

Dr.Lim stops abruptly and looks at Mariana, assessing her. “If you want to terminate the pregnancy, I advise you do it as soon as possible. The earlier in the pregnancy it is, the easier it is -”

This, Rijal realises with dawning horror, is why they came to Miri to do the check-up.

Abortions are illegal in Brunei, unless the baby would endanger the life of the mother, or in rare quiet cases of rape and incest. Technically they are illegal in Malaysia as well, but in an island outpost like Miri, it is much harder to regulate, and discreet private clinics like this one are normally allowed to slip under the radar.

Mariana is asking the doctor how long more she has to still have the choice of abortion. As she waits for the doctor's answer, her eyes meet Rijal's, and for the first time since he has met her, they are ruthless as well as bold. She is showing him her cards, and she is holding a hand that he cannot top.

"We're not getting an abortion," Rijal says, and his voice sounds hoarse to his own ears.

The doctor glances at him, and some flash of understanding? Pity? Goes through his eyes. "You don't have to make any decisions today, of course," he says, with a little less detachment than he has shown throughout the examination.

They leave the clinic, and Rijal gets blindly into the car. He doesn't switch on the engine yet, sits there with his hands limp in his lap until Mariana complains, "It's hot."

He turns to her, still blind, tries to make her out. For a second it is like he cannot recognise her; the woman sitting in his passenger seat is a complete stranger to him. He focuses on one feature at a time – have her eyes always been those wide? Then the features come together, but he cannot shake the feeling that she is still unknown. "Were you serious? About considering an abortion?"

She is watching him. "I'm not going to have a baby if I'm not married Rijal. It would ruin my life. It would ruin my family." She says it matter-of-factly.

The whole world has narrowed to this car. The precipice is gone, and they are freefalling into the abyss. She has thrown them both over the edge. His hands are shaking. He wanted answers, and now the decision has been made for him. He puts the key into the ignition and tries to turn it. His hands are so unsteady that he is forced to give up after a few tries. "Then I guess we're getting married."

* * *

The drive home is a blur for Rijal. Everything seems to happen as if through a haze of smoke, of slow-motion time. He forgets that they have eaten as soon as they do, and the queue at the border is an automatic line of braking and moving forward in miniscule increments. Now that things are settled, Mariana is unashamedly happy, chatty, sitting in the passenger seat with a bucket of popcorn chicken and her sunglasses and a smile on her face. Rijal recognises the victory, but he is too numb to resent it. Just the opposite, in fact. He welcomes the return to normality, forces himself to smile and reply to her conversation. Not for the first time, he is glad that Mariana is a talker. It is restful, he thinks suddenly. Mariana doesn't ask much of him once she has gotten her own way. He is important only insofar as he furthers her own wants. She never asks him what he wants, what he needs – it is restful to.

After he drops her home, with a promise to let her know what his parents say when he tells them the news, Rijal takes a wrong turn out of her road and ends up on the Muara highway. He could take the next U-turn, he thinks, but keeps going instead.

He doesn't know where he's driving, only that the quiet and the unfamiliarity act as a balm to his still-throbbing nerves.

He does not know why the prospect of abortion had shocked him so much. It is just that it had not even crossed his mind as an option, he supposes. And then when he had realised why Mariana had brought him to that ugly little clinic in Miri, he had pictured it, exactly what she was giving him a choice between. He had thought of a needle, puncturing her stomach, and blood, and a dead baby. And

he had thought of the only other time he has seen death, in the empty face of his cousin Sophie, ten years before. He had remembered another car on a city highway, shrieking laughter and the smell of liquor, and then the diamond-hard snap of impact, of shards of glass tinkling musically. His own face in the mirror, covered with cuts, and the scream that had blocked his throat when he saw Sophie, lying in the cold, cold morgue -

Rijal slams his foot down on the accelerator and blocks the thought out. He rolls down the window, and the roar of air outside wipes everything clean, deafens his thoughts. He gulps a breath down and very deliberately slows the car down. His heart is screeching inside his chest. He takes the next turn off the highway, not caring where he ends up, only knowing he needs the distraction of navigating unfamiliar roads, of the discipline and regulation of following and interacting with the cars around him. The rules are clear on the road -

He drives and drives until he ends up, he hardly knows how, on a road he recognizes. And without thinking, as if it is the natural conclusion to this hideous day, he parks his car behind his Uncle Yunus' silver Pajero and gets out.

They must have heard his car roll into the driveway, because the front door is opened as he is coming up the front walk by one of his cousins, the second youngest one, Alia, who looks at him and says hello. "Hi," he says softly, afraid to let it go any louder, in case it betrays him. "Is your dad in?"

She gestures, still looking at him curiously, and through the house he sees his Uncle Yunus sitting outside on the back veranda, his back to Rijal, with a mug on the rattan table by his side, and a book in hand.

Rijal knocks on the sliding glass doors, and his uncle, freshly showered and dressed simply and domestically in a white T-shirt and a kain wrapped around

his waist and legs, looks up, over his glasses. He is also wearing a white topi haji on his head, and Rijal notices that there is a sprinkling of white in his uncle's hair. Not a lot, but unmistakably, it is there.

“Rijal!” Uncle Yunus exclaims, getting up from his rattan recliner to embrace him. Rijal welcomes the touch, finds his eyes filling as he touches his forehead to his uncle's hands, which feel cool and smell of soap. He has to fight to press the tears back down without his uncle noticing.

“Hi,” Rijal repeats. He notices that there is a secondary school textbook on the table by Uncle Yunus' side. “Are you busy?”

“No, no,” his uncle says. “Just helping Atul with her homework. She didn't do so well on her last maths test.”

Rijal sits down next to his uncle. He doesn't know what to say or why he came, but is aware of his uncle's gaze on him. It feels stifling, but he welcomes the sensation. He has a sudden need to be constricted, restrained, boxed in so nothing spills out.

“How are you?” Uncle Yunus asks. “Do you want something to drink?”

Rijal shakes his head. “I've got to get going soon,” he says. He leans forward on his knees. “Thanks, though.”

His uncle regards him. “Is everything okay?”

Before Rijal can answer, Atul comes out through the doors. “Oh.” She claps a hand over her mouth. “I didn't know you were here,” she turns shy. “Hi Abang Rijal.”

“Salam your cousin,” her father says gently, and she comes forward to salam Rijal. “You finished praying?”

She nods, her eyes moving to her father. "I'll go do my homework upstairs."

She takes her book, and bends down to pick up a pen that has fallen on the floor. As she does, his uncle runs a hand over her head, patting it before she straightens and bounds out the door. Seeing that gesture makes Rijal's throat dry. He remembers his uncle doing that to him a lot over his childhood, before he grew taller and it became harder. A pat of comfort, or affection - sometimes for no reason at all except to reach out. That is Uncle Yunus, he supposes. Always reaching out.

Rijal clears his throat. "I just came to tell you," he begins, and has to cough again. "That Mariana and I are getting married."

Surprise, the good kind of surprise, blossoms on his uncle's face. "You are?"

Rijal nods.

"Alhamdulillah." His uncle sighs out the thankful blessing, long and low, and it is as if the tension and horror that Rijal has been holding inside all day sighs out with it. It is heartfelt and sincere. He leans forward and grasps Rijal's hand, squeezing it hard. "This is the right thing to do," he says, firmly. "You're doing the right thing." His uncle smiles, a little shaky smile, testament to the fact that his uncle has been worrying about him. It touches Rijal. "I knew you would. You're a good boy, Rijal."

Rijal shakes his head. "I don't think a good boy would be in this situation to begin with," he says with a faint smile.

Surprisingly, his uncle smiles, and they sit in companionable silence. Rijal thinks of math homework, and reminders to pray, and pats on the head, all of

which he also got from his uncle while he was staying with them. He thinks also of the day he got back from Malaysia, ten years ago, body aching and face stinging, and how he was sitting on his bed, head in his hands, and his uncle came to his darkened room and didn't say anything, just sat next to him, rubbed his back, and began reciting the Qur'an, or a prayer, or something. He hadn't known what to do then, so he had just sat there and let his uncle pray. And when his uncle had finished, that final rub of the back, a gentle resting of his uncle's hand on his hot head, and a quiet injunction to rest, everything would be all right.

"This is your chance to do things right," his uncle says to him now. "No matter what mistakes you've made before, you can put them behind you now, and do things right. Don't look back. We're all here to support you. It's hard to see now, but maybe this is all for the best."

Rijal wants to ask his uncle how he can be so sure, but follows his uncle's gaze instead. Uncle Yunus is looking over his shoulder, at the dining table, where Aunty Lily and his three youngest daughters are setting the table, putting out food for dinner. They are all already in their pajamas, and the whole tableau is so wholesome and homey that Rijal understands the light in his uncle's face. His uncle believes in the best, and in right and wrong, because he's spent his whole life living that way, and this is his reward, this shining example of what Uncle Yunus believes the world should be like.

The front door opens then, and Hana comes in, face flushed and lips clamped in annoyance. Unbidden, Rijal thinks of Meragang beach, and what would happen to the light in his uncle's face if he knew. And he is suddenly glad that he has had this chance, at least, to tell Uncle Yunus that he plans to do the right thing.

Rijal meets Hana's eyes, and a strange longing expands in his belly. He wishes he had not gone to Meragang beach that day, and was as blind as Uncle Yunus. He knows, better than most, that it is easy to forgive the sins of a stranger, a friend, a nephew. It is a very different story when the sins come from the blood of your blood. The flesh of your flesh.

* * *

Hana meets Rijal's eyes squarely. She is spoiling for a fight. She has spent the entire afternoon with Khalid, who had been in the strangest mood. The afternoon had started out fine, with them going to the Mall for food. They had finished eating at Swensen's and were waiting for the bill when Khalid suddenly checked his watch and said, with studied matter-of-factness, "It's almost Asar, and I haven't prayed Zuhur yet."

She had raised an eyebrow. It's not like Khalid to keep an eye on prayer times. Of course he prays – they both pray occasionally. And Khalid never misses Friday prayers. But he's never been one to timetable his life around the five obligatory daily prayers. "You can make it up later," she had suggested.

"Farid says that you can't make up prayers," he'd said. "Unless you've fallen asleep or forgotten."

"But it's too late to do anything about it," she had pointed out, reasonably, she thought. "We're too far from home, and getting to the mosque will take ages at this time because of traffic."

"There's a prayer room upstairs," Khalid had said, "Farid took me there the other day."

It had occurred to Hana that he was saying “Farid” an awful lot. “Okay. Do you want me to wait here for you?”

He’d stood up and put the money for their meal down. “Do you want to come pray too?”

Her cheeks had burned. How could he have put her on the spot like that? Saying no will make her feel like she’s a bad person, but she can’t pray in the Mall! Even if there was a proper place to take ablution, she has makeup on and she didn’t bring her praying clothes. She grasps at that solution, and makes a regretful face. “I didn’t bring my praying clothes.”

“That’s okay,” he’d said insistently. “They always have spare in the prayer rooms. And if not –“ he looks at her headscarf. “You can pray in that.”

Where is he getting all these ideas? He’d forced her to say it. “It’s okay,” she’d said, with a forced smile. “I’ll pray at home.”

She’d stewed over his subsequent disappointed look during the twenty-five minutes that he was gone. Twenty-five minutes during which she’d been forced to sit alone in the restaurant, pointedly avoiding people’s curious gazes and pretending to play with her phone. What has gotten into Khalid? He’d never been so stuck on praying before. Of course they both *want* to pray more often, to be better people, they’d talked about it, but not yet. When they’re settled down, when they have jobs, when all the other little things in life are set.

When he’d come back, she’d been so relieved after the lengthy solitude that she’d decided not to be mad, and had reached for his hand. To her shock, he’d avoided it, as well as her hurt look. “What’s going on?” she’d demanded.

“Nothing,” he’d mumbled. “I just don’t think we should hold hands in front of everybody -”

“It’s never bothered you before.”

He shrugged, still not meeting her eyes. He’d stuck his hands in his pockets. Out of reach. “Farid says that -”

“So you went to that study circle after all,” Hana had interrupted.

“I did, then after that the brothers -”

“The *brothers*?”

He’d shrugged again, looking uncomfortable, but still eager to talk about it. “That’s what they call each other. Anyway, they invited me out to another talk, and then another study circle. They’re having another one next week.”

A tiny bloom of uncertainty. “So what did you do at the study circle? What did you guys talk about?”

“A lot of things. They started with looking at the Qur’an, and we went through a few verses. Then they talked about what it means to be a Muslim -”

“What do you mean?”

He had waved a hand. “They made me think about what it means to be a Muslim. Whether I can still say I’m a Muslim if I don’t look after my prayers -”

“Surely that’s between you and God -”

He had looked grave. “That’s what I used to think. But then they asked what it means to say “I believe” and then still not do the things - like praying and staying away from sin...what it means to say I believe yet still disobey God. It means I don’t really believe...”

She had not been sure what to think. “That sounds good,” she had said, and he had nodded eagerly.

“It was really inspirational, Hana. It really made me want to be a better Muslim than I have been. Just to see and be around these guys -”

“The brothers -” she’d teased.

He’d grinned then, relieved that she was taking it so well. “This is a good thing, right?” he’d asked her then. “We both want to be better, right?”

She’d thought of long cosy days in England spent cuddled in bed while the weather went on gray and gloomy outside, and the way he’d refused to take her hand minutes earlier. But she hadn’t been able to resist his pleading look. “Yes, it’s good,” she’d said. But inside, that bloom of uncertainty had persisted.

It had been a long afternoon. Khalid had excused himself for the Asar prayer, and then he’d cut their afternoon short, saying that he wanted to be back in time for Maghrib. He has never hurried away from her to other obligations before - normally it is she who has to insist on being taken home, before her father and mother begin to worry. Uncertain where this new phase is taking them, Hana’s nerves are on edge, and they are rubbed raw by Rijal standing in front of her, and the echo of her aunt’s words in her head; “*She should have thought of that before she went sleeping with every Tom, Dick and Harry -*”. She has the uncomfortable feeling that if Khalid and Rijal are on a spectrum, between them, she is closer to Rijal now...

“Hi,” she says.

He inclines his head. “I was just leaving,” he says. “I didn’t block your car, did I?”

She shakes her head. “No, Khalid dropped me off.” She moves to let him pass, watches him salam her father and her mother, and slope off to his car. “What was he doing here?” she asks.

Her parents exchange a look, partly proud, partly relieved. “Your cousin is getting married,” her father announces.

She can't stop her jaw from dropping. "What?" she blurts out.

"In two weeks," her father says.

Six

Once the wedding preparations get going, they get going with a vengeance. Each day Rijal comes home to an open front door and workers coming busily in and out carrying planks of wood and yards of gauze. The front driveway is overrun with stacks of plastic chairs and piles of metal poles for the camps that will go up on the day of the actual ceremony. His phone buzzes more constantly than it has ever done, and they are all congratulatory, half-scolding, half-teasing texts from his relatives, commenting on the speed of the wedding, asking why didn't he tell them, and isn't he a secretive one. He even gets one from Sufjan, telling him that he'll be flying in from Australia a few days before the wedding. He doesn't know what his parents have told Sufjan, how much they have.

There is an uneasy peace around the household, and all the activity allows him and his parents to avoid talking as much as possible. His father is grimly – and somewhat surprisingly - determined to have the traditional wedding crammed with all the little ceremonies and rites which will be expected of his title and status, and his mother is watchful. They had both been curiously calm when he had quietly informed them that he would be getting married to Mariana after all, but as he had been going out the room, his mother had said, carefully, “It doesn't have to be forever, Rijal. This is just a solution for now.”

That was when he had realised that his mother was not being calm so much as biding her time. The Kwang survival instinct, again. That insistent search for an escape route, the ruthless weighing of necessity and gratification. And underneath the barely tamed anger that is an ingrained part of his mother's protectiveness, a fundamental distrust of the future. His father, in contrast, had simply looked sad, and a little confused at the way things are turning out,

involving himself in the things he knows – ritual, protocol, hierarchy – rather than the unknown future. His father clings to the past, while his mother is always preparing for the future. They are always trying to protect him, Rijal had thought. Always trying to protect as well as perfect. Their worry for him is like a burden he cannot shake off. I'm sorry, he wants to say, every day. He wants to tell them it will be all right, to echo the well-meaning platitudes of his Uncle Yunus, for they seem more in need of the assurance than he does. It is as if every worry they have is focalizing around the weight of the wedding. The need to make sure no one finds out about Mariana's pregnancy seems to mutate into the foreboding that this wedding is only a stop-gap measure for all the troubles, unnamed and unknown, that are yet to come. All in all, it is not a festive atmosphere. Rijal doesn't know how to make things right, but the burden becomes so unbearably heavy that it prompts him to ask his father if there are any jobs available at the family business.

He expects his father to be pleased at the interest – the first time he has ever shown it – and is surprised when his father shakes his head. "It's a bad time," Jaafar says, not unkindly. "There are things going on...it's not a good time for the business. We can't take anybody new right now. Not even you, Rijal."

His father has not spoken so seriously about the family business in a while, and it revives that curious dread that never really goes away, penetrates that bubble of careful limbo that they all work so hard to preserve. All Rijal's life, he has been aware that his father is not really involved in the family company – he, like the rest of his seven brothers and sisters, inherited it from Rijal's late grandfather, the same grandfather who, bold and enterprising and ambitious, had bought up the parcels of land that all their houses stand on, in the now-realised hope of making their own family village, only two of which still exist in Brunei

now. And Jaafar, like many of his brothers and sisters, holds an executive title in the company, but very little responsibility. Oh, his signature is needed on all sorts of papers, and his presence required in the office for one or two hours every day, but Rijal and Sufjan have always vaguely known they are very lucky, and from the rare occasions that they have accompanied their father to work as children, they can recognise that their father has very little to do for the amount of money that they receive.

All that changed, of course, ten years ago. Yet although the undercurrent of uncertainty rises from time to time, for the most part all of them are able to pretend that it is business as usual. But it is always there, a knowledge that their inheritance is not quite safe.

He has a brief urge to ask what's going on, but it is quashed when his father goes on, squeezing a hand on his shoulder, "But don't worry Rijal," comfortingly, "we'll look after you. You don't have to worry."

The burden presses down further, alongside the guilt that never goes away, but it also takes on an edge of restlessness that is new. So it is, that for the second time in as many weeks, Rijal finds himself at his Uncle Yunus' house one afternoon, when he expects his uncle to be home from work.

He is greeted at the door this time by Lily, and he realises vaguely that the house is quiet. That is itself unusual – he has never been to Uncle Yunus' house and felt it quiet. But it is, unmistakably – he realizes belatedly that there is only one car in the garage.

"Rijal," his aunty says, with a smile. "What are you doing here? Come in."

She must have just gotten back from work, Rijal realizes. Here at home, his aunty's head is uncovered, but she is still wearing a baju kurung, and the slash

of red which his mother also favours is still lingering on her lips. It has been years since Rijal has seen his aunty without her headscarf. Seen like this, her hair bobbed straight and black, Lily's resemblance to his mother is striking, and the Chinese set of her features is pronounced, as if in removing the headscarf she has removed more than a physical veil. Rijal looks at her with fresh eyes, and realises anew how firmly and far his aunty has come from the ways and traditions of her parents. For the first time he wonders what kind of fortitude it takes to make those steps. To take those steps that lead away from the past.

"I wanted to talk to Uncle Yunus," Rijal says, following his aunt inside, sitting down across from her at the dining table, where a half-eaten mangosteen and a cup of tea sit. His aunt pushes a bowl full of the dusty hard purple fruit at him, and gestures to the waiting maid to bring him a drink. He takes one out of the bowl, but sets it down on the prepared plate.

"Do you want me to open it?" his aunt asks. Without waiting for an answer, she reaches over and plucks the hard leaf cap of the fruit off. Then she places both palms on opposite sides of the fruit and squeezes, gently and firmly. Rijal can see the moment when the fruit begins yielding at the top, followed swiftly by the satisfying *pop*. The two halves of the fleshy shell fall apart. In one half the pristine, perfect slices of the white fruit, startling and frail against the dark, rich purple dustiness of its secretive cover. The other half is empty. The shell itself is almost three quarters of an inch thick; so much protection, Rijal thinks, for a fruit which is only about an inch and a half in diameter.

"Thanks," he says politely. He wrestles the fruit out of its shell, doing it quickly, knowing if he doesn't, his aunt might very well offer to do that as well. Like an orange, the fruit is naturally separated into sections, and he takes one. It

bursts with sweet and sour in his mouth, so much flavour contained in what is little more than a skein of white flesh around a large seed. Such a deceptive fruit, Rijal thinks. So much trouble for what seems like so little reward. And yet they are curiously addictive, the process of peeling as enticing as the tangy fruit that lies inside. He reaches for another, and opens it himself, this time.

“How are the wedding preparations going?” his aunty asks.

Rijal smiles faintly. “I’m the wrong person to ask,” he says. “My parents are taking care of everything. The only thing I’ve done is go to the tailor’s to get measured.”

“How many ceremonies are there going to be, now?”

Rijal ticks them off on his fingers. “The engagement, the nikah, the sanding, then the ambil-ambilan. There’s also the berbedak on her side. Four, five including the berbedak.”

His aunt purses her lips. “I remember, now,” she says. “From your mother’s wedding. This is all happening next weekend?”

“From Friday to Sunday.” Rijal tilts his head, curiously. It occurs to him that he has never seen any photos of Aunty Lily and Uncle Yunus’ wedding. There are very few pictures of his own parents’ wedding, for that matter, and that was before the almost-divorce, when his mother removed even those last ones and put them away. Burned them maybe – it wouldn’t surprise him - or maybe they are just packed away in some undisclosed location. They have never made it back out to the light of day, if that is the case. “It’s going to be a packed weekend.”

“Sounds like it,” his aunt says with a laugh. She sobers, looks at him with that concerned look he is so used to. It feels like everyone in the world looks at him like that. Are you okay, they seem to say with that look. Are you all right?

Tip-toeing around him constantly...the only person who doesn't look at him that way, he thinks suddenly, is Mariana.

“Are you looking forward to it?”

Rijal feels his lips curl slightly upward. “Did you look forward to your wedding?” he teases gently.

His aunt rewards him with a laugh. “Mine was a very different affair from yours and your mother's,” she says wryly.

“I've never heard about yours. You got married to Uncle Yunus before my mother got married, didn't you?”

Lily nods, and her gaze turns dreamy, faraway. “We had to,” she says. “If we had waited for your mother to get married to Jaafar...their wedding took a year to plan. Yunus didn't want to wait that long - to his way of thinking, we'd waited too long already...”

“Too long?”

Lily comes back to the present with another laugh. “We'd been dating for a year...no, almost two years,” she says lightly.

“And Uncle Yunus thought that was too long?”

“Your uncle asked me to marry him after six months.”

“Didn't my parents date for -”

“Almost ten years,” Lily nods. A smile, youthful in remembering, flashes across her face. “Your parents were...they've been together for a very long time, Rijal.”

“So why'd you wait that long to get married if Uncle Yunus wanted to get married earlier?”

“Because...” Lily stops to think, maybe about how to put it into words. “Because your Uncle Yunus is a very good person,” she says finally, and the answer seems to satisfy her. She sighs. “It was different for us back then,” she tells him, the mangosteen forgotten on her plate. “Our parents...didn’t approve of us dating. Both our parents.”

“Why?”

“Because I was - I am Chinese, and he’s Malay,” Lily says, matter-of-factly. “I wasn’t Muslim, and his parents didn’t like that at all. And of course, my parents didn’t like the fact that he *is* Malay...and Muslim -”

“But I thought they were okay with my mother marrying my dad –”

Lily appears to pick her words carefully. “It was different with your father,” she says. “You know...Yunus was always very religious -” Not like your father, is the implicit understanding “ - and he was very poor back then - we were too, by that time, of course -” Rijal has a flash, a memory of his grandparents’ tremendous wealth and equally stupendous decline, a decayed mansion on a rotting hill - “but your grandparents didn’t think he’d be able to provide for me...you know, it was a combination of all these factors. Our parents were very opposed to the match.”

“So it took a year to talk them around?”

A glimpse of teeth, of mischief. “It took a year to convince Yunus that we should run away and elope in Miri.”

Rijal can feel his jaw drop. Of all the stories he had expected, this is perhaps the least likely. He can hardly imagine his steadfast, respectable uncle and aunt running anywhere, let alone to Miri to elope. He pushes away the picture of a

dingy abortion clinic he would rather forget, tries to picture his aunt and uncle, those pillars of the community, doing something so reckless and rash.

His aunt laughs at his expression. “I’m joking,” she says. “It was my idea, but Yunus was the one who was determined to follow through.”

She tells him then of coming back from Miri. To two sets of guns, the stark police-issue barrels belonging to a policeman from the Berakas barracks, who had subdued rebels during the 1960s revolt, and the small pistols of a Chinese businessman who used them to shoot pigeons for food and barricade his door during that same revolt. To the fury and disappointment of both parents. He pictures the defiance that she must have worn as easily as a dress, as the headscarf she puts on now, every day, and imagines the solid, comforting presence his uncle must have been, the patient perseverance of a man used to doing the right thing. She also tells him of how long it took for both families to forgive them. “It was years before Yunus’ family would talk - properly talk, to him. After we got married, Yunus used to go over, without fail, every Friday, to pay a weekly visit, and they...they wouldn’t ignore him, exactly, but they would just sit there, so stiffly...you get into the habit of these things after a while, you know, Rijal.”

“The habit?”

“Of not forgiving.” She tells him of how Yunus would send part of his paycheck every month, “Not to bribe them, but because that’s just the way he is, your uncle is a good man, Rijal -” defending a man who seldom defends himself.

“It didn’t take as long for my parents to get over it,” she says, with a little laugh. “They don’t really hold grudges, your grandparents. As soon as Yunus got a good job, they were talking to us again by the time Gina’s wedding came around.”

“But everything’s okay now, right,” Rijal says, hesitantly. “I mean, with Uncle Yunus’ family.”

Lily’s eyes shutter, the tiniest flicker. If Rijal was not used to reading those flickers, those faintest of pauses and silences right before someone changes the subject when he walks into the vicinity, the slightest tightening of curves that tells him when someone is smiling too hard, he might have missed it. He drops his eyes. “Of course,” she says smoothly. “Everything is okay now.” She picks up the forgotten mangosteen, still glistening white. “It’s family, after all,” she says more thoughtfully, and he can feel her looking at him. “Family always forgives, in the end.”

Rijal meets her eyes, and he knows they are both thinking of the same thing. A young girl lying in a distant Chinese cemetery in Malaysia, and an uncle who has never come to Brunei, never lifted the silence since that funeral ten years before.

* * *

Lily finds Yunus in his favourite spot, the rattan chair on the back veranda, when the girls have gone to sleep. Everyone is home - even Hana, for a change, who is usually to be found in Khalid’s company. But she has been home more often recently, Lily realises with a slight frown. And she was unusually quiet at dinner that night, although Lily didn’t pay much attention to it at the time, preoccupied as she had been with thoughts of Rijal. Perhaps she is having trouble with Khalid. With an inward sigh, Lily tells herself that Hana will come to her if there is anything serious the matter. For the time being, puppy love and all its winding chasms and hills of emotion is best, and most wisely left to itself.

Nevertheless, it will not hurt to hold out the offer of a shoulder. She will talk to Hana the next day.

Despite the completeness of the house - Lily thrills to it, and knowing that her eldest-born is also under the roof, as she has not been for the past three years of studying abroad - it is quiet and slumberous. Instead of switching on the air conditioning, Yunus has thrown open the sliding back doors, and only the paper-thin, but hardy mosquito netting separates them from the night. Nightfall has not brought a cooling breeze with it - tonight the air is still, and almost tangible in its heavy humid weight, leaving a damp trail of moisture wherever it touches. As soon as she sits, Lily feels her legs turn dewy and sticky.

Yunus glances up, and smiles at her, that old familiar smile that fills her with soothing lightness. His conscience is so clear that it clears others for them, making her feel as empty and innocent as a newborn. “Sayang,” he says, that traditional endearment that she has only ever heard from his lips, that started out so alien to her ears, in its foreign rounded Malay syllables, and has expanded over years and years into the life they have built together.

She echoes it back to him, knowing it will make him smile. “What are you doing down here?”

He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. “Just finishing up some work. There was a new case today – this girl is having trouble at home and hasn’t been attending class very regularly. I spoke to her form teacher and then to the girl herself...it turns out her mother has just remarried and the girl doesn’t like her new stepfather.”

Lily waits patiently, knows - from experience - that there is more. “Just...doesn’t like?” she prods.

He looks at her, and she sees it, the helplessness and the grief for this girl he has likely only met today. “I hope that’s all it is,” is all he says. He closes his eyes. “We’ve scheduled a meeting with her mother tomorrow.”

On impulse, Lily leaves her own chair and goes to him. He makes room for her, and his arms go around her. She gives him a hug, some comfort that he can take from her. “I’ll hope that’s all it is as well,” she says, gently. So that is the meaning of the extra minutes he took on his prayer mat today. He does it every night, without fail, does Yunus, takes the problems of the world and leaves them on the prayer mat. She had thought that it had been for Rijal, today, but this must have been bothering him as well. Yunus is not like so many others – she has seen, in the wet market on Fridays, the supermarket, when they are out at a restaurant, the parents and grandparents who come to him, confide in him and, on parting, ask him to pray for them, and for their children and grandchildren. Every time, Yunus will reply with an affirmative and a word of encouragement, and that night, he will spend extra time at prayer. Yunus does not forget anybody in his prayers, she sometimes thinks. She has learnt to pray herself, over the years, just as she has learnt to fast and put on the headscarf and say the shahadah, but she knows that her ritual bending and bowing is a very different journey to the one Yunus undertakes with the same movements. With his prostration, he submits everything that he is, and when he stands, he ascends as a living promise of a man before His Lord. With every prayer, Yunus rises as a man renewed. There have been times when, after a fight, he will come to her after a prayer with new understanding and fresh patience. It is not always a welcome renewal – they will have been rejoicing, perhaps, in some good news, and he will return from prayer grave and thoughtful, with the cautionary admonition not to be so attached to this world, that all that is

good is from God, and is temporary. It can be a downer, as Hana would say. But she has come to accept this facet of Yunus, and the fact that she shares him with his God. He has never pushed her or forced her, but the day she began learning to pray, and the day that she put on the headscarf, she was rewarded with a happiness which rivalled his joy at the births of their daughters. Yunus has a way of doing that, of placing expectations so high -

He hands her a sheet of paper now, and she looks at it. It is a job application. “What’s this for?”

“It’s for a clerical job at the ministry,” he tells her. “It’s not much – it pays about a thousand dollars a month, but if Rijal sticks to it, they can send him for some training in a year, and he’ll be able to move up. If he takes a few classes in the meantime, gets his national diploma, then he’ll have even more options.”

Lily looks at the form dubiously. She knows – entry level as it is – that it is about the only thing Rijal is qualified for. Beggars can’t be choosers. And he had seemed sincere earlier when he had asked Yunus for help in finding a job.

She loves Rijal – no one can help loving Rijal. But she shares Gina’s fears for him. He has done nothing since he was sixteen and dropped out of school, not even after Sophie’s death. He has just drifted, aimlessly, allowing people to take care of him, wasting time with his no-good friends. It is almost as if he has become *worse* after Sophie’s death, even more detached from everything. She can understand Gina’s need to keep him protected, in that safe nest of Jaafar’s title and wealth. Perhaps it would have been different if Rijal had ever shown any desire to change, but if Gina has sometimes been over-protective, Rijal has always seemed like he needs protection. Perhaps, like Gina, she fears pushing him even

further into the isolation that has always dogged his steps, the detachment that he carries like a cloak.

Even this afternoon, when she had asked him how the wedding preparations were going, he had seemed uninterested.

Lily thinks of Sophie with a pang. Sometimes it is impossible to think of Rijal without thinking of Sophie. She had loved Sophie as well, everybody had. She was born in the same year as Rijal, but they had been so different. Sophie had excelled at school, she had been beautiful and bright and vivacious. She had only been eighteen when she died. She had been in the car with her boyfriend, she had been about to start university. She had had everything ahead of her. And yet, Lily thinks, she had gotten on so well with Rijal. They had spent a lot of time together – the only reason Rijal had been in Malaysia that month had been to spend time with Sophie in the weeks before she was going to start school. They'd been planning to fly to Thailand with Sophie's boyfriend. So they must have had more in common than was immediately apparent.

“It's a good job,” Yunus says, mistaking her silence.

“It is,” Lily agrees. “I just don't know – whether it will be good for him.”

He shifts so he can see her face. “We can't look after him forever, Lily. In a few months, he will have his own family to take care of.”

He adds, when she says nothing, “He's not a bad boy.”

“He's not,” Lily agrees, thoughtfully. Rijal is not a bad boy. But she fears, she very much fears, that he is a weak one, and that shoehorning him into a desk job will frustrate and alienate him, just as school did. Rijal has never had any ambition. He has never had to.

Yunus nods at the sideboard, where family pictures are framed and gloated

silently over. “Look how lucky we are,” he says, gently. “Hana has just graduated. Alia, Atul and Ismi are doing well in school – Alia might get a scholarship to go to the UK in two years, if she keeps it up. They’re good girls. Rijal doesn’t have their future. But that doesn’t mean he has no future at all.” He hesitates. “I think he just needs to begin believing that life isn’t such a scary thing. Perhaps he just needs a chance to try. Maybe it’s time for us to stop sheltering him so much.”

How does he keep doing it? How can he keep believing, year after year, in the fairness of life, when he sees kids like Rijal every day at school, and knows how much is out there that could so easily destroy them? Lily finds Yunus’ hand and squeezes it briefly. “You’re right.” She hands the form back to him. “Let him try.”

* * *

Hana hears the end of her father’s words to her mother, and backs silently up the stairs. Not, however, before she catches a glimpse of her parents, and the way they are snuggled into the chair together. She had not known they were downstairs until she’d almost been on top of them. She had had other things on her mind.

She goes back to her room and her unbearably silent laptop, thoughts of food forgotten. How lucky they are, she thinks, dull bitterness spreading through her stomach like acid threatening to seep out through her skin. Lucky. She flings herself on her bed, where her handbag is lying. She resists the urge to check her laptop again. She knows that there will have been no change. Her messenger has been quiet all evening – the special messenger that she and Khalid set up so that they wouldn’t have to be disturbed by other friends wanting to chat if they came

online. It has been quiet for the last week. Khalid is always busy nowadays. He is always out with his new “brothers”, and when he does come on, it is only to say a quick hi, and to say that he has to go, it is prayer time or dinner time or some other time that doesn’t involve her.

The distance between them is widening, and it is frightening.

Her hand tightens on her handbag and she can feel the hard outline of the boxes she has hidden inside. She went to buy them that morning, careful to go in the mid-morning, when everyone is either at work, at school, or still asleep. She had gone to the Manggis mall, which is generally empty on weekdays, situated as it is in the middle of Kampong Muara, a village full of government workers. Even so, her heart had been thumping with a steady thrum of fear when she had walked into the small Guardian pharmacy. Every step had been fraught with tension and the worry that someone would catch her. She had tried to brazen it out, facing the storekeeper – a knowing young Filipina worker with a thick wavy ponytail scraped off her face – with a completely emotionless face, trying for defiance rather than shame. Who are you to judge me, Hana had thought desperately, the entire time. You can’t judge me – the slow walk out of the store, deliberately slow, as if to say, I’m not scared, this is nothing - I’m not ashamed -

All the time, underneath the bravado, the racing heart. The fact – I am scared. I am ashamed. This is everything.

And now, they are lying in her handbag. Four pregnancy tests. Two of each brand that the store had had available, sitting on the very bottom shelf, so there had been no way of snatching them quickly and discreetly off the shelves. She’d had to crouch down to the dusty floor to get them out. She had barely dared to look at them, had just grabbed them and taken them to the register.

She makes sure now that her bedroom door is locked before taking the boxes out of her handbag. The very act makes her sick with anxiety. She forces herself to read the instructions slowly, even though her heart jumps every time she hears a sound outside her bedroom door. It turns out they both work in pretty much the same way - pee on the stick and watch for the colour change.

She can do it tomorrow, she tells herself. She closes her eyes, curling into herself, and reaches blindly out for the light switch by her bed. There's no need to do it now. There's no point anyway, it's probably nothing...

The first inkling she'd had was that she was late. She knows that a sudden change in diet or climate or stress can trigger that, all three of which she has experienced, so she hadn't worried too much, thinking it would come eventually. But it hadn't, and with each day that had passed, she had felt more on edge. She had started looking out for other signs, for nausea or sensitivity. She hasn't had much of an appetite lately, but she has put that down to the whole situation with Khalid.

She turns on her back, and stares into the nothing blackness of her room. Her eyes burn in the dark. It is more than that, and she knows it. She has *known*, since the moment she overheard Aunty Gina and Uncle Jaafar in the living room. The thought had come, swift and unbidden and unwelcome into her mind. What if that happened to her? And like a seed, the thought dropped from her mind to her stomach, until she has half-convinced herself that God has taken the thought and given it birth in her, punishing her for crimes thought and done...

Just as he is punishing her by taking Khalid away...

They're good girls, her father had said. She has tried, her whole life, to live up to her father's expectations of good girls. If not in private, than she has at

least respected the value of them in public. Maybe she does not live between the black and white lines of her father's rights and wrongs, but she believes in them. Isn't that enough? She has never hurt her father by airing her sins, to him or anybody else. Her parents must never know, she thinks fiercely now. If they don't know, then it never happened. She is still their good girl Hana...

She hears her parents come up and go into their room, and her nerves twinge and jump. Their house is like a tunnel, she thinks, in the way that sounds carry and move, and you can always hear signs of life. Even before she knows it, she is slipping out of bed, and moving silently to the bathroom. She closes each subsequent door with deliberate and prolonged care. As if by moving slowly, she can force her heart to slow.

Inside the bathroom, she peels open the first box with exaggeratedly careful motions. Each rustle of plastic wrapping and paper sounds as loud as firecrackers. With the finely tuned hyperawareness of the guilty, she turns on the tap to mask the sound of unwrapping with running water.

She goes through the motions with a sense of unreality. Can this really be her, Hana binti Yunus, sitting on the toilet in the middle of the night waiting to see if she is pregnant? Once she strings the thought together in a sentence like that, it seems, instead of grounding her, to make her dizzy with the surrealness of it. This can't be her. This can't really be happening. She finds herself almost smiling. This is just an emotional breakdown, that's all. It must be because her period is late. Her whole sense of proportion and perspective is out of control. It's impossible that she's pregnant. She is Hana binti Yunus, she has just graduated and she has her whole life ahead of her...

She shakes the white plastic stick once. Twice.

The blue lines remain, steady and unblinking, for a minute. Then they start trembling. Her hand is shaking. The dizziness increases. Without knowing it, she begins praying. *No no no no no no God no no no...*

It is a mistake, she thinks. God wouldn't do this to her. She checks the box. Ninety percent accuracy. Ten percent is not a big margin. But it's enough. She'll take it. The numbers are like slippery fish – she cannot keep them in her swimming head.

She opens the second pregnancy kit, and goes through the whole process again.

The third, and the fourth. They all say the same thing.

No God no no no no no no

She gets up on unsteady feet and washes her face with hands that have fine tremors running through them. It looks like a stranger in the mirror – she cannot relate the face she sees to the face she has seen every day. God wouldn't do this to me, she tells herself numbly. He might do it to that terrified face in the mirror, but He wouldn't do this to me. She stuffs all the pregnancy tests into her handbag again, nevertheless, very careful that nothing is left behind.

In her bed, she closes her burning eyes, suddenly tired beyond the telling of it. This isn't happening, she says in silence. When I wake up, this will just be a very bad dream.

Seven

Rijal is waiting at the airport.

Sufjan had said that he would arrive at ten-thirty, and his mother, busy wrestling with the caterers and the builders at home, had asked Rijal to pick his brother up. His father had left for work early, with a furrow in his brow, and Rijal knows better than to ask Mariana to come with him. He has barely seen her since they decided to get married. She texts him constantly – about colours and questions about ritual and protocol – messages that he gladly passes on to his mother, knowing that they are really intended for her anyway. He went to Mariana's house a few days before to give her the fabric for her wedding dress that is meant to match his wedding costume. Her house is a construction zone identical to his. They had talked for a few minutes - she was feeling fine, she'd said cheerfully - but she had quickly been commandeered and distracted by her mother, who she introduced him to for the first time. He had thought that Mariana's mother looked nothing like her, dressed in a softly shabby blouse and sarong, hair tucked tightly into a bun, as they had walked away together.

He doesn't mind not having much contact with Mariana. It's best not to think too much about the wedding, he tells himself. He has found that things have a way of happening whether you think about them or not, so there is no use in worrying. Despite that, he can feel it, a thin humming thread of worry. He has the feeling that he is walking into something that is - more - than he is used to. He is always calmed, however, by the comforting thought that he has no choice. Rijal does not like having options. He is always, he thinks bitterly, bound to pick the wrong one.

The airport is empty. Rijal checks the arrival board and sees that Sufjan's

flight has been delayed. He has nowhere to be, so he sits down on the plastic chairs that face the automatic doors of the Arrival Hall. He can see the bored immigration officers and the unmoving luggage belts through the mildly tinted automatic doors which let out a belch of cold – not just chilled, but cold – air every time they slide open. Everything about the morning is sluggish and heavy, as if the whole country is waiting for something.

Someone has left a newspaper behind, and Rijal lights a cigarette and picks it up. The usual stories - the sultan has visited a school, some foreign labourers have been arrested in a sex raid, some teenagers are being sent overseas to represent the country in some kind of math competition. Complaints about blackouts, water shortages, an announcement that government scholarship awards will be handed out soon. There has been another fire at the Water Village. How much of it is left to burn down, Rijal wonders wryly.

He is reading the comics when he feels a tap on his shoulder, and he looks over the paper to see his brother grinning down at him.

“Sufjan!” Rijal is unaware that the grin that breaks out over his own face is a mirror image to the one his brother wears. He only thinks admiringly that his brother has gotten handsomer in the year he has been away. He is glowing with health – his skin has gone an olive-brown, the perfect setting for that brilliant white smile. His hair is cropped close to his head, and he has filled out unmistakably in the casual blue polo he wears. He even looks taller, but when Rijal stands up to give his brother a hug, he turns out to be the same height as always.

“Where are Ma and Da?” Sufjan asks as he follows Rijal to the car. “Can I drive?” He looks at the car admiringly. “Is this new?”

Rijal looks at the sporty little Jaguar and tries to remember when his parents bought it. “Yes, I think they got it after you left.” He tosses his brother the keys. “Ma’s at home, she couldn’t get away, and Da’s at work. But she had Aunty Melissa make your favourite dish for you – asam pedas fish.”

Sufjan licks his lips. “I’ve dreamed about that fish. Just the way Aunty Melissa cooks it. I tried to make it myself in Australia, but I don’t know. It never tastes as good as hers.”

“You cook?” Rijal is surprised.

Sufjan slants him an amused look before he slips on a pair of sunglasses that Rijal does not recognise. “It’s not like Brunei,” he says by way of reply. “It’s too expensive to eat out every day, so I had to learn to cook. Aunty Melissa sent me a lot of her recipes.”

Rijal tries to imagine his little brother cooking, and, surprisingly, does not find it as hard as he would have thought. The Sufjan sitting beside him, with clothes that Rijal has not seen before, wears an air of competence that is new and yet natural. It sits comfortably on him.

“You’ll have to cook for me one day,” Rijal says.

Sufjan laughs. “Not here,” he says teasingly. “Home is for Aunty Melissa’s cooking. And to relax. And your wedding, of course.”

Rijal smiles. “Yes, of course.”

Sufjan tilts him another look. “Two more days,” he says lightly. “I couldn’t believe it when Mama called to tell me you were getting married. It seemed so sudden. So who is this girl?”

They haven’t told him, Rijal realises with a small jolt. Sufjan doesn’t know about Mariana and the baby, or why everything is happening so quickly. He

wonders why. He can't imagine keeping this a secret from Sufjan, of all people. They are not particularly close, and they have not really kept in touch while Sufjan is in Australia for his bachelor's degree, but they are brothers. Sufjan knows everything about him, just as he knows everything about Sufjan.

Yet he feels no compulsion to explain things to Sufjan right now. His mother will do that, he is sure. "Her name is Mariana," he says.

"What does she do?"

"She's a stewardess."

Sufjan whistles. "Nice. When did you two start going out?"

"Before you left," Rijal says, casting his memory back. "I think you met her once or twice."

"I did?" Sufjan frowns, thinking back. "When?"

"I don't remember exactly," Rijal says. "But I think maybe you came out to dinner with me and my friends once before you left? I think I was dating her then."

Sufjan's face lights with sudden recall. "Her!" he says. "I kind of remember now. She's kind of small, with long straight hair, yeah I remember she was a stewardess. I don't remember her face exactly, but she was pretty. That's her, right?"

"Must be."

Sufjan whistles again. "Wow," he says wonderingly. "I can't believe you're getting married in two days. Are you nervous?"

Rijal expels a breath. Is he nervous? "Not exactly nervous," he says slowly. "But I am worried. I don't know if I'll be a good -" it is the first time he has said the word aloud, "- husband."

The word seems to strike both of them. “Wow,” Sufjan says again. “I can’t believe you’re going to be a husband. Seems so weird.”

Rijal punches his brother lightly in the arm. “Thanks,” he says dryly.

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Sure,” Rijal drawls out, and his tone is like he is sticking his tongue out.

“Hey, so what about you? Seeing anyone in Melbourne?”

Sufjan takes his time in answering - maybe because he is navigating the roundabout. “Kind of,” he says.

“Will I be hearing wedding bells any time soon?”

Sufjan barks out a laugh, short and sharp. “I don’t think so, bro.” He takes the last turn into their driveway. “Home sweet home,” he says softly.

Aunty Melissa is standing outside, watering the plants with a hose. She is wearing cracked, faded flipflops and her soft jersey trousers are rolled to the knee, but it is damp anyway, either from perspiration or splashes from the hose. Her rough, curly hair, frizzy with humidity, is bunched in a ponytail, and as she squints at the car, she turns off the hose. When Sufjan gets out, her face softens and shatters into a smile, and she drops the hose. “Sufjan,” she says.

Sufjan goes to her easily, naturally, arms wide open. “Aunty Melissa.”

They hug, with a fierceness from Aunty Melissa’s side that tells Rijal how much she has missed Sufjan. When they part, Aunty Melissa’s eyes are glistening. She sniffs, once. “You’ve grown,” she accuses. Sentiment and scolding, inseparable. “Wah, so handsome already. What you eat, over there in Australia?”

Sufjan laughs. He pats her head affectionately. Rijal wonders if Sufjan has always been so open with his affection, or if it just seems new because he has not been home for a while. “And you look just the same,” he says, fondly. “Rijal said

you cooked asam fish for me?”

“Yes, inside,” she says. The hose lies forgotten. “You hungry? I go warm it up for you.”

“Okay,” Sufjan says cheerfully. “Where’s my mother?”

“She’s inside talking to the caterers,” Aunty Melissa says, leading the way into the house. Rijal brings up the rear, with Sufjan’s suitcase, which he sets down in the living room.

He hears Gina’s voice rise in delight, and a few minutes later, she follows Sufjan out of the dining room, where she has been cloistered with the caterers. Aunty Melissa comes out of the kitchen carrying a plate of rice, the special tamarind sticky-sour fish made in Sufjan’s honour, and a glass. “What do you want to drink?” she demands of Sufjan.

“Are you tired?” Gina asks.

The two women flutter around Sufjan, making sure he has everything. When he begins to eat, Gina fires questions at him on the sofa, and Aunty Melissa hovers by the doorway, listening, smiling. They are drinking him in with their eyes, Rijal sees, and the sight makes his throat ache, with the way Aunty Melissa can’t bear to leave him and his mother keeps interrupting her own flow of questions to ask if he has enough food, does he want anything else. Rijal is content to sit quietly, eat his own plate of food and watch the proceedings. He is happy for his mother, and Aunty Melissa. He had not realised how much they missed Sufjan. He has forgotten, as well, how cheerful Sufjan is, how the house just suddenly seems livelier with him around. Not as quiet, as somber and slow. For the first time, he notices the resemblance between his brother and his mother’s faces, in their animated mobility, only Sufjan’s face is far less prone to anger,

tending more to teasing grins and laughter. There has been, he realises afresh, very little laughter in the house over the last few weeks. The whole atmosphere seems to lift and lighten, even to quicken.

They are interrupted by the caterers coming to the doorway and asking to speak to Gina. With one last look at her second son, Gina disappears again into the dining room. Sufjan has finished eating, and he lifts his arms and stretches. Aunty Melissa comes forward to take his plate, but he forestalls her by picking it up and bringing it to the kitchen himself. Rijal's eyes widen in surprise, Sufjan does it so casually, as if out of habit. He has changed, Rijal realises. His little brother has changed.

"I'm going to go take a shower," Sufjan announces.

"You should rest," Aunty Melissa fusses. "You must be tired."

Sufjan smiles at her. "I don't want to sleep now," he says firmly. "Otherwise I'll have jet lag." He nods at Rijal. "What are you doing today? More wedding stuff? I'll follow you."

"I have to go to the Ministry of Education," Rijal says.

"Okay. Wait for me. Give me a while to freshen up."

Sufjan disappears out of the room, Aunty Melissa with him. Rijal finishes eating, slowly. Aunty Melissa has outdone herself, the asam fish is as sour and tangy and delicious as only she can make it, perfectly absorbed by the solid white rice, cooked also to perfection, plump little morsels neither too dry nor too moist. The okra, soaked in the fish sauce, spurts out flavours every time he bites down. His mouth burns. He cleans his plate and is about to leave it on the table when he remembers Sufjan. Hesitating, he brings it into the kitchen and looks around, unsure what he is supposed to do with it. Guessing, he leaves it by the sink.

It will be interesting to spend some time with his brother today, he thinks.

* * *

“So why are we going to the ministry?” Sufjan asks, resting comfortably in the passenger seat. Rijal is driving because Sufjan does not know the way. His brother also looks a little tired, Rijal thinks, sneaking a glance. It is a long flight from Melbourne to Bandar Seri Begawan.

Rijal flicks the brown envelope into his brother’s lap. “I’m applying for a job.”

“Oh?” Sufjan says with interest. “As what?”

“A clerk. Uncle Yunus told me about it.” He feels a little shy saying it aloud to his brother, knowing that Sufjan’s prospects are so much brighter than his own. But then again, it is not as if he has ever been held up as an example for Sufjan in the way that Hana is held up for the family.

Sufjan runs his eye down the application form. “It looks good,” he comments neutrally. “So we’re just going to drop this off?”

Rijal nods.

Sufjan frowns. “Shouldn’t you be dressed up a little bit?”

Rijal looks down at his shirt and khaki shorts. “What for? I’m just dropping the form off.”

“Your call,” Sufjan says. “Just seems you should be wearing something a little more formal to go see your future employers -” He is cut off by his phone trilling, a short startling burst of sound. Another message. Sufjan has been receiving them since they left the house.

“I guess she really misses you, huh?” Rijal says, referring to the girlfriend

he assumes is contacting Sufjan.

Sufjan frowns as he looks down at the phone. “Kind of,” he says quietly.

Rijal broods over Sufjan’s comment on his clothes. “Maybe you should go up and drop the form off for me,” he suggests tentatively. He glances at Sufjan, at his brother’s vibrant liveliness, despite the faint shadows of fatigue tracing his eyes, and for the first time becomes aware that his own clothes are not just casual, but slightly shabby. Everything about Sufjan, on the other hand, seems brand new, somehow polished and fresh.

“Sure,” his brother says agreeably. He looks down at himself. “I guess it isn’t like Ilham, huh,” he jokes. “You know, where you can wear whatever you want because you’re the boss’ son.”

They both grin at shared memories of playing around the Ilham headquarters as children, on one of his father’s brief drop-ins to sign papers, before taking them out to eat.

“Speaking of,” Sufjan says casually, “What’s up with the court stuff? Any updates?”

Rijal shakes his head. “Not much,” he says. “The usual. Not that I’ve heard of, anyway. But they wouldn’t tell us if there had been, would they?”

Sufjan chuckles. “We’re still the kids, huh? Well, I’ll keep my ears open when you get married. I thought - well, I thought something was up with it. There have been some rumours in the Bruneian community in Melbourne -” He shrugs it off. “Just rumours, I guess.” Rijal slides the car into the waiting bay of the rundown Ministry. “Here?” Sufjan asks. At Rijal’s nod, he opens the door. “I’ll be right back.” He even walks with new purpose, Rijal thinks, as his brother disappears into the grimy elevators.

Rijal has been sitting in the idling car, with the windows rolled down, in the waiting bay for ten minutes when, to his faint surprise, Hana comes out of the same elevators. She appears not to see him sitting in the car. There is a frown between her eyes and she looks preoccupied. “Hana,” he says, before he knows it, just as she is about to pass him.

She looks up. She is holding a brown envelope – he takes in her formal baju kurung and matching tudong and guesses that his brother was right about dressing properly to go to the ministry. No surprise that Uncle Yunus’ daughters know all about that, he thinks resignedly. “Hey,” she replies automatically, squinting at him. It takes a few seconds for her to register his identity, then she evinces the same faint surprise that he had felt. “What are you doing here?”

“Just dropping off something,” he says, purposefully vague. He is well aware that this is probably the last place she would expect to see him. His family have never had many dealings with the government. “What about you?”

The frown between her eyes deepens, and is at odds with her words. “I got called in,” she says. “I’ve been given the scholarship to do my Masters.”

“Congratulations,” Rijal says, sincerely, without much surprise. He wouldn’t have expected anything less from Hana. “Are you here by yourself?”

“No,” she says. A young man comes up behind her, carrying a brown envelope identical to Hana’s, and looking at Rijal curiously. He, too, is appropriately dressed, in formal slacks, shirt and a tie. Rijal has never seen someone so young wearing a tie so perfectly knotted, with such ease. He has a pleasant face; clever, and solid. A model young citizen, Rijal thinks, with some awe. He and Hana make quite the pair.

“Khalid, this is my cousin, Rijal,” his cousin says, her voice not quite as

smooth as Rijal suspects she would like it to be. “Rijal, this is - my boyfriend, Khalid.”

The still car on the quiet Meragang beach. Heat strikes up Rijal’s neck, and he feels intensely uncomfortable. “Hi,” he says. “Nice to meet you.”

“Khalid’s coming with my family to your wedding on Friday,” Hana says stiffly. Formally.

“Great,” Rijal says, desperately hoping that his face isn’t giving anything away.

Sufjan comes out just then, and his eyes light up when he sees Hana. “Hana!” he exclaims.

Hana whirls and recognises him immediately. “Sufjan!”

They share a spontaneous hug. “Hana, I’ll go get the car,” Khalid says quickly, right before he slips off, tactfully leaving the cousins to their reunion.

“I didn’t know you were back,” Hana says to Sufjan.

“I just got back this morning,” he nods at Rijal. “For the big brother’s wedding.”

Her eyes run over him. Rijal has been on the end of that assessing gaze before, but her reaction has never been so positive. “You look good!”

He laughs. “You do too,” he says admiringly. He nudges her. “Nice work on the boyfriend.”

Hana laughs, but it sounds forced. “Thanks,” she says, striving, Rijal thinks, just a little too hard for lightness. “I think so too.”

“So you’ve got a scholarship!”

Hana nods. “Yes,” she says. Just the right mix of bashfulness and pride now. The tension is momentarily gone from her face. The contrast between her

earlier preoccupation and her current brightness is marked. Rijal wonders if it had anything to do with Khalid. He finds himself hoping not. Much like the presence of Uncle Yunus, some vague part of him is both bemused and thankful that there is such a thing as a model couple in this world. Hana and Khalid certainly seem, outwardly, at least, to be that.

That quiet beach.

Enough, Rijal tells himself. If you don't know about it, it didn't happen.

"So, are you busy now?" Sufjan prods. "Or can you join us for high tea? We can catch up properly. Rijal, we don't have anything else to do today, right?"

Rijal shakes his head.

"A quick tea," Sufjan cajoles.

Hana smiles. "Let me ask Khalid," she says. "It's okay if he joins us, right?"

"Of course," Sufjan says gaily. "I'd love to get to know him."

A car pulls up behind Rijal's, and he is about to tell Sufjan that they have to move when he realises that Hana is going to it. It is Khalid's car. A dark blue BMW. Rijal cannot help thinking that Khalid is like a dark BMW as well. Perfectly respectable.

He cannot help himself from watching Khalid and Hana curiously. They exchange a few words, through the driver's window, and Hana comes back to the car, her frown pronounced once more. "He'll come," she says, again with that forced lightness. She is not a good dissembler. "But he can't stay for very long. Can you give me a lift home after we're done?"

"Of course," Sufjan answers for Rijal. "Where shall we go?"

They arrange to convoy to Coffee Zone in Kiulap, a small, popular coffee

chain that is frequented mostly by UK students on their summer holidays. It is full even now, in the mid-afternoon.

“So,” Sufjan says, once they’re all seated and waiting for their drinks and food. “How did you two meet?”

It is the kind of question that is normally met with laughs and sly looks, but both Khalid and Hana look ill-at-ease. “We went to university together,” Hana says briefly. There is an uncomfortable silence, and she changes the subject. “So how long are you in Brunei for?”

Something is wrong, it is awkwardly obvious to all of them. They exchange news politely - Sufjan tells Hana that he is back for a couple of weeks, but then he has to get back to school. Hana tells him in turn that both she and Khalid have just been approved to begin their Masters in Edinburgh in September, two months away. Sufjan remarks that that’s nice, at least they’ll be together. “Yeah,” Hana says. But they are all relieved when Khalid makes his excuses and leaves. Hana follows him to the door, and they exchange a few hushed, uncomfortable words, and she comes back to the table, looking miserable.

“Whoa,” Sufjan says, exhaling hugely. “What’s going on with that?”

“We’re having a few problems,” Hana confesses. Her lip trembles as she tries to smile. “He’s got some new friends that I don’t really like.”

“What kind of new friends?” Sufjan asks. Rijal is curious - he assumes that the new friends must be like...well, like him, to make Hana this upset. Smokers, maybe, dropouts. He is surprised when Hana simply replies,

“They’re kind of religious.”

Something in Rijal is uneasy when he sees how miserable his cousin is. He is suddenly, and unwillingly, able to read Hana all too clearly. He knows too

much, far more than Hana would like him to know, he is sure. That parked car in Meragang must be why Hana is so miserable, yet so invested in the relationship. Is she feeling guilty? Is Khalid? Part of Rijal is relieved at her misery. The guilt means that she is still, after all, Uncle Yunus' daughter. He is used to taking such things lightly, so it is probably hypocritical of him to be glad that she does not. He doesn't mind that, though. Rijal thinks simply that even if he is bad, he needs to know that there are people in this world who are good.

* * *

When her cousins drop her off back home, Hana is surprised to see her father's car in the garage. It is still early in the day - her mother isn't home, and her sisters are still in school. She comes in and finds him on the back veranda, reading, as usual. When he turns the page, she sees that he is reading the Qur'an.

"Hey," she says.

He looks up at her. "Hey," he says back. He sets down the Qur'an, taking off his reading glasses and rubbing his eyes. "Were you out with Khalid?"

"Yes, at first," she says, sitting down. "Then we ran into Sufjan and Rijal at the ministry, so we went for tea."

"Oh, Sufjan's back," her father says with pleasure.

Hana nods.

"How's he doing over there in Australia?"

"He seems to like it."

"How's Rijal doing?"

"Good." She changes the subject, not wanting to think about the wretchedly awkward tea. "What are you doing back so early?"

He rubs his eyes again. "It was a half-day today at school because of parade practice for the lower secondary. They're practicing the marching display. You know. For the Sultan's birthday." Hana does know, she remembers those painfully hot afternoons spent practicing turns and synchronized waves and frantically searching for shade in the impossibly open school field. "Anyway, listen to this, I just read this -"

He recites the Arabic to her, then reads, "Therefore remember Me, I will remember You, and be grateful to Me, and never be ungrateful to Me. O You who believe! Seek help in patience and prayer. Truly! Allah is with the patient."

He falls into silence, and she can see that he is not really with her, in that moment. With a sigh, he comes back. "Isn't that beautiful, Hana?"

"Beautiful," she echoes, not really meaning it.

"So many promises," he murmurs. "The promise to always be with the patient. There's a promise within that promise as well, you know. He's promising that with every hardship is a reward, if you only turn to Him. You know, sometimes we think that our prayers are answered by a way out of the difficulty, the problem. But that's only half the answer. The other half is that in praying for a way out, we approach Him. Remembering that He is the only one we can ask for help, is His reward to us. His reward and His answer." He sighs again, and looks at her. "You got the scholarship?" he asks, softly.

Hana nods. His beam hurts her. "Alhamdulillah," he says. "Alhamdulillah. So when does your course in Edinburgh start? And did Khalid get the scholarship too?"

"Yup," Hana says, trying for happiness. "He did."

Her father searches her face. "Khalid's a good boy?" he asks. "He treats

you well?"

She nods, not trusting her voice. "He's a good guy, abah," she says hollowly. Getting better every day. Maybe too good for me, now.

"It doesn't matter if he's not the one, you know," her father says, unexpectedly. He pats her hand. "It's better to find out now than before you get married."

"But - you met him," she is surprised into replying. "I wouldn't have introduced him to you if I didn't think we were going to -" End up together. In happily-ever-after.

"I know," he soothes. "But I'm just saying. I know he's important to you. But it's not the end of the world if you don't get married, okay? I'm not saying that you shouldn't take these kinds of relationships seriously. But just don't force it. Okay?"

She gets up. "Okay." She is too agitated to stay. "I'm going to go take a shower."

"Don't forget to pray," is his automatic response, as he goes back to reading. Her father has long given up on monitoring and supervising her prayers - although he still does for her younger sisters - assuming, she supposes, that she has gotten into the habit of doing it unsupervised. She has never told him that she seldom prays in the UK. She never wakes up for the dawn prayer, and often sleeps before the night prayer. And in between - well, there are classes to go to, and friends to meet, and it is difficult and inconvenient to find a place and a time. She means to, of course she does. But somehow prayers get lost in the shuffle of the day. Or they used to.

Khalid used to be just like that, she thinks bitterly. But now - he is always

finding excuses to go pray. Somewhere deep down, a tiny part of her is ashamed that she resents that growing part of Khalid, but it is ruthlessly stifled by the much larger part of her that is lying in fearful, watchful wait.

She had meant to tell him today. The minute he had called, her heart had jumped. It is the first time he has called her in a while, instead of her calling him. He had gotten a call from the scholarship department and asked if she had too. Did she want to go over there together?

She had meant to tell him in the car, when he had come to pick her up. But he'd seemed like his normal self for the first time in weeks, and she had been so glad that she hadn't wanted to ruin the mood. Then he'd turned the radio down and spoken.

“Do you think we both got scholarships?”

“Yes,” she'd said. “Mal got the call as well. She went in this morning, and they gave her the scholarship.”

He'd looked so handsome in his formal shirt and pants. She had dressed with special care, knowing she would be seeing him, and knows she looks pretty in the gold and green baju kurung she'd been saving for a special occasion. She doesn't know why she'd felt compelled to wear it that afternoon. Maybe she'd been afraid that she would have very few chances from then on to dress for him.

He'd been quiet for a few moments, letting the air conditioning hum between them. “I guess we'll both be going to Edinburgh.”

“That was the plan,” she'd said, allowing the chill she felt to colour her tone. Suddenly she had felt angry. All this time that he has been pulling away from her - she'd allowed herself to think it, then - she had been patient, unfrontational. Well, perhaps it is time to face down over it.

He must have heard the unwelcoming tone in her voice, because it is a few more moments before he speaks again. "I've been thinking."

"Oh?" she'd said, disdainfully now.

He'd glanced at her. "You know how we planned to live together, with Ari and Susan?"

"Yes."

"Maybe it's not such a good idea."

She hadn't filled in the silence, had allowed it to grow and suffocate the car. In his mounting discomfort, she had felt the power creep up in her. Maybe this is why Rijal stays so quiet, she had thought. To force other people to speak.

"It's just that," he'd begun. "You know I love you."

She'd raised an eyebrow, but they are the words she has been starving for, and everything in her softens, a little bit, even that tiny hard knot that she imagines is the baby growing in her belly.

"I do," he'd insisted. "It's because I love you that I don't think we should live together next year."

More silence. His own words come easier. "I don't want to go back to the same relationship that we had," he'd said.

"What kind of relationship do you want?" she'd retorted, the panic melting the ice for heat.

"A better one," he'd said.

Again, the relief, and the anger that he can play on her emotions like this. She feels taut, strung, on edge. "What do you mean by that?"

"I don't want us to have sex any more."

She'd absorbed that. She had expected that. It is not the huge revelation he

clearly thinks it is. “Okay.”

“In fact, I want us to minimise our - physical contact.”

“What does that mean? We can’t hold hands any more?”

“If possible.”

“Okay. Okay -”

He’d looked straight at her for the first time, trying to read her. “Do you understand why I want this?” he’d asked, straightforward and direct.

“You want to be a better person,” she’d parroted at him hollowly. He has said that to her at regular intervals over the last few weeks.

He’d looked troubled, his eyebrows drawing together. He has such a nice face, she’d noted. So clean and clear, such trustworthy features, rounded and boyish. A face for any mother to trust. Don’t they make such a suitable couple? She’s heard that so many times she has started to take it for granted. She knows people think of them as a golden couple, both from good families, doing good degrees, going together to Edinburgh, a good university. They’re just – good.

“Yes,” he’d said. “And being together the way we’ve been – I knew it was wrong. But I never *felt* how wrong it was.”

“And your brothers -” she cannot stop the bitter inflection, “—have shown you?”

“No,” he’d replied, quietly. “God has shown me.”

“Through your brothers.”

“Yes,” he’d admitted, reluctantly. “I wish -”

“What?” she’d said, after a while.

“That you would go to a study circle too.” He’d paused. “Are you angry?”

Yes, she is angry. Why are you taking him away from me? She’d asked

God then. “We’re here.”

And then, of course, after they’d gotten their scholarship notifications and a reminder to come back in a week to pick up an advance on their allowances and flight tickets, they’d run into Rijal and Sufjan, and she hadn’t had a chance to talk to Khalid properly. Hana winces at the memory of the tea. It had been incredibly awkward, saved only by both Sufjan and Rijal’s abilities to plough through awkward situations – must be years of practice – with unflinching courtesy.

Even the shower fails to calm her down. She feels perpetually on edge these days. She has to tell Khalid soon. The next time she sees him, she tells herself firmly. Her gaze falls on her prayer mat, folded carelessly on the floor, already in the direction of the Kaabah in Mekkah, thousands of miles away. She thinks of her father downstairs reading words written fourteen hundred years ago, and of Khalid, as seduced by the teachings of that long-dead Prophet as he is distant from her now, and all she can feel is resentment.

Her mother comes in just then, knocks on the door. “Hey,” she says. “I heard about the scholarship. Congratulations.”

Hana musters up the energy to look up at her mother and says, “Thanks.”

Her mother comes in and sits on the bed. “You don’t seem very excited?”

“I’m just tired,” Hana replies. “It was hot today.” She knows how inane and listless she sounds.

“Is everything okay with Khalid?”

Is she that easy to read, that first her father, then her mother can pinpoint exactly what’s wrong? The very thought frightens her. But she doesn’t have the heart to lie to her mother. “He’s changing,” is all she says.

Her mother strokes her hair. “Changing how?”

Hana buries her face in her covers. “He’s getting more religious,” is all she says, falling back on the same explanation she gave Sufjan and Rijal earlier. She doesn’t know how else to articulate it.

“I see,” is all her mother says in return. Hana can feel the tears burning in her eyes, and she suddenly feels a lot younger than her twenty-one years. She feels like a seventeen year old again, confused and dependent, going away for the first time.

She turns her face up, still not looking at her mother, staring fixedly at the wall. “I feel like I’m losing him,” she explains haltingly. How can her mother understand this? Lily was so loved by her father that he risked his own family to marry her. Her mother can’t understand the shame of not being wanted that much. The shame of being put aside for...something that you can’t even see, or touch, or feel.

And yet, her mother puts her finger, unerringly, on the exact spot that Hana avoids saying aloud, as precisely as if she can *see* the bruise. “Losing him to God?”

“Yes,” Hana says, forgetting to be amazed.

Her mother falls silent again. Hana allows herself to be soothed by Lily’s touch, but waits, craving reassurance. “I used to feel that way about your father,” is Lily’s unexpected reply.

“What?”

Lily’s mouth quirks upward in a smile as she smooths Hana’s hair away from her cheek. Hana sometimes forgets how pretty her mother is. That smooth porcelain skin, the curved black eyebrows and almost stern straightness of the nose. Like Gina, Lily is slim, that Chinese slimness and delicacy – she has kept

her figure through four daughters and the onset of middle age. “It happens,” she says. “When we first got married, your father wanted to get closer to God. So he kept moving up and up...and I thought that moving up meant moving away from me.”

“And it didn’t?”

“No,” Lily says gently. “It just means moving up.”

“Didn’t - doesn’t that mean there’s a distance between you?”

“I thought so at the time,” Lily agrees. “But it turned out to be the opposite.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that...” Lily pauses and Hana can see her mother struggling to take a different approach. She has never spoken so openly to her mother about the way in which Lily has quietly and steadily, over the years, transformed herself into the model Muslim wife. “I thought that he was moving away from me. But I didn’t want to follow him, not at first.” She pauses again and Hana thinks of all the things Lily has had to give up. Islam is not an easy religion to follow, all the rules and restrictions which, girls raised, as her mother and her Aunty Gina were raised, on complete freedom, would balk at. “Then I thought that we could only stay close if I stopped him. So I tried. Then I found out that stopping your father from going on his spiritual journey didn’t mean that he stayed closer to me. He moved farther away, because he began to hate himself. I knew that it was only a matter of time before he began to hate me. So then I let him go. And that was when he came back to me.”

Hana bursts out laughing, despite her misery. “Maaa..” she complains. “That’s such a cliché.”

Lily takes that in equitably. “Maybe,” she says, tapping Hana in light reproof. “But do you understand what I’m saying?”

“That I can’t stop Khalid from finding God?”

“You can,” Lily says, her voice quiet. “That’s our power and responsibility as women, Hana. But stopping him won’t bring him back to you. Maybe instead of concentrating on Khalid, you should be concentrating on finding God yourself.”

Hana frowns, back on the verge of tears. “But he’s all I want, Mama.”

“Maybe that’s the problem.” Lily twists a strand of hair – straight and black, just like her own – and releases it. “God is jealous, you know. Maybe right now He wants you both to remember that you’re supposed to love Him most of all.”

“What if Khalid loves God more than me?”

Lily smiles. “Your father loves God more than he loves me. That hasn’t taken him away from me. I think right now you just have to trust that Khalid’s looking for God doesn’t mean that he’s looking to lose you.”

“But what if I’m in the way?”

“Then maybe...it’s not meant to be.”

Hana takes that in, swallows it whole. There is nothing else to say, she realises. Her parents don’t understand that it’s already written. She and Khalid are meant to be. The small hard ball in her isn’t just the baby. It is a knot that ties them together.

Eight

Rijal comes home on his wedding day and is immediately accosted by his mother.

“Where have you been?” she scolds.

He holds up a bag of netting. “You told me to go buy this.”

“Not you,” Gina half-shrieks. “I told your brother to go buy it! You’re getting married in a few hours! You should be getting ready.”

She snatches the bag away from him. Rijal grasps her shoulder, pats it awkwardly. “Calm down, Mama,” he says, unsure what else to say. “Don’t worry. It’ll all be fine.”

She takes a deep breath. “Yes,” she says. “The wedding will be fine. On this side, anyway. I don’t know about her side.”

The contempt is thick enough to layer. “Thanks for doing this wedding, Mama,” Rijal says, choosing to ignore it. He supposes she’ll settle down after today. After it is done and dusted. Gina is too pragmatic to do otherwise.

She can also, however, he remembers, hold a grudge like no other. “Hey, Ma,” he says.

“Yes?”

“Be nice to Mariana and her family today, okay?”

She raises an eyebrow at him. “I’m always nice.”

“Ma...”

She waves a hand at him. “Don’t worry,” she says. “I’ll be nice. I suppose we have to put up with them for the time being.”

Frowning slightly, Rijal lets her usher him through the living room, which has been transformed into a mini prayer hall over the last week. The furniture has

all been moved somewhere else to leave space for a wide expanse of carpeted floor, with two white cushions sitting in the middle. He will sit, he knows, on one, Mariana on the other, while the imam sits in front of him and takes his oath. To take his promise to shoulder a responsibility that Rijal thinks he only half knows the implications of. Gina shoos him up the stairs, telling him to hurry, his uncles are going to be here in a few minutes to help him get dressed.

Rijal begins to take a quick shower, and then slows down a little. It's his wedding night after all. He bathes with a little more care.

It turns out he needn't have bothered. As soon as he steps out of the bathroom, it turns out all his uncles – from his father's side, and he glimpses Uncle Yunus standing there as well – have gathered, and they usher him back into the bathroom, drawing a fresh bath and sprinkling a heady mixture of coloured petals and something that looks like milk into the water. He asks with some alarm what it is, but receives a soothing, dismissive answer just before he is made to get back into the bathtub. Thankfully, he is allowed to keep his boxers on. Over the heads of his uncles – it feels like a thousand of them are crammed into the bathroom – he catches a glimpse of Sufjan snickering in the background, and he sends his brother a death glare. The bathroom smells like the incense of his grandmother's joss sticks and the sweet full scent of bunga melur – a mixture of dried flowers and herbs, the fragrance of which lingers for days after a wedding.

His wet head is sprinkled with holy water and scent, and he is prayed over - and with, he supposes – dutifully cupping his hands and saying “Amin” at the appropriate intervals. His uncles, to his protests, towel him dry and tell him to get into the white cara melayu, which is lying on his bed. Rijal closes the door on them, thankful for the reprieve, which turns out to be brief – they start knocking

impatiently on the door when he has barely had time to stick his legs through the silk trousers.

The sun is just setting. The ceremony will begin after they perform the Maghrib prayers together. Rijal had been walked through the proceedings the day before by his Uncle Yunus, who quietly explained everything the imam had talked to him about. He thinks wryly now that even his uncle - so careful to clarify everything he thought Rijal might not understand - didn't think to ask him whether he still remembered how to pray from his one year of religious school. He only knows enough to follow the motions, but the rhythms of the prayers and verses flicker at the edge of his memories, faded, flashing bright only at odd moments, as he prays behind his uncles in his room. They are careful to lay down extra clean prayer mats to keep his white *cara melayu* as pristine as possible as he bows and prostrates.

As soon as they are done, the attack begins again. One uncle is arranging his headpiece – a stiff length of red and gold fabric that feels like cardboard, and another two are pulling him into his *jongsarat*, an equally stiff swathe of red brocade with a geometric pattern of golden flowers, folded intricately around his waist and coming to his knees, cinched in the middle with a heavy gold belt. It is the same one that his father wore to his own wedding, and which Sufjan will wear at his. Rijal doesn't know much about them, but he knows they are expensive enough that even his father balked at buying a new one. He also knows they are handwoven on ancient wooden looms in a uniquely Bruneian tradition, each strand of gold placed just so – he remembers from a school trip when he was younger, when he was lectured on the dying cottage industries of Brunei Darussalam.

He is handed a keris, a small wavy traditional sword in a gold and wood scabbard, to tuck into the top part of the jongsarat, which stands proudly out of the gold belt. The hilt is fussed over so that it sticks out just so. Once he has been doused with perfume and had himself tugged and twisted into what his uncles deem as presentable shape, they exit the room en masse, like a flock of satisfied birds, and he finds himself alone with his father, Uncle Yunus, and his father's oldest brother, Uncle Aaraf.

Uncle Aaraf tells him that the imam has just arrived and has gone with Mariana into the guest room, which has been set aside specifically for this purpose. The imam will be asking her her share of the questions now – is she entering this marriage of her own free will, does she have the consent and blessing of her parents – Rijal worries briefly that he will not recognise Mariana's parents - and signing the marriage contract in private. It is only Rijal who will have to answer questions, prove he is capable of leading a family, and sign his half of the marriage contract in public. Because of the rushed nature of the wedding, Rijal has only had one brief talk with the imam, instead of the 4 weeks worth of the nationally required marriage course. He did not ask his father what kind of strings he pulled to allow him to postpone the marriage course until after the wedding.

Uncle Aaraf gets a call, saying that the bride is still in the guest room, and so Rijal won't be needed for a while, to relax. Jaafar fusses around Rijal. He, too, is looking more groomed than Rijal has seen him in years, in a green *cara melayu* that matches the *baju kurung* his mother was wearing when he came home, and a gold *sinjang*. His hair has just been cut, his face is clean-shaven. He looks about as nervous as Rijal feels, which doesn't help matters.

Uncle Yunus, too, who can normally be counted on for calm and reason, has a line of worry disturbing his forehead. While Uncle Aaraf talks on the phone, the three of them stand before the mirror.

Rijal has not worn the full *cara melayu* for many many years – he wears the shirt and trousers to family functions, and sometimes even a *sinjang*, but the *sinjang* is invariably well-worn and soft enough not to offer any support at all. Now, with the *jongsarat* holding him straight, and the headpiece making him conscious of having to keep his head up, he feels taller than he has in years. He realises with a small shock that he is taller than both his father and his uncle. Perhaps they realise it too, for they both sigh as they scrutinize that every hair is in place, every wrinkle and pleat of the *jongsarat* falling straight and true.

“You look good,” his father says, pleased.

“You look ready to be married,” his uncle says.

Rijal swallows. “Can I have a cheat sheet?” he asks, half-jokingly. He means for the minor test that the imam will be giving him in front of everyone. “Can we go through the *Al-Fatihah*?”

To his credit, Uncle Yunus’ eyes round only briefly at the request to go through the opening chapter of the Qur’an, the one, Rijal knows, that he is supposed to be reciting at least seventeen times a day. Obliging, they go through the chapter and Rijal is relieved to acquit himself, if not favourably, then at least with some dignity. Now he can only hope that the imam will ask him to recite that instead of something else. He has not prepared anything else.

Uncle Yunus reaches a hand into the breast pocket of his own creamy brown *cara melayu* and produces a small prayer book. “Let’s say a quick prayer.”

His father curves his hands in supplication and Rijal follows suit. It feels awkward, now that he does not have the distraction of splashing water and hundreds of uncles surrounding him, and his hands seem to dangle clumsily in front of him. He can't help comparing his lacklustre hands to his uncle's firm, steady ones, one holding the prayer book, the other held palm upwards as if it is the most natural position in the world. Uncle Yunus begins reading and Rijal listens. The Arabic words are not completely unfamiliar – shades of the one year of religious school and the verses he memorized then come back to him, little by little. He could not say them by himself, but he can follow along as his Uncle Yunus reads.

Other than his uncle's low, sure voice, the room is quiet.

“Amin,” his uncle finishes. The line of worry has been smoothed away, and he looks at peace, once again.

“Amin,” his father murmurs, pressing his face into his hands. Rijal does the same, quickly muttering “Amin” and wondering if the reason you hold your hands cupped upwards is so that heavenly benediction can fall into them. He must remember to ask Uncle Yunus after this is all over.

* * *

The four of them come downstairs, Aaraf leading the way, to a packed house. The air conditioning is going at full blast and is holding up well, keeping the living room, thronging with a restless, impatient crowd of relatives, relatively cool. Mariana is already sitting on her prepared white satin cushion. Yunus settles Rijal on his own, a few feet away and slightly in front of Mariana's, facing the Imam. He whispers a final blessing, and then goes to sit in his designated spot,

next to Jaafar. Yunus searches the room, and finds Lily and his daughters sitting together, off to Mariana's left. He manages to catch Lily's eye after a while, and they smile at each other.

Hana, too, is looking for somebody, he notices. His eldest daughter is sitting perfectly still, but her eyes are systematically, meticulously scanning the room. He glances around himself, hoping to see what she is looking for. He spots Khalid a few seconds after his daughter does. Unlike Lily, however, Khalid seems unaware that Hana's gaze is on him. Yunus watches Hana watch Khalid, and his heart tightens. He's not good enough for you, he wants to tell his daughter, and feels an unaccountable urge to go and shake Khalid. He had liked him well enough when he had met Khalid in the UK – the boy is polite and smart, but clearly he is not kind. No one can be kind who can ignore the plea in Hana's gaze tonight. Yunus is only surprised that the whole room does not vibrate with sympathy.

Ah, fatherhood, Yunus thinks ruefully. He allows himself a glare – which goes unnoticed – and then makes an effort to relax and turn back to the proceedings. It's Rijal's night tonight, he tells himself. His unasked-for, well-beloved son. His gaze falls on Sufjan, sitting on the other side of Jaafar, and pride touches his heart. Sufjan looks extremely well in the green *cara melayu*. Australia has been good to him – he looks happy, healthy and confident. And his phone has been vibrating incessantly with messages, so much so that Yunus is hopeful that there will be another wedding soon.

He glances at Mariana, sitting still on her white cushion. Her head has been draped in a white lace headscarf, and her face professionally made up. Her beauty is stunning. There is no denying it, Mariana is a beautiful woman. Sitting

there, her hands demurely folded over each other, her face solemn, the makeup is the only thing that detracts from the harmonious simplicity of her form, her features. Rijal's face too, has been powdered, and his lips brushed with a gloss, courtesy of the uncles on his father's side. Yunus thinks fleetingly back to his own wedding, and a small smile touches his face. Rushed, hurried, amongst strangers, with an underlying sense of urgency to the ceremony, and yet, and yet - his eyes seek out Lily again, whose head is bowed now -

The room falls quiet, abrupt and hushed. The imam has started the proceedings with a prayer. Mariana, Rijal and everyone in the room have their hands raised to pray with him, ready to say "Amin", to add their supplications. For this moment in time, everyone is wishing them well, and it is a powerful thing.

Whenever people gather to supplicate to God, the angels gather with them to shelter them under their wings.

Yunus wishes his nephew well.

He concentrates now on the Arabic that streams from the imam's lips, steady and unrelenting. There are very few in the room who will understand the meaning of the prayer, and he is not amongst them. Yet the grace and beauty of the syllables and prayer that was first said over a thousand and four hundred years before goes beyond meaning. There is barakah, blessing, in reciting the holy words, words that were shaped and formed in knowledge and anticipation of this precise moment, and millions like it.

The imam finishes the prayer, and the "Amin" fills the room, nestling in the spaces between everyone, lying on the floor between Rijal and Mariana. The imam begins the marriage sermon, touching on the usual topics – the creation of love and mercy by The Most Loving and The Most Merciful, the rights and roles

of the husband and the wife within the covenant of marriage, the duties of each, and the need for support from the family and community. It is a good sermon of its kind – the imam is quietly playful – and the only thing that slows down its flow is the necessity – because of all of Rijal’s titled relatives – of adhering strictly to honorifics when addressing the crowd. Instead of “ladies and gentlemen”, it becomes lists of titles.

The imam pauses, and the crowd hushes again. It is time. The imam begins with asking Rijal to recite the Al-Fatihah, the chapter which Rijal had asked to practice earlier. Rijal recites it creditably, in a low voice that even Yunus, sitting close as he is, has to strain to hear. Then the imam asks a few more questions – how many and what are the pillars of Islam? What are the articles of faith? Basic foundational questions, meant to establish that Rijal will be able to pass on the fundamentals of the faith to his family. Rijal answers each question with only the slightest hesitation, which will be taken for the proper nervousness.

Satisfied, the imam then requests that Rijal state out loud the bride price that he will be giving Mariana, for her exclusive use after their their marriage. It is a condition of the bride price that Rijal has to state that he, Awangku Muhammad Rijal bin Pengiran Muhammad Yunus, is giving Dayang Mariana binti Hanifah, the sum of five thousand Brunei dollars, in one breath. Rijal messes it up on the first try, pausing to take a deep breath, which nullifies the attempt, but gets it on the second. After that, the imam gives Rijal a short lecture, and goes over the clauses that Mariana has put in the marriage contract – she will be allowed to terminate the marriage immediately if Rijal ever abuses her, physically, verbally, spiritually or emotionally. She will also be allowed to terminate the marriage if he does not provide for her financially, physically, spiritually or emotionally. Finally

he asks Rijal whether he promises to take care of Mariana, to shoulder her sins, to provide for her needs. Rijal repeats the oath that has been prepared for him in a low, steady voice that stumbles only a little over the longer Malay words. Mariana is listening intently, her eyes lowered to the white cushion she sits on, to her hands, folded in her lap. Even though Rijal is not looking at her, these are promises to her, witnessed and sanctified by the imam, by everyone in the room.

The marriage contract is brought to Rijal, a silver pen provided, and Rijal signs it. They are married. Rijal is helped to his feet by buoyantly congratulatory uncles and he moves toward Mariana. They have both taken ablution before the ceremony begins, and they are both about to deliberately nullify it with Mariana's first salam to Rijal, as wife to husband.

She salams him from the cushion as he bends over her, kissing his hand and touching her forehead to it. It is supposed to be a moment of intense beauty – the first time a man and a woman's touch becomes permissible to each other. Even knowing that Mariana is pregnant, and that the touch of Rijal's hand is not new to her, it is a sweet thing to watch. It does not matter what they have done before, it only matters what they do next. Rijal kisses her forehead chastely, and the clapping begins.

* * *

The house rings with noise.

Rijal and Mariana sit and pose for a few pictures, and then people start to drift through the rooms, talking and laughing and eating. Rijal and Mariana do not touch, even though they are sitting so close their sides are touching.

“How are you feeling?” he asks her, during a lull.

She smiles at him. “I’m happy. Are you happy?”

“Of course,” he says.

“Are we still going to a hotel on Sunday night? After the ambil-ambilan?”

They will not be staying together tonight, despite being officially married. They will not spend the night together until Sunday and the final ambil-ambilan ceremony, when Rijal and his contingent will go to Mariana’s house for the final reception, a sort of formal and ritualized removal of Mariana from her parents house. When they leave that night, they will take Mariana with them.

“To the Empire,” he confirms, naming the most expensive resort in Brunei. It sits on a private beach and is about forty minutes away from the city center by car – which, in Brunei, is quite a distance.

“Romantic,” she chuckles. She seems pleased, sitting there confident in her beauty. She is glowing with it.

He looks at her now, smiling for the camera that one of his cousins points at them, and suddenly he feels a wave of fondness. She is so very confident that the biggest hurdle has been cleared, that all their problems have been solved, in her own ability to win over or deal with his mother, his father. Her confidence rings clear. It is a welcome relief. The black and whiteness of Mariana is comforting – she wants what she wants. He will never have to guess what she wants, she will always insist upon it. He can understand her, he can deal with her. It is shades that he shies away from, shades and shadows, the murky depths that Hana tries so hard to conceal, the pulsating chokehold of the tensions of the past, the guilt over Sophie, his parents’ and his own uneasiness.

She looks at him. “We’re married now,” she whispers, mischievously.

He can grin at her, and although he doesn't know it, the openness of that grin eases the hearts of his Aunty Lily and Uncle Yunus, who have come to take a picture with them.

Hana is holding the camera. Uncle Yunus' hand is warm and heavy on one shoulder, Aunty Lily's a light brush on his other.

In the end, after all, Mariana asks very little of him. She does not take his heart and wring it with her disappointment, she does not place expectations on him which are always, always just beyond his frustrated reach. Her secret – their secret – is not one which would surprise or crush anybody. It is a secret for the sake of being a secret, to show that they are not flaunting their sin and flouting religion and convention, not because they have anything to hide.

He smiles automatically at Hana, who takes the picture without one. In Mariana's confidence, her sureness of what she wants, he can place his own hopes for the future.

* * *

Hana is standing outside, looking for Khalid. She is hot and nauseous, and the noise of the wedding, the booming speakers that have been placed by the front doors is giving her a headache, drilling sly needles along her scalp. Her mouth feels dry, and the colourful, blinking lights hung up around her aunt and uncle's house blur into another aspect of her headache. She can't find her shoes, has trouble focusing for them. The infernal pile of sandals and shoes! She spots the golden sandals and shoves her feet into them, stumbling down the front steps. She wants to get away from the noise, but finding Khalid has become a drumbeat as insistent as her throbbing temples.

There is a crowd of people outside, hanging around the heavy green canvas tents and plastic chairs, eating and talking and laughing, but no one pays any attention to her when she sits down, a plastic cup of calming soda in her hand. She forces herself to sit and breathe, but she can't stop her eyes from darting from side to side.. Where is Khalid? It is bad enough that they didn't come together – Khalid came with Farid instead – but they didn't even get to say hi before the wedding, because of the segregation between males and females. She'd seen him in the living room, but he hadn't looked at her. He has been avoiding her gaze. And now – is he still avoiding her? She seems to swallow anger and worry along with the warm soda. She needs to tell him tonight. Her foot in its flimsy sandal taps like a drumbeat on the outdoor tile. Suddenly she can't bear it any longer and gets up abruptly. She can't just sit there – she'll go look for him one more time.

Her drink splashes a little with her sudden movement, out of the cup and onto someone's stockinged, sandal-ed foot. "Oh, sorry!" she cries immediately, and finds herself looking at Farid.

"It's okay," he says politely. He smiles. "Oh, it's you, Hana. Hey, Khalid's been looking for you."

"Where is he?" Hana asks shortly. She meets Farid's eyes and welcomes the shot of resentment that lodges in her chest, as naturally and easily as if it were coming home. In that moment, she hates his smiling face. This is his fault, she thinks, and the burn arrows through her wretchedness. This is all Farid's fault, the reason Khalid has been changing, the reason Khalid has been treating her this way. Him and his stupid study circles.

"He was in the living room looking for you, then he had to go to the bathroom. I'm sure he'll be out in a minute."

“Great,” she says flatly. Farid’s eyebrows rise a little at her hostile tone, but he perseveres.

“Hey, Khalid told me you both got the scholarship,” he says politely. “Congratulations. You must be busy, getting ready to go.”

“It’s not for another two months,” she says, the icy civility of her tone rivalling her Aunty Gina’s.

“Is everything okay?” he looks so confused at his reception that instead of relenting, her resentment grows. He has no right to be so nice, so – so *good*, when he has been messing with her life for the last few weeks.

“Fine,” she says, dismissive. “How are you enjoying the wedding?”

“It’s good,” he says, still confused. “Happy to see my cousin get married – “

She spots Khalid over his shoulder, drains her cup and cuts him off. “There’s Khalid,” she says.

“I’ll see you later,” he says to her back. She feels churlish and petty, and it only adds to her anger.

“There you are,” she says to Khalid.

One smile, she tells him in her head. One sweet smile, a coaxing word, and she would have forgiven him anything then. Instead he looks over her shoulder at Farid. “Were you just talking to Farid?”

Her smile hardens into a brilliant diamond. “He said you were looking for me.”

“I was,” he says absently. He finally looks at her. “Didn’t get to say hello earlier.”

“Hello.”

He smiles. "Hi."

She waits. He asks, "Do you want to come talk to Farid?"

"Look, am I your girlfriend, or is Farid your girlfriend? I need to talk to you alone. It's important."

He frowns. "What's wrong with you? Of course you're my girlfriend."

"Well, it feels like you're spending a lot more time with Farid than you are with me, these days," she snaps.

Her anger seems to goad him into impatience. "What are you talking about? I told you why I don't want to spend so much time together. It's not because I don't still like you."

He doesn't say love, she notes, coldly and bitterly aware, and is surprised that her heart can wring out any more pain. "Can we talk?"

He follows her out to the front gate, unlit and far away from the crowd. "Do we have to talk here?" he complains. "There are mosquitoes."

She did not know she could get more enraged. "Do you have any other suggestions?"

He shifts. She can feel his irritation rising to meet her own. "What's going on?"

She inhales sharply. Now that the time has come, her anger and her courage dissipate a little, and she allows the impatience on his face to hurt a little more. "I took a pregnancy test," she blurts out.

She hears, rather than sees, his sudden intake of breath. "It was positive," she hurries, getting it all out as quickly as possible. "I'm pregnant."

"What?" he whispers.

"You heard me," she hisses.

He shakes his head, dazed. “But we were always so careful.”

“Do you think I’m lying?” she demands furiously, still keeping her voice low. “I don’t know how it happened. It just did.”

He shakes his head, half to clear it, half in denial. “Maybe it’s a mistake,” he grasps.

“I took four tests.”

He trembles, as if his legs can’t support him. Looking at him, her anger suddenly makes her remote. His problem now, she thinks spitefully and distantly. She has been left alone to deal with it for the last week, now it is his turn. She makes no move toward him. She has no words of comfort for him. Later she is to think that perhaps if she had - perhaps if she had had a little kindness in this moment, things would have turned out differently. But she remains silent, and the die is cast.

“How long have you known?” he manages, finally.

“A week,” she says, her tone short and clipped. “I tried to tell you, but –” she shrugs. It feels good to shift the blame, to feel his mounting guilt.

“I’m sorry,” he says, miserably. He holds out his hands – finally, she thinks with relief – that in this moment of shock, at least, he closes the distance between them. “I should have been there. I’m sorry.”

His guilt feels like a balm on her sore feelings. She draws it out, like a violinist extracting the last note with a long, steady pull of his bow. “I’m scared.”

He hugs her, solid, comforting – it feels like *him*, again, at last. She is so relieved that she could cry. “We’ll figure it out,” he says hoarsely. Then, “Oh God. What are we going to do?”

* * *

When Hana gets home that night, her father hands her a package that has just come in the mail. It looks official, and it has come all the way from England. Without much interest, Hana pries the hard cardboard open and draws out the sheets inside. Four cardboard frames embossed with the University of Nottingham logo, and twelve glossy photographs. Her parents ooh and ahh over them – they are her graduation photos, and Hana sees the one she has been waiting for, the one she has been looking forward to for the last six weeks. The family photo. In it, her parents smile proudly behind her, her little sisters are ranged on one side, and Khalid stands on the other. It is a beautiful photo. She remembers that the photographer had gently chided her to smile a little less – she'd been smiling too wide, too bright.

Hana runs a finger over Khalid's face, foolishly, and thinks of his reassurances tonight, the way he'd stuck by her side for the rest of the night, his whispered *I love you* as they'd left. It seems like a sign. Maybe it's not too late to go back, after all.

Nine

The rest of the wedding ceremonies go smoothly, but they are exhausting. For the next two days, Rijal finds a new outfit laid out on his bed, but thankfully his uncles do not come by to help him get dressed. His parents have spared no expense, and have skimped on none of the ceremonies or efforts needed to change their house temporarily into a huge camp for the wedding. On Saturday night, the night after the solemnization of their vows, there is the bersanding –reception - ceremony, which is being held at his house. Which means that on Saturday morning, he wakes up to workers in the living room, busily transforming it from the cool white simplicity of the nikah - solemnization - setting, to the lush, fragrant décor of a bersanding setting. The pelamin, the thrones which he and Mariana are to sit on that night, is being set up, and his mother is overseeing the draping of gauze and the arrangement of fresh flowers which will transform the rather gaudy golden chairs set on a wooden platform, into a sea of red and peach brilliance. The colours, he knows, were picked out by Mariana, much to his mother's professed disgust, although he secretly thinks that if they hadn't been, the boldness of the red and peach would have suited Gina very well. As it is, even standing there in her sweatpants and sleeping shirt, a mug of coffee in her hand, the colours swirl around her and set off her ferocious vivacity.

“You're up,” she says, still keeping her attention on the workers.

Rijal casts a dubious eye on the living room. The floor is covered in dust and there is still some debris from the night before. But he has ultimate faith in his mother and so says nothing except, “Where is everybody?”

“Your father is outside, helping them set up the tents again. Sufjan has been on the phone for the last hour.”

Rijal suppresses a yawn. “Who’s he talking to?”

As if on cue, Sufjan’s laughter drifts down the stairs. Rijal and his mother raise their eyebrows at each other, and Rijal feels his mouth twitch into a small smile. “Sounds happy.”

“Must be the person who’s been messaging him constantly,” his mother says.

Rijal laughs and realises how light he feels. How light and unburdened. It feels – good – to know that he is married, that that one step is out of the way. He knows that his mother is not entirely happy, but suddenly he shares Mariana’s optimism about the future, and he remembers his uncle’s advice to look forward instead of back. Maybe he hasn’t been the best of sons, of people, before, but he can try from now on, can’t he?

“Go have some breakfast,” his mother says. “There’s plenty of food in the kitchen. Ask Aunty Melissa to fix you a plate.”

“Have you eaten?”

His mother nods, and hurries away to scold a worker, who looks supremely unconcerned, which Rijal knows from experience will just enrage his mother more. He wanders into the kitchen and finds it full of leftovers from the night before covered in foil, but no Aunty Melissa. He gets his own plate and is about to stick it in the microwave when his mother comes in and shrieks, “Not that plate!”

Rijal starts. “What?”

She takes the plate from him and transfers the food to another plate. “Rijal, you can’t microwave this plate. It’s china.”

Rijal feels his cheeks heat, and foolishly he utters, “Oh.”

Shaking her head, his mother presses a few buttons competently and the microwave whirrs loudly to a start. “Twenty-eight years old and still doesn’t know how to use the microwave,” she says. “What are we going to do with you, Rijal?”

He knows his mother means it as a joke, but the mild euphoria that has hung around him drains away as suddenly and brutally as a shock. He says nothing, but the food tastes like dry grass in his mouth. What is he doing, he wonders. Marriage, a child – a *child* – he can’t do this. He can’t even use the microwave without messing up.

His mother lingers in the dining room as he eats. The dining room is blessedly empty for the time being, but the polished silver domes of the stands are ready to hold the food which the caterers will bring by later. “Good, right?” his mother says, nodding at his plate. “I think we can use them again.”

Rijal smiles faintly. “For Sufjan’s wedding?”

“Yes, to Miss X that he’s on the phone with,” his mother agrees. “Or even for your next one.”

Rijal stares. “My next one?”

His mother shrugs. “You never know,” she says. She doesn’t sit down, just keeps looking at him. “After the baby is born...you never know. Just keep your options open, Rijal.”

She is already expecting the marriage to fail, he realises. Even before it has really begun. Expecting, or hoping? He does not know which, or whether he even knows the difference himself, but he does know that the sermon of the night before, on the sanctity and permanence of marriage, has been completely ignored by his mother. Her matter-of-factness seems to diminish the entire ceremony, and

turns the bersanding ceremony that they are preparing for into an elaborate farce instead of a traditional ritual. Not a new beginning, but just the continuation of old stories, old lies. Well, what had he expected, he thinks wearily. He has not even asked how they are paying for this wedding. Catering three events for a thousand relatives is not cheap. Things are not moving forward. Everything is the same. He feels as if he has been yanked back from freefall, solidly back onto rough, barren ground.

“I just want you to be happy,” Gina says, suddenly troubled. For a minute, their moods match exactly. Then she is whirling on her way out the door. “I have to look after the workers,” she calls out. “Go see if Sufjan is off the phone, and tell him to eat some breakfast.”

Rijal finishes his breakfast slowly and drags himself up the stairs to Sufjan’s room. He can hear Sufjan still talking on the phone, but when he knocks, Sufjan’s voice abruptly lowers, and it is obvious from the hurried tone that he is saying goodbye quickly. He hears Sufjan hang up the phone and when the door opens to reveal an alert but unwashed Sufjan, he says, “If you’re done dating, Mama wants you to go eat some breakfast.”

Sufjan laughs. He looks so happy, it is as if he is the one who got married the night before. “Okay,” he says lightly. He comes out of his room, yawns and stretches, like a big satisfied cat. “So,” he says, “how does it feel to be married?”

“Same as it felt yesterday,” Rijal says. He follows Sufjan down the stairs, not really sure what he’s doing. Only knowing that Sufjan’s gay alertness is the only thing that seems to lighten the house, allow air into the vacuum. He watches as Sufjan gets himself a plate of food. Aunty Melissa comes in just as Sufjan starts the microwave.

“Good morning,” Sufjan says cheerfully.

“Morning,” Aunty Melissa says. She is carrying a basket of clothes, just in from the drying line outside. She pats Rijal on the back as she moves out the kitchen. “Congratulations,” she says.

“Yeah, congratulations, big brother,” Sufjan says, getting a can of soda out of the fridge. He pops it open and drinks thirstily. He lets loose with a burp, and stretches again. Rijal catches sight of them, standing side by side in the tinted windows. He looks like he is wilting, next to Sufjan’s energetic good health. It makes him feel momentarily and depressingly self-conscious.

“So who’s the mystery girl?” Rijal asks.

“What mystery girl?” Sufjan evades.

“The one you were on the phone to.”

Sufjan grins. “My significant other,” he says, lightly.

“Does she have a name? Is she Australian?” Rijal pauses. “Why didn’t you bring her back with you?”

“What’s with all the questions?” Sufjan asks.

Rijal shrugs. “Just curious,” he says. “Maybe I just want to know.” There is something there, he can see it. There is some turmoil moving under the skin and muscles of Sufjan’s smooth tanned face.

Sufjan laughs shortly. “Let’s just say Mama and Da wouldn’t approve.”

It is Rijal’s turn to laugh. “After Mariana, I think Mama would welcome anyone you brought home with open arms.”

“Yeah, why does Mama dislike her so much anyway?” Sufjan asks curiously, yanking his plate out of the microwave. Rijal enjoys and envies his brother’s quick, competent movements.

“Mama thinks she’s a gold digger,” Rijal says.

Sufjan chuckles. “What’s so bad about that?”

Rijal moves his shoulders. “You think she is?” he asks. He is not quite sure what Sufjan makes of Mariana.

“I haven’t spent that much time with her,” Sufjan says, as they move again into the dining room. “But it’s not like you’re being forced to marry her or anything.”

He doesn’t know, Rijal realises. Nobody has told Sufjan about –

“She’s pregnant.”

Sufjan’s eyes widen, and his hand clenches on the silver spoon. “You’re kidding.”

Inexplicably, Rijal finds himself smiling. “Nope.”

Sufjan’s throat works and he automatically gulps some soda down.

“Wow,” he breathes. “No wonder.”

“No wonder what?”

Sufjan waves a hand. “No wonder the rush! No wonder Mama hates her.”

“It’s not like that,” Rijal says, feeling defensive for Mariana. “She...It’s not like that.”

“So you would have married her anyway.”

“Who knows?” Rijal asks. “Maybe not soon, but -” he shrugs.

Sufjan shakes his head. “Wow,” he repeats. “Does everyone know?”

“No, not everyone. Just Aunty Lily and Uncle Yunus, I think.”

“How about Aunty Melissa?”

The question takes Rijal by surprise. He has to think about it. “Well, I haven’t told her,” he says slowly. “But I’m sure she knows.” Just as she knew

about Sophie without him having to tell her. He is used to Aunty Melissa's silent omniscience.

Sufjan seems to understand. He leans back, still shaking his head. He is more shocked than Rijal would have expected. Something stirs in Rijal, some bit of intuition. There is something going on with Sufjan...he shies away from it. "Maybe you're right," Sufjan jokes. "After this, anyone I bring home is bound to be better..."

Rijal laughs. "You think?"

The humour leaves Sufjan's face, as swiftly as it came. "No," he says. "Trust me. I think Mama would prefer even Mariana to the person I'd like to bring home."

* * *

For the first time in weeks, Hana does not have to wonder or go looking for Khalid. He calls her the morning after Rijal's nikah, and says he will come pick her up for the bersanding. Hana agrees, and even despite the frightening nausea she manages to conceal that morning, feels lighter than she has in days.

Happily she packs a graduation photo for Khalid, and fusses over her clothes and makeup. When he comes by the house, she lets him wait for a few minutes – just to savour the feeling – before she comes out.

"Hi," he says, when she gets in the car.

"Hi," she says in return. She hands him the graduation photo. "I have something for you."

He takes it out from the tissue paper and she watches his face soften. “I remember this,” he says. He looks from the photo to her. “We look good together.”

Hana smiles. “I think so.”

He packs the photo away and says thanks. As he pulls carefully out of their driveway, Hana catches a glimpse of her parents watching them from the front window. She points them out to Khalid, who brakes. “Should I go in and say hi?”

“No, it’s okay,” she says. “But you should probably wave.”

He does so. “I’m going to have to go in soon though,” he says.

“Why?”

He looks surprised. “When my parents come to ask yours for you.”

“For me?”

His eyebrows draw together, a new uncertainty comes into his face. “That’s what we have to do, right?” he says slowly. “We have to get married.”

“You haven’t told your parents, have you?” she hisses, horrified.

“Of course not,” he returns immediately. “What’s the matter? Don’t you want to get married to me?”

A tentative happiness is rising, but she quashes it cautiously. “Yes of course,” she says carefully. “But I don’t want to force you to marry me.” She recognises it for a lie the second it leaves her lips. She will take Khalid, any way she can. But his next words smooth away the guilt.

“Of course you’re not forcing me,” he says, as promptly and perfectly as she could have wished for. “You know I love you Hana. And I would have –

insyaAllah – asked you to marry me in the next few years anyway. This is just...ahead of schedule.”

“Because of the baby.”

He looks over. “Yes, because of the baby.” He catches her eye. “But maybe it’s a blessing in disguise,” he says softly. “It’s very hard for me to keep my hands off you. And marriage – Farid says that marriage is best for someone who can afford it, who loves, and has a hard time controlling – you know.”

Her happiness is marred slightly by first the conditional – insyaAllah, God willing, for some reason she dislikes that – that he states, and then the mention of Farid. Even the name has begun to chafe on her. Nevertheless, it bubbles up. “Okay.”

The uncertainty is back and it completes her happiness, that it is his turn to be unsure of her, after weeks of her unsteadiness. “Are you sure you want to get married to me?”

“It’s not my idea of the perfect proposal,” she teases, then turns serious. “Yes, I do, Khalid. And,” she touches her stomach, still flat in the silky baju kurung that clings to every curve. “I think it needs to be soon.”

“Before we go back to the UK,” he agrees. “Do you think your parents will agree to it?”

A tiny shard of worry. “I hope so. What are we going to tell them? We can’t tell them the truth. It would kill my parents.”

“We’ll tell them the other half of the truth,” Khalid says sweetly. “That we love each other and we want our relationship to be lawful.”

Khalid does not know about Rijal’s circumstances, but Hana thinks of them now, and of her parents’ disappointment when they found out. With that

fresh in their minds, she does not think they will object to a quick marriage, especially not her father. “I think my parents will be okay with that,” she says slowly. “What about yours?” Khalid’s parents are more liberal than her own, and will be less likely to want them to rush into marriage, preferring a long engagement. Especially as Khalid will be doing his masters and does not have a job yet.

Khalid grins. “I’ll get Farid to come over and explain it to them the way he explained it to me,” he jokes. “He has a way of getting things through.” He reaches over, tentatively, and touches her hand. “It’ll be okay,” he reassures her. “Right? This is the right thing to do?”

Hana takes in a breath. “I hope so,” she says, quietly.

“The timing will be good too,” he says. “If we get married before we go, then you won’t be showing yet, right? And we’ll be in Edinburgh, where there aren’t many Bruneians -” they both know the dangers of chatty Bruneians in the UK, relaying news back to Brunei more efficiently than the post, “so everyone will think this is a...bunting pelamin.” A child of the throne – referring, of course, to the throne which newlyweds sit on, like the one that Rijal will be sitting on tonight. A child born exactly nine months after the wedding night.

Hana lets out her breath. They are almost at Rijal’s place. “Right,” she repeats after him. She lets herself smile at him openly now, so grateful that they are back on the same side. “Thanks, Khalid.”

He squeezes her hand once. She is glad that his ridiculous objection to touching her seems to be over. She refuses to feel guilty. *I’m not stopping him from finding God*, she tells her mother in her own mind. *We’ll go together now*. “Everything will be okay.”

She holds on to that, even when Farid is the first person that they see when they arrive at Rijal's. The guy is everywhere, she thinks, with a faint flash of irritation. Khalid greets Farid with almost too much enthusiasm – they salam and then hug. She spots Sufjan, resplendent in a peach cara melayu, black songkok perched casually on the back of his head. He waves at her and comes over.

“Hey,” he says. He claps Farid on the back. “I see you know my cousin.”

“We're football buddies,” Farid says, grinning. “Hey, man. Didn't get to speak to you last night. How's Australia treating you?”

They trade a few pleasantries, and Hana is surprised at the easy rapport that Farid builds with Sufjan and Khalid. From all Khalid's “Farid says”, she had imagined he would be slightly more serious, stuffier, stricter. More like a full-bearded, white robed imam than the young man who stands laughing and talking about football and school. He is unfailingly courteous, and she notices – she has become attuned to such nuances – that physically he keeps well away from her. When he speaks to her, he keeps his eyes gravely and steadily on her own, but other than that, she would be hard-pressed to distinguish him in behaviour from any of Khalid's other football friends.

“So, you're next in line then,” Farid is saying to Sufjan. “The pressure is on.”

Sufjan laughs. “I think these two will be up before me,” he says lightly. “When will I get an invitation to your wedding?” he directs the question at Khalid.

He is only joking, but Khalid and Hana exchange a look, and Khalid says simply, “We're thinking of getting married before we go back to the UK, actually.”

Sufjan and Farid are identical in their pleased astonishment. “What?” Sufjan exclaims.

“MasyaAllah,” Farid says.

“Shh!” Hana hisses. “We haven’t asked our parents yet.”

“Oh-ohhh,” Sufjan says, with understanding. He whistles. “This is a day of surprises!”

“What other surprises have there been?” Hana asks in curiosity.

He shakes his head. “Nothing you’d want to know. Wow. This is fantastic news. Congratulations, you two!”

“Well, nothing’s set in stone,” Khalid demurs. “We still have to get our parents’ permission first.”

“What are you going to do if they say no?”

Khalid and Hana exchange another look. “We’ll run away and get married in England,” he jokes.

Farid smiles, but says, “No, you should do it the proper way.” He reminds Hana of her father when he says that. “You can’t get married without her parents’ permission. But I’m sure they will say yes.”

“We hope so,” Hana says.

Sufjan glances up. “You’ll have to fill me in on the proposal later, cousin,” he says. “I have to go now, I think my dad is looking for me.”

They wave him off, and Farid claps Khalid on the arm. “This is great,” he says, and looks so genuinely pleased for them that some of Hana’s resentment of him ebbs away. As long as he is on their side, and not against them, she can bear his influence over Khalid easier.

* * *

Sufjan comes and finds her later, where she is sitting on the stairs and watching Rijal and Mariana sit on the pelamin, deeply henna-ed hands cupped on rich velvet pillows on their laps, to receive the flowered herbs sprinkled by the procession of relatives. Gina, Jaafar, and a couple Hana assumes are Mariana's parents, stand by, holding on to the small crystal bowls that hold more herbs.

“She doesn't look like her parents, does she?” Hana remarks to Sufjan. Mariana is taller than both her mother and her father, and her face is almost insolent in its beauty, whereas her parents are stoic and stolid specimens. Mariana and Rijal look good together – Rijal is sitting straighter than he normally does in the throne, although his shoulders, from force of habit, are drooping slightly, and his thin, attractive face is set off by the perfect rounded slopes of hers. There is no shyness about Mariana's beauty, either – she wears it with the force of someone who knows she is beautiful. The red and the peach set of clothes that she and Rijal wear fairly glow with the statement.

Moving her gaze to Uncle Jaafar, Hana is struck once again by how much Rijal looks like him. The resemblance is even more pronounced today, and it takes Hana a few minutes to realise why. Both Rijal and Uncle Jaafar play the same part next to their fiercely alive wives. Although Aunty Gina looks nothing like Mariana, her sharp Chinese beauty of fair skin and straight black hair pronounce the same bold awareness of self. Both women almost vibrate with energy, and both men stand quiet and absorbent, next to them. For all that, too, Rijal looks both older and younger than his age, making him curiously ageless – there is something boyish about his anxious position on the pelamin, careful to hold his hands just so, but there is also a wary caution about him which Uncle

Jaafar does not have, as if he knows enough to know that he should never be too sure of himself.

Sufjan fastens a critical gaze on the bride. “She does,” he says at length. “See her eyes and her nose? Exactly like her father. But the bottom half of her face is from her mother.”

Hana narrows her eyes and tilts her head, and she sees it. It’s true. Mariana has taken the features that are unprepossessing – and borderline unattractive - on her parents, and in her they have been rounded, refined, narrowed, to create that stunning face. In a different society, a different country, Hana thinks, Mariana might have been a model. But in Brunei, where modelling is just another kind of prostitution, she has taken her good looks, become a stewardess, and snared a rich husband. So all in all, Hana thinks drily, Mariana has not done too badly out of her looks.

Sitting with her cousin in this easy, companionable way, Hana remembers school holidays spent in Malaysia, at their grandparents’ house – at Uncle Henry’s house, with his big pool and friendly, now-divorced – wife, and Sophie, while their parents laughed and talked and played mahjong well into the early hours of the morning. She wonders now, thinking back, what her father had done while her aunties and uncles gambled and drank – Malaysia is a lot more liberal than Brunei when it comes to alcohol. She does not remember an exact conversation, but does remember that it had been made very clear to her that the behaviour she was privy to while in those big, lavishly furnished houses, with their dark rosewood cabinets, heavy velvet drapes that blocked out all the light, and polished marble floors that she and Sufjan took great joy in skidding around on – that that behaviour was not *good* behaviour. That no matter what she saw, and how the grown-ups laughed,

she was never to be tricked into thinking that drinking and smoking and gambling was okay.

Maybe Sufjan shares her memories, for he leans forward, nudges her in a friendly way and asks, “So why didn’t Ah Ma and Ah Kong make it for this wedding?” He is referring to their grandparents on their mother’s side.

“It was too short notice,” she says. “They’re away on holiday with Uncle -” she pauses, not sure she’s allowed to say his name. Sufjan takes it up, matter-of-factly.

“Oh, with Uncle Henry.” Easily, almost too easily, as if the reaction has been rehearsed. Sufjan has never betrayed, not in so many words, how he feels about Uncle Henry’s treatment of Rijal, or Auntie Gina, after Sophie died. She has never dared to ask. He has never brought it up. Just another shadowy corner of their family history that has grown dusty over the years.

He nudges her again. “So. How did Khalid propose?”

Hana shrugs. “Not very romantically,” she says honestly. “We just talked about it and decided that it was the right thing to do.”

He watches her. “I see.” His *cara melayu* shirt pocket vibrates – like Auntie Gina and Uncle Jaafar, he is wearing a peach material which sets off his tan.

Hana nudges him back. “Anything you want to tell *me*?” she teases, nodding at his phone.

He flips it open, cannot help a smile that lifts his lips, and puts the phone back in his pocket. “What do you mean?” he asks, feigning innocence.

“I’ve heard about your mystery girl, that you never talk about,” Hana says, putting more knowingness than she actually has in her voice.

He lifts his eyebrows in a haughty arch, mischief dancing over him. “Oh?”

“You forget that our mothers are inveterate gossips,” she says, casually.

He sputters out a laugh. “What did my mother tell yours?” he demands.

“I don’t know,” she says, maddeningly. “Why don’t you tell me about her, Sufjan?” She butts her legs against his, confidently. “It’s *me*.” It’s me. Your cousin. We grew up together. Your family’s shameful secrets are an open book to mine, and ours to yours.

He is watching her, and some solemnity comes into his eyes, makes him look more like Rijal. “I think it would shock you,” he says.

She thinks of four pregnancy tests, snuck out of the house and thrown away on a trip to the mall, as if she cannot get them far away enough. “I don’t think much can shock me at this point.”

Some wonder enters his voice. “You know about Rijal.”

The conclusion surprises her, but she nods after a slight hesitation. “I overheard the parents,” she confesses.

“Did you tell Khalid?”

She watches Khalid, hanging out at the doorway with Farid. “No.”

“Why not?”

She shrugs. “It wasn’t his business.” It is only partly true. She might have told him – she tells Khalid everything, if she had not half-consciously felt that he might associate all that sin and shame with her. During his religious phase.

“Such drama,” Sufjan sighs, and he sounds sad. “Our family has had too much drama.”

They lean on each other, their own little oasis away from the grown-ups and their secrets, just as they did when they were children. She remembers Sufjan coming to her room and playing video games with her while his parents yelled in

the living room after dropping him off, as if there was so much anger it couldn't be contained, not even long enough to get back to the car. Sufjan has always been the more grown-up, the sophisticate of the two of them, even as kids, treating the failures of marriage and business with brisk acceptance. They didn't keep in touch after family functions lessened and they both left for university, but there is always that thread of family drawing them together. Somehow over the years they found a way to be friends as well as family.

“You don't have to tell me,” she says.

His leg tenses against hers, and she can feel him force it to relax. “I haven't told anybody,” he says.

“You don't have to tell me.”

“I'm planning to stay in Australia,” he says suddenly. “You know. Even after I get my degree. I'm going to apply for permanent residency and try to become a citizen.”

The idea takes her breath away – she has never imagined, for herself, living, settling, anywhere other than Brunei. She looks at Aunty Gina, Uncle Jaafar, thinks of gold embossed envelopes inscribed with Sufjan's full name and title that come every year from the palace. By virtue of his birth, his identity, even more than hers, is written into the fabric of tradition and culture that makes Brunei - Brunei.

“Why?”

He shrugs – she can feel the movement in their touching shoulders. “I feel...at home there,” he says, haltingly. “No one knows who I am, who my father is...I like living in a city like Melbourne.” He laughs and tries to joke it off. “The

shopping is a lot better.” He pauses, turns serious, and that sadness creeps back in. “It gets suffocating in Brunei.”

She thinks of her conversation with Khalid earlier, the way they hadn’t had to explain to each other why it is such a blessing that there are few Bruneians in Edinburgh. How that anonymity, that freedom from being Muslim, being good children, had allowed them to take the steps that had led to the four discarded pregnancy tests. Is that why she hates – yes, she can say it to herself here, on the steps with her cousin, the blood of her blood, she *hates* – his religious side? It is as if he is putting on, willingly, voluntarily, those chains she’d thought they both were glad to be unfettered by...

“I get it,” she says.

“Do you?”

“I do,” quietly. “It does get suffocating here.”

“Don’t you ever want to get away?”

She looks for her own parents in the crowd, finds them waiting patiently in the line that is winding around, to bless Rijal with their own offerings of scents, flowers, prayers. She turns Sufjan’s question over, asks it of herself, remembers homesickness and yearning while she was overseas. “Sometimes,” she says. “But Brunei is home for me.” She does not always adhere to the lines her father has drawn of life, but she cannot imagine, does not want to imagine, living in a world where those lines don’t exist, are carelessly scattered, as they have been during her years abroad. It doesn’t matter whether it is out of habit, or something deeper, something like long-buried belief – she only knows that those lines are the only way she wants to make sense of the world. Clear black lines, separating right from wrong, good from bad, false from true. She knows where she stands in this world.

She does not know how to say this to Sufjan, how to put it into words. She tries, with a faltering, “My family is here.”

She looks at him when she says this, sees the twist of his lips into something not quite a smile. “I suppose you can make your own family over there,” she says, an attempt to match his earlier levity. “With mystery girl.”

He nods slowly. “I can’t make it here.” Their eyes meet, and she has the feeling that she will never be able to unhear the words that he says next. She hesitates, stepping back from the brink, but it is too late. He presses forward, holding her gaze. “Mystery girl isn’t a girl, Hana. It’s a guy.”

* * *

Yunus is talking to one of his sister-in-law’s relatives, but he is really watching his wife.

Lily has gone to talk to her sister, standing behind the pelamin and his nephew. They are standing with their heads bent together like flowers, watching the procession, which Lily will come back to rejoin once he is closer to where Rijal and Mariana are sitting. They are whispering, a faint smile on Lily’s face, as Gina whispers fast and furious, the only way Gina ever does anything. Jaafar is standing nearby, and he too is listening, and seeing the three of them stand together like that is like looking into the past. How many times has he watched them do just this, Yunus wonders, whisper and gossip – he knows that is what they are doing – trading the secrets of others in their own impenetrable circle? It used to make him feel left out and uncomfortable, during their family gatherings – if any good came of Henry’s secession from the family, it is that Yunus is no longer obliged to go to those infernal family gatherings in Malaysia, where he

would be immersed in his wife's family and their ways. It bothered him immensely, when he was younger and less sure of his beliefs. Not just his own, but his wife's and children's. He had felt – inadequate to the task of fatherhood and husbandhood, and to have his authority and beliefs tested and challenged at every family gathering had been tough, to say the least.

He has come through it well enough, he thinks, and is unable to stop the bubble of pride that comes when he sees his wife with her sister and her sister's husband. Of the three of them, his wife has changed the most obviously in those ten years since the family gatherings of their young adulthood. She wears the badge of her change in the headscarf that billows neatly around her face, and the patient lines of her mouth as she listens. But it is also there in the children they have raised together – he scans the room for Hana, and finds her, as if she is ten years old, sitting on the stairs overlooking the living room with Sufjan. The sight is so familiar, and yet so long-forgotten, that he blinks, expecting them to be giggling ten-year-olds when he opens his eyes again. But they remain who they have become – Sufjan a young man whose height means he has to look, ever so slightly, down, when he talks to Yunus, and Hana...slim, young, beautiful. Hana who will be leaving them soon for the UK, one last time.

His gaze lingers on Sufjan, who, like Hana, is the most visible manifestation, alongside Rijal, of the changes that have come over Gina and Jaafar. He remembers when Gina was – not the way she is now. She has not always been so...hard...beneath that electrifying liveliness that cloaks her. Her laughter was not always so brittle, rattling frantically against the cage of her watchfulness. He does not know when exactly she began changing – somewhere in between Jaafar and Rijal and Ilham and Sophie, and sometime after. His heart

aches for his wife's family. Not just for Sufjan and Rijal, funnily enough, but for all of them. He has always loved Sufjan and Rijal, the two little boys who used to salam him in that rough, bumpy way that girls never seem to. He fell even more in love with them when Sufjan came to live with them during that time when Gina and Jaafar were going through the divorce, and although he was glad when they remarried, a month after the divorce, his heart ached to let Sufjan leave. In those few months when Sufjan lived with them, he was like the son Yunus had always longed for.

Unlike his own daughters, though, there was always something about Sufjan and Rijal that he did not understand. No – not something. Everything about his two nephews was a mystery to him. He loves him passionately, but Sufjan remains as much of an enigma to him as Rijal. He had wanted to take Rijal in as well, during those months, but Rijal had refused, had instead stayed at home, and then gone to Malaysia for a visit. To Maurice, to Henry, to Sophie.

Over the years, his wife's family has become more his own than his own family.

Trouble, he supposes, brings people together. Especially the kind of trouble and tragedy that Lily's family has been through. It was not, maybe, a willing alliance, or an easy one, but it became necessary. Is that what family is? Forced alliances, reluctance, and yet staying steadfastly together? Embroilment in things you would rather never have known about?

That is what Lily's family has always been about, to him. Intrigue and risk and tragedy – tranquillity has always been scarce. Even in times of peace, they involve themselves with things and people that fluctuate wildly – business and money and dramas. He has even begun to hear the open rumours of Ilham's

troubles – Brunei is too small to avoid news of that kind – that Gina and Jaafar had warned them about, and he knows instinctively, although his wife’s family has never regarded him very highly in any kind of business sense, that it is not a good thing that the case is beginning to come to light. In their personal lives, too, though, his wife’s family is either recklessly happy or volatile and angry. There is never any middle ground with Lily’s family. Divorce happens almost unthinkingly. It is something that he fears has been passed down to Hana, in her recent heartbreak and then wild happiness over that Khalid. If there is anyone who has escaped the curse of all that extreme emotion, it is, funnily enough, Rijal. Rijal’s apathy, stoicism, the way that the whole family coddles and protects him. It is the antithesis of the emotion which always seems to bubble and pipe through Lily’s family.

He is nearing the front of the line, and he can smell the heady, effusive scent of the traditional mixture of herbs, spices and flowers, and see the deep orange-red that Rijal and Mariana’s hands have been dyed. Yunus has always loved the pomp and ritual of Malay custom, even though he knows many of the customs have their roots in the Hinduism that still lingers on. The intricate snake-like swirls engraved on the pelamin that his nephew and new niece sit on, the way the air has been infused with scent, the hard-boiled eggs wrapped carefully in paper and gauze flowers and tied to small wooden sticks only slightly slimmer than a chopstick. They are all familiar sights, sounds, tastes of his childhood growing up in the rigid community of the Berakas police barracks. There is no one more traditional than the policemen of a country, with their attachment to and belief in hierarchy and rite.

It is an old wound that never heals, his expulsion from that hierarchy. With his marriage to Lily, he was barred from the intimate and expansive family community that he took for granted growing up. Sunny, too-short days of being an errand boy for aunties and uncles, squabbling with cousins over games of running, swimming, hunting. Always with a sense of knowing exactly who he is in relation to everybody else, and the relative importance or unimportance of his position. So perhaps part of his simultaneous attachment and repulsion to his wife's family is jealousy and longing – that this is the only access he has left to such a community, and the knowledge that it is not the same.

It is too old a wound to be allowed to affect him now – he feasts his eyes on Rijal, instead, all the while still carrying on the small talk. Rijal is carrying the family flag well, that serious look on his face and the tiny smile on Mariana's; they will show up well in the official photos. The photographer is adjusting the lighting, moving around, clicking furiously on his remote. Yunus nods at Lily – it is almost their turn now. Lily says one last thing to Gina and comes back to him. She will always come back to him.

“So what are we supposed to do here?” she whispers. “Just take some of the stuff from the bowl and scatter it in their hands?”

He has time to nod, then it is Lily's turn.

He places a finger's pinch of the “stuff” carefully in Mariana's cupped hands, which are only half-full – there is a bowl by her side for her to empty her hands every time they begin to overflow, and even so, he can see a generous smattering of the tiny confetti on the stiff folds of the jongsarat that sits across her lap. He wonders briefly who she borrowed her jongsarat from – they are too expensive for many people to buy. Even he does not have one – he didn't need

one for his own wedding of course, and over the years, when his daughters have had Khatam Al-Qur'an ceremonies at which they needed to be used, he'd borrowed from colleagues. He has sometimes thought that he should look into buying one, but he has always forgotten. Their need has not come up more than a handful of times over his life. It occurs to him that Hana will get married eventually, and he will need one then.

He knows, of course, where Rijal's one is from, and that Jaafar would always have been more than happy to lend it to him, but he is reluctant to ask. He knows how expensive the one Rijal is wearing is – its preciousness is especially obvious now that his and Mariana's are side by side – Rijal's one gleams with a muted lustre in the gold thread, and the design is militarily precise and careful. Yunus knows a little bit about jongsarat-making from years of taking students on countless field trips – it remains a dying industry - and can recognise the pattern on Rijal's as one of the oldest and most intricate ones, known as "Blooming Flowers Scattered," easily costing at least two to three months of the average government worker's full salary. Mariana's one is more regular, with less flair – if it can be called flair to slave a thousand stitches over one petal of a golden flower. He remembers hearing on his last visit to the hand-looms in the Water Village, that even the most skilled weaver can only complete one square centimetre a day of what will eventually become a piece of cloth measuring two by one metres. The amount of work that goes into these treasured pieces of cloth is staggering.

Like the ritual he is performing now, as he places another careful pinch into Rijal's upturned hands, and says a prayer for his nephew alongside the blessing of flowers, spontaneity has very little place in the weaving of the jongsarat. The beauty of the woven cloth emerges out of discipline, design and

love – for no one weaves jongsarat for profit. Yunus looks down at his nephew, and prays that all those will be present in Rijal's marriage.

Ten

The next afternoon, Hana is lying on her bed, working up the courage to talk to her parents about getting married to Khalid, when her mother comes in.

Lily is dressed finely, as she has been for the last two days, in a beautiful blue baju kurong, today. A gold watch is clasped around her slim white hand, and her wedding ring looks like it has just been shined. She has not put on her headscarf yet, and Hana marvels at how young her mother looks. She looks far younger than her forty-seven years.

“Are you leaving soon?” Hana asks. For the *ambil-ambilan*, the final part of Rijal’s wedding ceremonies, children are not invited, just close members of the immediate extended family, for they will have to move as a convoy to Mariana’s house, which entails a lot of cars. So only Lily and Yunus are going – Hana is staying home with her little sisters.

Lily shakes her head. “Just trying on this baju,” she says. “To see if it still fits.”

Hana frowns. “Is it old? I haven’t seen it before.”

Lily laughs. “It’s very old,” she says, stroking the silk fondly. “Your father bought me this material ten years ago. But it’s too fancy for the office -” she holds up an arm to show Hana the laboriously intricate flower detailing worked on the sleeves in beads that echo and mimic the shades of the flower pattern on the silk. The beads are laid over a latticework of *ketuk*, tiny glittering lace patterns worked out of the silk. “- so I put it away and I forgot about it.”

“It’s really nice,” Hana says, fingering the beads. “Which tudong are you going to wear with it?”

“A plain blue one,” Lily says. “Bernie -” the maid, “is ironing it now.”

“I can’t believe you can still fit into a baju kurong from ten years ago,” Hana marvels.

“My wife has kept in shape,” her father says as he passes by the open door, to disappear into the master bedroom. He is sweaty and in the tattered clothes he uses to tend their garden. “I’m going to take a shower,” he calls.

“It looks like things are better with Khalid,” Lily says, sitting on the bed.

Hana nods. Now is the time, she knows. Sudden shyness seizes her. How is she supposed to bring this up? “There’s a reason he was acting weird,” she begins. Her voice sounds unnatural, even to her.

“I thought it was because he was getting more religious?”

Hana nods, casts her eyes down. “Yeah,” she says softly. Maybe it is time to insert a half-truth. “He didn’t want to spend so much time together ‘cause he thought it was...wrong.” She knows she doesn’t have to explain this part to her mother. “But then, you know...he was thinking about how we’re going to be together in Edinburgh, and how difficult it’s going to be...”

She waits, expectantly, but her mother doesn’t say anything. “He wants to get married,” she finishes in a rush. “Before we leave.”

Her mother is eerily quiet. She’s not laughing it off, at least, Hana thinks with relief. She knows she would have had no chance if her mother had laughed.

“He wants to get married,” her mother says thoughtfully, at last. “Because...why?”

“Because he thinks it’s the right thing to do,” Hana says, thankful that she has paid enough attention to Khalid’s parroting of Farid’s principles that she can answer this, at least. “He thinks it’s not right for us to spend so much time alone together if we’re not married. He thinks it can lead to...” she trails off,

embarrassed. Surely her mother can fill in the blanks there. She hopes devoutly that her mother can. She can think of fewer things more embarrassing than having to discuss sex with her parents. Or the possibility of sex. The thought crosses her mind fleetingly that she is awfully conservative for someone with a baby in her, but she tamps it firmly down.

“I see,” Lily says, with her unreadable face on. “He’s worried that you won’t be able to control yourselves?”

The heat rises to Hana’s face. “I guess,” she mumbles.

“And what do you think, Hana?” her mother asks, not unkindly. It occurs to Hana that her mother can be just as ruthless as Aunty Gina, in her own way. “Don’t you think you’re a little young to be getting married? Last week you were on the verge of breaking up with Khalid. This week you want to marry him?”

Hana picks at her pyjamas. “It’s not like that,” she says.

“What is it like?”

“I think he’s right,” Hana blurts out. “I think...it’s dangerous for us to spend so much time together when we’re not married. I don’t want to end up like Rijal.”

Her mother’s gaze sharpens. “Who told you about Rijal?”

“Sufjan,” Hana lies instantly. She is getting too good at lying, she realises miserably. But there is no other way.

“Hana,” her mother says, “you and Khalid haven’t - have you?”

“No, of course not,” Hana says, injecting just the right amount of incredulity and embarrassment into her voice. “But...I don’t want to take the chance. And Mama,” she sits up, “Mama, I love him.”

Her mother sighs. “I know you do, sweetie,” she soothes. “I just think you’re a little young to be thinking about marriage...”

“How old were you when you got married?”

“Twenty-five.”

“And you’d been dating Abah for how long?”

Another sigh. “Two years.”

“I’ve *been* going out with Khalid for more than that now,” Hana points out. “Mama, we’re serious about this. He’s serious about this. He’s talking to his parents as well...and if you say yes, then he wants to arrange for them to come here to discuss it with you.” She doesn’t know if her mother knows the traditional Malay ritual – she only knows about it from Khalid – “To do a merisik ceremony. That’s when...the parents meet, and promise us to each other.”

Her mother is quiet. “I have to discuss this with your father,” she says finally.

“I know.”

“But only if this is what you really want,” she says firmly. “I want you to think about this, seriously, for a few days – no, Hana,” she stops Hana from interrupting. “I mean it. A few days. Then if you’re still serious, I’ll talk to your father about it. In the meantime, I want you to do that prayer...what’s it called? The one you do when you’re trying to make a decision.”

“Istikharah.”

“I want you to keep making that prayer.”

Hana wants to protest – time is essential here, she is horribly aware, especially if she and Khalid want to get married before they leave in...exactly two months. But she swallows her protests, knowing that they make her seem childish,

and also that her mother is serious. “Okay, Mama,” she concedes. “I will. I promise I will.”

“Good,” Lily says, getting up. “Now I have to go get ready. Will you look after your sisters while we’re out?”

“Of course,” Hana says dutifully.

When her mother leaves, she flops back onto her bed. Her mind frantically works the math – a few days before her mother will accept she is serious, another few days for her and her father to make a decision. Two weeks before they can do the merisik ceremony, and then there will only be a month and a half left...her mind whirls with the thought of it, of growing bellies and permission yet to be granted. She holds on to Khalid’s remembered, “Everything will be all right” as she sighs and gets up. She supposes she will do an istikharah prayer now, even though she knows there is no decision to be made, not really. But she did promise, after all.

* * *

It feels like it has been months since he has not been surrounded by crowds of bustling relatives. Rijal breathes a sigh of relief as soon as he and Mariana arrive at the hotel suite in the Empire Country Club and Hotel which has been booked for them. On the bed is a luxurious scattering of rose petals in the shape of a heart – someone must have told the hotel that it was their honeymoon.

“Nice,” Mariana says, approvingly. Here in the dimmer lighting of the hotel, the heavy makeup that was necessary for all the official photos is cakey in its thickness. He can actually see the lines drawn on her face, like a colouring book, to contour her nose and cheeks.

Rijal sinks into the big lounging chair by the bed with another sigh. “I’m glad that’s all over,” he mumbles. He feels exhausted from days of sitting straight and being bundled into that stiff jongsarat with the gold belt cinching his waist so that he can’t breathe – he took it off in the car on the way over – and receiving the attentions of a thousand relatives, both his and hers. He is glad to be alone, away from the disdainful sniffs of his mother when they arrived at Mariana’s house, a modest old-fashioned house turned into a flurry of tents and lights for the *ambil-ambilan*, the removal ceremony. It is even a relief to be away from the silence of his father, who has been concentrating on treating each relative with the proper procedure, something he has not had to do for years. Rijal can practically see, everytime he looks at his father, Jaafar’s flipping through his mental files to retrieve the correct title to call a great-uncle, a cousin, a cousin through marriage.

Mariana laughs and twirls, admiring her own dress in the mirror. The hours of standing and mingling have only given her more energy, and have flushed her cheeks and brightened her eyes. She glows with attention on her. It occurs to Rijal that in a different world, Mariana would have made an excellent diplomat’s wife, or an actress or singer. But the world is unkind, so here she is with me, Rijal thinks ruefully. He gets up, stills her twirling form with his hands on her hips. “How are you feeling?” he asks, brushing his thumbs over her stomach. It feels the same to him, flat and unmoving.

Mariana pushes his hands away and dances backwards. “Fine,” she says gaily. “I’ve made a doctor’s appointment – at RIPAS, this time -” she names the national hospital, “for Wednesday.”

Rijal cracks a faint smile. “I suppose we can start telling people about Junior next month.”

Mariana examines her stomach in the mirror. “I guess,” she says thoughtfully, smoothing her hands over the tight purple fabric – purple and gold, the theme colours for the ambul-ambilan – stretched over her stomach. “It doesn’t look like there’s anything in there, does it?”

Some doubt trails over Rijal’s spine, as if someone is trailing a finger over his back. He looks, really looks at Mariana. “But there is,” he says, “isn’t there?”

She fixes those glittering black eyes on him, and her lips curve in that brilliant smile. “Of course,” she says, mock-scolding. She comes to him and places a light kiss on his mouth, and he is sure that when he looks in the mirror, it will be stained with the dark red of her lipstick. “We’re married now, though,” she whispers, drawing his unresisting body into a dance. “So it’s okay.”

“What’s okay?” The way she manoeuvred him, so easily, at the doctor’s office in Miri. Would it even matter, he asks himself suddenly. Whether she really is pregnant or not, whether she trapped him into marriage or not. He cannot see that it does. It’s done now. They are moving forward, whether he likes it or not.

“We’re okay,” she says, as they sway slowly. “Everything’s okay now that we’re married. We’ll get a house, have a baby, and live happily ever after.”

She tilts her head back to look at him more fully, and he feels pinned, drawn to that magnetic confidence and surety. “Right, Rijal?” she prompts.

“Right,” he echoes. “Right.”

She has everything planned, he thinks. Mariana has always had everything planned. She sees the future so clearly that he can almost see it too.

* * *

Hana meets Khalid a few days later to tell him that her mother has finally relented and agreed to talk to her father about their marriage. He comes to fetch her at her house in the evening, and they drive to Gadong, which used to be their favourite place to find food.

They are having dinner when the pain starts.

Their food has just arrived. Hana's chopsticks are halfway to her mouth when it feels like her stomach has been kicked from the inside and out. She breathes in sharply and her chopsticks clench into a cross, the raw salmon falling in a clump to her plate, the vinegar rectangle of rice fluttering apart into individual grains.

Khalid looks up, surprised. "Hana?"

"My stomach hurts," she whispers, then cries out a little before she can stifle it at another grasping pain. Her stomach is wringing itself into a knot and yanking brutally apart.

Khalid puts down his chopsticks and takes her hand. "What kind of hurt?" he asks firmly. "Tell me."

"I don't know," she says, still whispering. "We have to get out of here." People are already starting to stare.

Khalid helps her up and says, "Lean on me." Hana closes her eyes and lets herself be led out of the restaurant. She only opens them once Khalid has settled her in the car, levering the seat back.

"Is it still hurting?" he asks.

She clenches her teeth and nods. The pain has moved lower, and her uterus is clamping in rhythmic spasms.

“What’s happening?” he asks, his voice shaking, despite his attempt to keep it steady.

A small sound escapes through her gritted teeth. “I don’t know,” she pants.

He holds her hand, and his helplessness is overpowering. “What should we do?”

She is unable to answer as the pain shudders through her.

“I’m taking you to the hospital,” she hears him say, through a distance. It takes a few seconds for hearing to translate into understanding, and then she is horrified.

“No!”

He is already starting the car. “Shh,” he soothes, one hand still on hers. “Stay still.”

She grabs at the ignition.

“What are you doing?”

“We are not going to the hospital!”

As if the power of will is enough, the pain recedes as quickly as it begins, and Hana is able to breathe. Surprise comes hand in hand with a long relief. She takes in a long breath before saying, “It’s gone now.”

Khalid is suspicious.

“It is,” she insists, drawing in blessed air. She realises her face is burning, and fans herself helplessly.

He places his hands on her face, and rests his own against hers, and she realises he is trembling, fine tremors that don’t quite have enough strength to vibrate through her, but which she can feel. Tiny electrical currents that are charged with emotion. “Are you okay?”

“Are *you* okay?” he whispers.

She closes her eyes, exhausted. “Yes.” She gestures. “Help me sit up.”

Now that the haze of pain has gone, she can see that his face is taut with new worry. “I think we should go to the hospital,” he says.

“I’m fine,” she repeats, not stubbornly, not defiantly, calm and decisive. “There’s nothing to be worried about.”

He looks so unsure that she knows she can talk him around to it. She just needs to keep her head. Neither of them know what to do, but if she can fake it, then he will follow along. He has to.

Even as she is thinking this, she can see his face change. Dismayed, she watches it harden into resolve. No, no. “It’s probably the baby, isn’t it?” he says.

She matches his question with her own steel. Now is not the time to give in. “It’s fine now.”

“It could be anything, Hana. We need to make sure that you’re all right.”

“We can’t go to the hospital, Khalid,” she says, spacing each word out deliberately. “Someone will see us. Our parents will find out. You *know* that.”

He shakes his head. “Maybe they will,” he says. “But maybe we should stop lying, then. We can’t worry about that now. What’s important is to make sure you’re okay.” He makes a move, as if he’s finished discussing it. “I’m taking you to the hospital.”

The anger comes so quick and strong that it is like there is an extra person in the car, so real is its presence. “It’s not your decision!” she shouts at him. She shakes with it. She is so angry with him. She is fed up with this, fed up with the whole mess, fed up with Khalid. “It’s not just *your* life, Khalid!” she practically sneers his name. Suddenly the bile of the last few weeks comes spurting out. “You

think it's all up to you to make the decisions for the both of us! Whether we should go out or not, whether we should live together, or hold hands, and I'm just supposed to wait patiently while you take your time deciding! You won't even *talk* to me about it, you just tell me how things are going to be! How *you're* going to be, and I can just come along for the ride or not, and you don't even *care* how I feel about it! It's my life too, and I'm *not* going to the hospital! It may not be important to you if everyone finds out about this, but it's important to me, do you hear me? It's my reputation and my life and -" she is choking on her own emotion, the words tumbling out, so she doesn't even really know what she's saying. She will lose him with this outburst, she realises dimly, but she can't help herself. Her fists are clenched and she is breathing hard, but every exhalation is a relief. It's finally out there.

"Shh, shh," Khalid is saying, soothingly, and then she bursts into tears. She slaps away his hands, which are frantically trying to smooth and pet, and rubs furiously at her eyes.

She tries to get her breathing under control, gulps in the air and stares out the windshield into the murky blue-black-yellow of the restaurant parking lot. Across the road, Gadong Centerpoint is teeming with teenagers laughing into the solemn heaviness of a humid night, amidst the gay brightness of the coffee shops, the supermarket, McDonalds. Sitting in a car without the engine on, the silence of it weighs on both of them, with only her hiccups to fill the black air.

She takes a deep breath and shudders into calm. "I'm not going to the hospital," she repeats, and looks over at Khalid.

"I'm sorry," he surprises her by saying. He scrubs his face with his hands, then tentatively reaches for hers. She lets him hold it, but doesn't respond.

“I didn’t realise that I’d been hurting you,” he says, and he sounds so mature that Hana blinks and wonders dizzily if he’s always been this way. He’s changed so much in the months that they’ve been home. She hardly recognises him. He’s not the same Khalid who playfully followed her around in England, who was always by her side and worshipped everything she did.

He kissed her for the first time in the university park, on a cold day in November, so icily cold that the lake was already shimmering with frost. They were both wrapped up, in their bulky winter coats and thick scarves wrapped around their necks. They had been standing, hand in hand, her gloved hand wrapped securely in his, looking out at the lake. Ice crunching underfoot every time they shifted their weight. She had been aware of his gaze on her, had been deliriously happy with it – she remembers being so happy that she could not imagine that Khalid would ever stop loving her, or she him. He had leaned over, his breath warm, his nose cold as it touched her cheek, and he had kissed her, hand gripping hers firmly, so sure, as if he knew exactly what he was doing, as if she was already his. A quick, brief kiss, his lips brushing hers, and then he had taken his other hand out of his pocket and he had hugged her. She remembers leaning into him, face pressed against the scratchy wool of his scarf, so completely enfolded in him.

Three years of stolen kisses and moments, all carefully hidden from all the other Bruneians in Nottingham. Oh, they knew he stayed over in her room, they knew that she stayed over in his room, that they’d gone on holiday together, but without actually witnessing anything, there is nothing to be said. It has become almost commonplace, their kind of relationship, where things taboo in Brunei – holding hands in public, staying out late – become tacitly allowed, natural in

England. The lines of conduct shift with the continents and the time difference, fluid. It is different. In England.

Three years, and he is a stranger now. For the first time, Hana feels a strike of uneasiness, to think of getting married to this young man. But as quickly as the uneasiness comes, it is chased by the fear of not getting married to him. Only now, she cannot see, cannot tell whether she is more afraid of the shame, of the humiliation of being discarded, or of his not loving her anymore. Maybe it is a little of each, mixed up in each other.

“What did you expect?” she asks hollowly.

“I love you,” he says, solemnly. There is not a trace of levity on his face, in his demeanour. “And maybe I haven’t explained properly...maybe you can’t understand that the way I’ve been acting has been because I love you so much. It’s not easy for me to make these decisions, Hana.”

“It’s not up to you,” she says.

His face draws taut. “Do you think it’s easy for me?” he demands. “To keep my hands off you, not to see you so often? It’s not. It’s...it’s really not. But I do it because I want to look after you. Not just in this world,” he swallows. “But in the next, too. And if I were to discuss it with you...I’m afraid that you can make me change my mind.” He draws his hand up her arm to touch her, yearning. “It’s...very difficult.”

His words are a cool gift to soothe the burning edges of her emotion. She feels the anger drain away, leaving her empty. He seems to sense her need, and gives her more words. She had not realised how much she needed them.

“I don’t want to shame you,” he says, “because everything that’s happened,” he gestures at her stomach, “I think it’s my fault. I’m the guy. I should have looked after you. I’m the one who should have controlled myself.”

Part of her feels the truth of this. For all that they have left so many of their values behind, Hana knows that both she and Khalid are at heart, very traditional. The man is the one who shoulders the brunt of the blame, the sin. But another part of her rebels against it, as him taking control again. “It wasn’t just you.”

“No,” he agrees, “but I should have had more self-control. I just didn’t think about it, then. But I’m trying to be better now, Hana. And part of why I’m trying to be better is because I want to be able to look after you properly.” He squeezes her hand. “I don’t want you to be the one to suffer for our mistake. Let me take you to the hospital. Please.”

“It was probably nothing,” she says, but her protest is half-hearted now. She is weakening. Khalid’s soft words have done their job, made her feel secure and safe in him. The feeling is like a drug, dulling the edges of her fear.

“I would feel better if you would go have it checked out.” He is pushing, gently, inexorably.

“I can’t...someone will find out.”

“Look, we can go to the emergency room and see a doctor. It’s late, no one we know will be around – it’s unlikely -” he amends, at her look. “Think of it this way, if there’s nothing wrong, then no one will know anything, and if there is something wrong -”

“There isn’t.”

“Then it’ll probably happen again, and probably in public as well.” He finishes. He knows exactly which buttons to push, does Khalid. It amazes her how well he knows her, and yet in some ways, she thinks, he doesn’t know her at all. “I don’t want anyone to find out any more than you do,” he says. “Please, Hana. Trust me.”

“Okay,” she finally says. “Okay. But you’re going to feel really dumb when the doctor says there’s nothing wrong.”

He breathes out on a laugh. “I hope so,” he says, starting the car.

* * *

The emergency room is almost empty, the unforgiving fluorescent lights making the waiting area seem bigger, barer. The few people waiting – Hana is thankful that she does not recognise any of them, and that none of them seem to recognise either her or Khalid – look up at them when they come in, and continue to watch, without interest, as Khalid leads her over to the receptionist.

The receptionist asks a few questions, which Khalid answers, and then, satisfied that Hana is not going to collapse in the next few minutes, gives them a few forms to fill out. The pen feels heavy and stiff in her hand as she writes down a false name, address, conscious of guilt. Then they go sit in the waiting room, carefully away from everyone else.

She goes to sleep on Khalid’s shoulder, and wakes to the gentle squeeze of the arm he has around her.

It is eleven, she notes blurrily. Her parents will be expecting her home soon.

“Our turn,” Khalid says.

She gets up with him, stumbles a little in her grogginess and mumbles a sorry to the elderly man across the aisle, who looks up briefly from his recitation of a pocket-sized Qur'an. He could be her father, Hana thinks with a pang, but refuses to let that sink in, following Khalid obediently to where the nurse is waiting for them.

The nurse draws the curtain closed around a bed and a young local female doctor – maybe in her thirties – with glasses and a brightly coloured headscarf, steps in. Her manner is brusque and efficient, but not unkind. “And you are Siti NurHana?”

Hana nods.

“It says here you have stomach pains,” the doctor – Doctor Jannah – Hana sees from her tag – says. “Are you still having them?”

“No,” Hana says. She looks at Khalid accusingly – she is starting to feel silly, and more than ever that this trip was wholly unnecessary. “They only lasted ten minutes.” Khalid takes charge.

“Doctor, can we speak to you in private please?” He glances at the nurse. The doctor looks slightly annoyed but nods curtly at the nurse, who moves silently away.

“What’s the matter?” she asks. She has an air of having heard it all before, which comforts Hana. This doctor will not be surprised at anything.

“Can you keep this confidential?”

The doctor looks impatient. “As long as you haven’t committed a crime, yes,” she says bluntly.

Hana and Khalid look at each other. Adultery and fornication is still officially a crime in Brunei, even if no one is ever prosecuted for it. Khalid leans over her, ignoring the doctor's pointed sigh, and whispers, "Do you want to tell?"

Hana looks at the doctor again, takes in the practical, trendy shoes, and says, "I'm pregnant."

"What a surprise," the doctor mumbles. Hana is almost completely certain that she is being sarcastic. She feels like a child, guiltily hiding her stolen chocolate when her mouth is smeared with it, but the doctor's flippancy also makes her feel relieved. Maybe there are some people who would not condemn, after all. "Lie down, please."

Hana lies down silently. Khalid holds her hand while the doctor asks her some questions about the pains. Finally she nods, closes the chart and says, "It doesn't sound like anything serious. There's no bleeding and the pain has stopped. I recommend that you go in for a scan – since you're about a month along you should have had one already – but it's just a precaution. Shall I schedule one for you?"

She already knows the answer, Hana can see. "It's just a precaution?"

"That's what I would think," Doctor Jannah says. "But of course the only way to be sure is to go for one. I strongly recommend it." She says the last bit with emphasis.

"We're getting married in a month," Hana says. She feels the sudden need to justify herself – them – to the doctor, whose face is still carefully neutral.

All the doctor says is, "Do you want me to schedule a scan for you?"

Khalid lets out a breath. "Can it be kept quiet?"

Hana cringes at the question. It puts everything out there on the bed between them and the doctor, in their clasped together hands. Their motives, their fear, their shame. The sordidness of it all.

The doctor shrugs. "All patient notes are confidential of course."

They look at each other. It is too risky, they both know that. The hospital is packed with potential relatives, friends, people who know their parents, know them. In the nurses, the orderlies, the patients, the doctors. Hana looks down at her stomach, still flat, at Khalid's hand around hers. "No," Khalid says.

The doctor nods curtly. "Fine," she says, with an air of, "I tried." She is not sympathetic but she is not vindictive. "But I'm going to prescribe you some vitamins that I want you to take. I can't give them to you now because the pharmacy is closed, so come back tomorrow and pick them up."

"I'll pick them up," Khalid says.

The doctor scribbles on a pad and hands the prescription to Khalid. "All done."

"Wait, doctor," Hana calls.

She turns back impatiently. "Yes?"

Hana feels foolish, intimidated. "Is there anything...we should know?"

The doctor regards both of them for a second, and something like a smile twitches at her cheeks. "They sell condoms at Guardian." She seems to regret saying it as soon as she has, and adds, more kindly, "Good luck."

Eleven

Their second check-up goes more smoothly than the first. Rijal and Mariana go in during the middle of the morning, when everyone is at work, so that they won't have to wait as long. They haven't made an appointment, but the gynaecology department is fairly quiet, with only a few heavily pregnant women waiting, looking bored as they watch a Spanish miniseries dubbed in Indonesian and subtitled in Malay. Rijal and Mariana register with the equally bored orderly at the desk, who takes an interminably slow time transcribing their names from their identity cards to his appointment book. Without a word of explanation, he gives them a small square bit of folded and refolded card with the number 76 scrawled on it.

Mariana nudges him. "I'm going to be like that in nine months," she whispers, nodding at the woman across from them.

Rijal looks at the woman, who is in her late thirties. Her face is scrubbed free of makeup and tired under a bright red floral headscarf which only accentuates her fatigue. She is dressed in a large loose dress that reaches all the way down to her flat black shoes and stretches over the huge round belly. He looks back at Mariana, who is as perfectly groomed as always, in a skin-tight black T-shirt, equally fitted jeans, and shoes that are not much more than a heel and a strap. He cannot imagine her belly ever jutting out like that. Mariana laughs. "You should see your face," she says cheerfully. She rummages in her tiny handbag. "You look like your mother."

Rijal tries to school his expression. "You seem to be getting on all right with her," he says, for lack of anything else.

Mariana shrugs. “For now.” Since they came back from their honeymoon, there has been mostly a policy of avoidance. They eat their dinner at a different time to his parents and Sufjan. “I can’t wait till we move out, though. We should really start thinking about that soon.”

“Move out?” Rijal repeats. He tries to imagine living somewhere else. It is not an unwelcome prospect, just a new one. He doesn’t even know how people go about finding places to live. “We don’t have any money.”

“Sure we do,” Mariana says. “I’m going back to work next week, and you can go work for your dad right? At Ilham? We can rent somewhere first, while we build a house. You have land right?”

“I don’t have land.”

“Yeah you do. I remember you telling me once, that your grandfather gave you all land.”

“I meant my father and his siblings. There’s no more land in that kampung.”

That gives Mariana pause. “Oh.” She comes back quickly. “That’s all right. We can buy land somewhere else.”

“With what money?” Rijal asks, genuinely baffled. He tells her that he already asked his father for a job at Ilham. “It’s not a good time. I’ve applied for a job at the ministry of education, but I don’t think it pays that much.”

“I’m sure your parents will help us out,” Mariana says breezily.

Rijal stares at her. “It’s not a good time,” he says slowly.

“I don’t mean *now*,” Mariana says laughingly. “I know the wedding must have wiped them out a little bit. But maybe in a few months.”

Rijal realises he'd not even thought about where the money for the wedding had come from. And his parents hadn't brought it up either. "How much do you think the wedding cost?" he asks her.

Mariana shrugs. "Are you asking me to guess? Maybe forty, fifty thousand? They also gave me ten thousand in cash to help with my side of things."

"You didn't tell me that."

"I thought you knew." Mariana frowns. "You didn't know?"

Rijal shakes his head. He has a disoriented feeling, like vertigo. As if things are moving too fast around him, and all he can do is just go along with the ride. He has never really thought about money before. Of course he understands that if Ilham goes bankrupt then they will have less of it, but it has never really translated into buying and selling power for him.

The wait takes forty minutes, and then a nurse strapped into a thick white suit comes out to call for number seventy-six. They have been waiting so long at that point that they have almost forgotten that that is their number and stare blankly at the nurse. Mariana gets up, tells him to hold her purse.

"Don't you want me to come in with you?" Rijal asks.

Mariana shrugs. "It's okay," she says. "You can wait here."

Used to being told what to do, Rijal stays where he is. The examination takes less than fifteen minutes, and Mariana comes out holding a fluttery white prescription.

"Everything okay?" Rijal asks.

Mariana nods. "She's just given me some special pregnant-woman vitamins to pick up from the pharmacy." She grimaces. "Another hour of waiting, I bet."

The waiting room at the pharmacy confirms Mariana's predictions. It is packed with people, despite the early hour. They go through the same rigmarole of getting a number, this time two hundred and sixteen. Rijal sighs. "Do you want me to drop you back home?" he asks Mariana. "I can wait for this."

Mariana is texting on her phone. "You sure?" she asks.

"Yes, of course. You shouldn't be waiting here for so long anyway."

Mariana accepts the special treatment gracefully. "You don't have to drop me," she says. "One of my friends works across the road, she can come pick me up and we'll have lunch. Is that okay?"

He nods, and she gives him a kiss, which causes a few heads to turn and look curiously. Such public displays are uncommon, in Brunei, and a little unseemly. Rijal cannot even remember seeing his parents ever hold hands in public. There is mild embarrassment, despite the consciousness that they are married now.

He goes to stand by one of the walls, and allows his thoughts to drift. Two hundred. Two hundred and one.

He is startled back into reality when someone bumps into him.

"Hey, sorry," the person says. It is a young man. Rijal blinks. He looks familiar. Recognition comes with full return to his surroundings.

"Khalid," he says.

Khalid looks surprised. "Hey," he says. They shake hands instead of salaming. "What are you doing here?"

Rijal gestures with the prescription. "Just picking up some vitamins for Mariana."

"She okay?"

“She’s fine,” Rijal says. “They’re for the baby.”

Khalid’s eyes widen infinitesimally and Rijal realises belatedly that no one has told Khalid. He has just assumed that everybody knows – there are few reasons that someone would pull together a wedding in two weeks. How many people has he blurted this out to? Rijal wants to laugh a little, but doesn’t think that it is appropriate. Instead, he keeps his mouth shut and allows Khalid to pull a mask of polite ignorance over his initial reaction.

“I never got to say congratulations,” Khalid manages, creditably.

Rijal smiles faintly. As far as reactions go, that is a fair one. “Thanks,” he says. “I heard that you’re thinking of tying the knot soon as well?”

“Our parents have given the go ahead,” Khalid says. “They agreed this morning.”

“Hey, that’s great,” Rijal says, pleased. “Congratulations to you as well.”

“Thanks,” Khalid says. He waves the little white bag of tablets that he is holding. “Well, I’ve got what I came for.”

“Hey -” Rijal blurts out.

Khalid raises an eyebrow under the sunglasses he is slipping down over his nose. “What’s up?”

Rijal shakes his head. “Nothing,” he says quickly. “Take care, man.”

Khalid hesitates, but clearly decides not to push it. With a wave, he is off, and Rijal bites down on his tongue, berating himself. He wouldn’t have exclaimed like that if he hadn’t been caught so off guard. The name of the pills on the bag Khalid had been holding were the same as the one that has been scribbled down by Mariana’s doctor.

It doesn't mean anything, Rijal tells himself. And he doesn't want to know, anyway. He really doesn't want to. But the sickening feeling in his stomach tells him that he already does know. What had he just been thinking? That no one tries to pull together a wedding in two weeks unless they have to.

But Khalid and Hana are cleverer than him and Mariana, he realises. They will disappear off back to England where no one will be able to tell anything. He supposes they have much more to lose than him and Mariana. Much, much more. He wonders whether Uncle Yunus and Aunty Lily know. And he wonders, when did it change? What marks the point when children start to feel the pain of their parents as keenly as their own?

* * *

Hana is listening to her parents talk, from the stairs. They are not exactly arguing, but they are not agreeing either. They are in the living room, waiting for Khalid's parents to come and discuss the upcoming wedding. Her mother is asking her father whether they are doing the right thing.

"What time are they coming?" Atul, her younger sister asks, poking her head out of her bedroom door.

"Fifteen minutes," Hana says, making a shushing motion with her hands. Atul's eyes narrow. She is fifteen now, and doesn't like being bossed around.

"Are you listening to Mama and Abah talk?"

"They're talking about me," Hana retorts.

Atul's eyes narrow even further, but she is still too much in awe of Hana to do much more than flounce back into her room. They all still look up to her, Hana knows. Parents – their own and everyone else's – are always holding her up

as an example. Her sterling academic record, the way she has never gotten into trouble at school, and has always worked hard and never rebelled – at least not openly – against their parents. Atul, Alia and Ismi are too close to her, in the way of siblings, to admire her, or admit to admiring her, on a daily basis, but it would be hard not to admire the theory of her. The Hana-in-the-abstract. They’ve been brainwashed into it, Hana thinks grimly. She wonders whether this early marriage will be something they will consider for their own futures.

“She’s still so young.” Then her mother says something that surprises Hana. She had not known that her mother thought of her this way. “She’s still so naïve.”

Naïve? Hana suppresses a laugh. She wishes she were still naïve.

“He seems like a nice young man,” her father says. “He’s got a degree. He’s going to be doing his Masters in September, and God willing, he’ll get it.”

“I don’t see why they can’t do a long engagement instead – just to see -”

“They’ve been dating for three years,” her father says gravely. “They have had plenty of time to ‘see’. How much longer do they need to prove their relationship to us? We dated for much less time than that, Lily.”

“But we were older. And we knew...we faced a lot of obstacles during our relationship.”

“And they can face them after they get married.” It sounds like her father is touching her mother, maybe hugging her.

“The first sign of trouble and they’ll regret they got married so young. And they’ll blame us.”

“Or maybe going through their troubles together will be easier, if each knows that they’re in it for the long haul. Do you think she hasn’t thought about this properly, Lily?”

“I think she only sees a happy ending. But she doesn’t know...last week they were fighting! This week they want to get married.”

“How does anybody know?” her father asks. “They’re young. They’re in love. They sat us down and told us properly. They’ve discussed this themselves. I could wish that we knew Khalid better, that I knew the man my daughter wants to marry better – but they are doing this their own way. They *have* been doing this their own way. And I would rather they were married now, rather than – off in England by themselves dating -”

That is the crux of the matter, Hana knows. Yunus wants everything to be clean and clear and lawful. For Hana and Khalid to have rights upon each other, as they do not have any now. He is worried not just for Hana’s life in the present, but in the hereafter. It is as if she is listening to Farid’s words in her father’s mouth. Whereas her mother...Hana knows her mother well enough to know that Gina is not the only protective one in the Kwang family. For her mother, the hereafter will take care of itself.

“We don’t even know him.”

“We spent a lot of time with him in England before Hana’s graduation,” her father reminds her. Some amusement seeps into his voice, a gentle irony. “And your father only met me once, on the day I asked him for his blessing to marry you.”

“And look how well that turned out,” Lily says, ambiguously.

Her father doesn't take it as the insult it sounds like. He laughs instead.
"We've done all right, haven't we, sayang?"

Hana hears Lily sigh. "But look what happened to our families..."

"Exactly," her father says, so quietly Hana has to strain to hear him. Peeking covertly over the banister, she sees him take her mother's hands. "I think we've learnt that whatever happens, it will be easier on Hana if she has our blessing."

Hana's phone goes off then, and she winces and scrambles to get it before her parents hear it and suspect that she's been listening to them. Her hopes are dashed when her mother calls up the stairs, sharply, "Hana?"

"Yes?" Hana calls back, trying to sound as innocent and unconcerned as possible.

"What are you doing up there?"

"Nothing," Hana reads the message that has just arrived. "Khalid's parents are about five minutes away."

"Okay," her mother says, coming to the stairs. "Are you ready?"

Hana nods. "But I'm not supposed to be downstairs, right?"

Her parents exchange a look. "Your father and I think it would be better if you and Khalid sat down with us," her mother says.

Hana is confused. "But that's not -" Normally the prospective bride waits upstairs while the parents agree on the bride price, length of engagement and so on.

"We want to ask you and Khalid a few questions," her father says. Like her mother, he is dressed semi-formally. Not a full-on cara melayu, but the batik

long-sleeved shirt and dress pants that says this is not a simple social call. “All together.”

* * *

The visit turns out to be surprising for Hana, for many reasons.

The first surprise is when her father draws a list of questions out of his pocket. With a sheepish grin, he admits that he’s been compiling it since the day Hana was born, for any potential suitors, although, he adds, he had not expected it to be quite so soon. This garners polite laughter from Khalid’s parents, who are dressed almost identically to her own. The scene gives Hana a warm feeling, and settles her stomach a little. That’s the nice thing about the weight of custom and tradition, she thinks. That when everyone plays their part, everyone knows exactly what is going to happen, what to do. Everyone is sure of their place. There is no room for discomfort or uncertainty.

The second surprise is that Khalid is able to answer all of his questions. How he is planning to support Hana. Financially. There is a special government allowance for married couples who are students that he has applied for. His job prospects after he gets his masters will be good, and he already has a scholarship bond with the government which means that he will be given every opportunity to work with them after he graduates. His bond is with the government, and not with a particular ministry, so he is thinking of going into the Ministry of Finance.

Spiritually. He has started attending the pre-marriage course with his kampung mosque’s imam, that are mandatory. This is another surprise to Hana. Did he mention it to her? She supposes he must have, but lately she has been tuning out whatever he says about classes, always assuming he means those study

circles that he still goes to with Farid. Khalid doesn't mention those to her father, although he does say simply that he is committed to learning more about his faith.

What does he see as his duties as husband? Khalid comes out with an answer that Hana suspects is cribbed from his notes from the pre-marriage course. To provide for Hana, as enjoined by the Prophet, peace be upon him, spiritually, emotionally and financially. To lead her in prayer and all spiritual duties, and to guard over the company she keeps. The Prophet said that the best of men, Khalid adds, is he who is best to his wife, and he will try to be the best man that he can be.

Why does he want to marry Hana? This question makes Hana's ears burn, and she shoots her father a glaring-pleading look. How embarrassing. Khalid carries off the question well, not sinking into mushiness or sentimentality, just saying that he loves her, he wants to make sure that their relationship is blessed and lawful. It is as if he is, without trying, ticking off all the boxes that her father is waiting to hear. Hana almost bursts with pride at the sight of Khalid, sitting straight and strong, comporting himself as the ideal son-in-law.

It is so much like a dream, the way she has always imagined that it would be, that she forgets, almost, that the real reason they are getting married so quickly is something else entirely.

But that's not the only reason, Hana assures herself swiftly. It's the reason that they are getting married *now*, but of course they would have ended up together anyway. She gazes at Khalid, adoringly, unashamed even in front of both their parents, to let him know how she feels. They're meant to be. Of course they are. Otherwise they never would have done it.

The final surprise is that their parents do not get along.

Hana had not thought much about it, and when she had, she had always assumed that they would. After all, look at the way they are dressed, the way they speak. They are almost identical in outlook and speech and ways, and perfectly civil to each other. But there is that tell-tale awkwardness between statement and response, a lag between remark and polite laughter. They discuss matters efficiently, but with that overly courteous deference that signals a basic lack of ability to read each other, the fear of giving offense. But it is almost the first time they've met, Hana reminds herself. They're getting to know each other. It doesn't mean they don't *like* each other.

"So does Khalid pass?" Hana whispers to her mother.

Her mother shushes her, but Hana can see a hint of a smile.

They are discussing wedding dates now. "It will have to be at least a week before they leave," Khalid's mother is saying.

"If we have your blessing," Khalid says, looking at Yunus seriously.

Yunus and Lily look at Hana. "If you're sure this is what you both want," Yunus says.

"Then we'll support you fully," Lily finishes. Everyone is looking at Hana now. She feels her stomach lurch, as if it has taken the step before she has.

"Thank you," she says to her parents. Then Khalid breaks out in a smile that matches her own. "Thank you," he repeats to her parents. "I'll take good care of her. I promise."

Twelve

The next few weeks pass in a blur of renewed wedding activity. Hana feels like her whole summer has been taken up by weddings and wedding preparations – first Rijal’s, then her own. Once they have consented, Lily and Yunus throw themselves into preparations with a vigour that reminds Hana that she is their oldest daughter, and first child to get married. Lily arranges with Gina to take the pelamin that was used for Rijal’s wedding, instead of constructing their own. Gina flings herself with enthusiasm into helping out, and Hana marvels at the girlish youthfulness with which Lily and Gina giggle and fuss over fabric and colours and catering. Her aunt’s reaction to the wedding is sweet and untypical. She melts.

“Congratulations,” she says, when Hana tells her and Sufjan over breakfast. For a moment she looks wistful. “You’re so grown-up now,” she muses, and sighs. Unexpectedly she reaches out to touch Hana’s hand. “And he’s a good boy?”

“He’s a very good boy,” Lily says.

“That’s good,” Aunty Gina says. “That’s very good. A good boy for a good girl...” Hana gets the feeling that her aunty is using the word in a very old-fashioned sense, for her gaze turns inward, even though she is looking right at Hana. “We’re all very proud of you, you know,” she tells Hana. “You’ve grown up very well.”

Even Uncle Maurice, although characteristically boisterous in his reception of the news – he laughs, jokes that Khalid must be an imam to have gotten Yunus’ approval – gives her a hug and says the same thing. They are proud of her.

News of the wedding even seems to soften her paternal relatives. When Hana goes with her father to deliver the news and wedding invitations to the huge

extended household that still lives in the house her father grew up in, she is surprised and touched by the unexpected pleasure her paternal relatives show for her, and the offer of a jongsarat for her nikah. It is brought out of a cupboard, a thick, gleaming few metres of red and silver.

Her father trails a fingertip over the fabric. “This is your grandmother’s jongsarat,” he tells Hana, and she can see that he is inexplicably moved. He nods up at a picture on the wall, an old black and white photo framed in heavy scratched gold, that is turning sepia with age. “She wore it on her nikah day.”

It is a picture of her paternal grandparents, standing together. Hana has never really looked at it before, although of course she has seen it on the rare occasions that her father brings her over – once a year at least, on the first day of Eid. Now that she does, she can see that the pattern on the jongsarat her late grandmother is wearing is the same as on the one that has been laid before her. She realises how much her father looks like her grandfather in the photo.

She touches the jongsarat. Despite the humidity, it remains cool to the touch. “Wow,” she whispers to her father.

He is still looking at the jongsarat. When she speaks, he looks up, and past her, to her grandfather, who is standing silently by the side. Their eyes meet. “Thank you,” he says.

Her grandfather says something back, gruffly. Hana has always had a hard time understanding her grandfather, because he speaks in the heavy nasal Water Village accent that her father only has traces of.

“What did he say?” she asks her father, once they are back in the car, holding the jongsarat which has been carefully wrapped and packed in tissue.

“He said that it was about time someone in my family used it.” Her father sees her face and explains, “He meant it well. I think because all of my brothers and sisters wore it on their wedding days, except for me and your mother.”

They sit there for a moment, looking at the house. It is an old wooden building, made in the traditional style, the sunken first floor with its single shallow front step, and the extensions that have become necessary with an expanding family, clearly outlined in their brick and concrete. Hana gets the feeling that her father is not seeing the building as it is now, shabby and old and a little rundown, a strange amorphous shape that is all irregular angles, but as it was when he was a child. For him, Hana knows, it is not the dark and foreign building that he comes to as a stranger, as it is for her and her sisters, but a host of memories from which he has been exiled. For Yunus, the front step, with its mosaic of tiny tiles, is not a quaint throwback, but the place where he was made to sit on a stool while his mother cut his and his siblings’ hair, letting the cuttings run into the nearby drain. One of those rooms that she has never seen used to be his, and it must be a strange sensation every time he sees an addition that he knows nothing about.

“I always thought that you’d get married here,” Yunus says. “In the old way. All of your cousins have. It’s tradition.”

Hana reaches over and touches her father’s shoulder. “It’s okay, Abah,” she says. “I’d rather get married in our own house.”

Her father turns, and smiles rather beautifully at her. “I suppose we can start our own tradition,” he says. His gaze turns to the jongsarat on her lap. “But I’m glad that you’ll be wearing your grandmother’s jongsarat. I’m very glad.”

In the flurry, it becomes easy to forget everything. Hana can see how much this wedding represents to the whole family. The new generation, beginning to take their place. The wedding, although it is much less lavish than Rijal's, is entered into with so much enthusiasm, with her at the centre of its pride, that it seems greater than the sum of its parts. It is as if all the hopes of her aunties and uncles are laid gracefully and tremulously on her wedding, a symbol that they haven't done so badly after all. That all that the Kwangs have been, and all that her father's relatives have done, have come together and will carry on, renewed. A great-aunt Jing Chew, who Hana rarely sees, sums it up the best when she pulls Hana aside secretively, gives her a red angpao of money as if she is a child, and whispers, by way of advice, "The marriage is yours, but the wedding is ours."

"Congratulations, cousin," Sufjan says, with a knowing twinkle that says, "So, you got their permission after all." Hana grins, a grin of comradeship, back at him. They have not spoken much since Rijal's wedding, and not at all about his revelation to her then. She does not know what she can say about it, although she does think about it from time to time, and in the midst of her bliss, pities her cousin and the fact that he will never have the same reception that she is having to news of her wedding.

"You'll be back for the wedding, right?" Hana asks anxiously. Sufjan is flying back to Australia that afternoon.

"I wouldn't miss your wedding," Sufjan assures her. "I've already booked a ticket for the week before."

"It's a lot of flying back and forth this month," Lily comments.

Sufjan smiles. "It's not every month both your brother and your cousin get married," he says. "So it's worth it."

“Maybe you can bring someone with you when you come back,” Lily says, too-casually. Hana knows straight away that Aunty Gina has been discussing Sufjan’s mystery girl with her. Sufjan’s phone is on silent today, but she can feel it vibrate under the table every so often. She marvels at how regularly it does. She even feels a little envy. Even Khalid doesn’t dance attendance on her like that.

Sufjan doesn’t seem fazed. “It’s the middle of the school year,” he responds smoothly. “All my friends still have classes.”

Aunty Gina looks disappointed. “That’s true,” she remarks to Lily. The sisters nod at each other in understanding. “Maybe next time, you can bring a friend.”

“A friend” is the family acronym for significant other. It is Sufjan and Hana’s turn to exchange a look of suppressed laughter.

“Maybe next time,” Sufjan agrees, but the sudden somber look in his eyes reminds Hana that there will never be a suitable time for Sufjan to bring his “friend” back to Brunei.

“How can you deal with it?” she asks him later, quietly, while their mothers settle the bill. “Knowing that you’ll never be able to bring him back here?”

Sufjan glances at their mothers, to make sure they are not nearby. “It wasn’t easy at first,” he says. “It made me angry, in the beginning, even up till I came back, to think that...what we are, will never be accepted or welcomed here. But it’s funny, once I got back here, I didn’t mind so much. It was Rijal’s wedding that really helped me make my peace with it.”

“Rijal’s wedding?”

“Yeah. It was funny, but seeing how our parents, you know, tried so hard to keep Mariana’s whole situation secret, and the lengths they went to...it wasn’t even so much that, but *why* they did it. They did it ‘cause...it still matters to them, these ideas of right and wrong. I like that. I like that this is still a place where those ideas are still important.” He adds, “Even if it means I can’t live here, and even if it’s a relief to be going back to Australia. I like knowing that there is...this...to come back to. If I ever need it. I wouldn’t want to change things. I wouldn’t want to come back here and disturb it.”

They stand in solidarity, watching their mothers perform their usual squabble over who will pay the bill, both women thrusting money at the cashier, who, used to such occurrences, simply takes the handful of money that is closest to her. “It’s good that there’s a place like this in the world,” Sufjan says.

* * *

Only a few things mar Hana’s absorption in wedding plans.

She finds Rijal at her house one day. He comes in just ahead of her, so that she catches up to him as he is knocking at her door. He doesn’t hear her coming, because of the workmen outside, who are fixing the roof and painting the house in preparation for the bersanding, which will be held at her house. At Khalid’s insistence, they are having the nikah at his kampung mosque.

“Hey,” Hana calls. She reaches past him to unlock the front door. “What are you doing here?”

They move into the house, and once the door is shut, are drowned in silence. Hana sets her bag on the coffee table by the door and adjusts her headscarf. She hasn’t seen Rijal since his wedding. She had had a bad moment

when Khalid had mentioned that he'd run into Rijal at the hospital, but after having Khalid recount everything they'd said to each other, had managed to suppress the panic she'd felt. He doesn't know anything, she assures herself now, making herself look her cousin squarely in the eye. He meets her gaze at first, then quickly looks away. But that's Rijal, she thinks, determined not to overreact.

"Your dad asked me to come over," Rijal says.

"I'm sure he's around," Hana says. Yunus' car is in the driveway. "Do you want something to drink? I'll go check and see if he's upstairs."

Her father turns out to be in the shower, and calls out that he'll be down in fifteen minutes. Hana groans inwardly, knowing that it falls to her to entertain Rijal. Her mother is out, fetching her sisters from school. Maybe she'll be back soon, Hana thinks hopefully.

Rijal is staring out the front windows when she comes back down. He declines a drink politely. She expects him to make the usual polite conversation about wedding preparations, but instead he says, "Your mango tree is giving a lot of fruit."

Hana looks out the window and sees that he is right. In all the commotion, no one has thought to go and pick the mangoes, which are heavily ripe, almost over-ripe, bursting yellow and green. "I'll let Bernie know," she says, referring to the maid, who will go out and pick them. "Do you like mangoes?"

He is still looking at them. "I like them," he says. "We have a lot of mango trees at our house, but I don't think they're flowering as much as yours." He turns to her. "Must be a good sign," he says.

"Hopefully," Hana says, with a laugh. "Normally yours are so much better than ours. Uncle Jaafar and his green thumb."

“He hasn’t had much chance to work on them recently,” Rijal says. Hana has heard that the court case is drawing to a grim close.

“Is it Ilham?”

Rijal nods. “They’re going to pass a verdict pretty soon.”

They stand in tense silence for a moment. “So,” Hana says, trying to lighten the mood. “Any advice for me on my wedding day?”

Rijal is surprised into laughing. “Advice from me? No, no.”

“Why not?” Hana says, teasingly. “After all, you just went through it.”

“If anything, I should be asking you for advice,” Rijal says. Hana stiffens, always that small feeling that he knows ready to come to the surface, and he says quickly, “You seem to have everything under control, I mean.”

Hana forces herself to relax. So what if he knows, she thinks defiantly. Of course he doesn’t, but it wouldn’t matter if he did. It’s just Rijal. He knows how to keep a secret.

“So what are you and my dad up to?” she asks, with forced cheerfulness.

Rijal avoids her gaze. “I applied for a job,” he says. “I haven’t heard back from them, but I guess your dad wants to go over the application with me.”

“Good luck with that,” Hana says. She turns in relief to see her father come down the stairs, fresh and awake. “Here he is now.”

“Thanks,” Rijal says, as she makes a move to leave. “And good luck to you too.” He hesitates. “You know, for the wedding.”

She meets his eyes, unable to contain the cold suspicion. “Thanks.” He doesn’t know, she repeats to herself. But the incident, and Rijal in general, with his applying for jobs and Mariana who is beginning to show, ever so slightly, in

her face, keep her on edge, and tie her back to the reminder of why the wedding is happening so quickly, when she would rather forget.

* * *

The other thing is that she rarely sees Khalid during the lead up to the wedding. He takes care to explain his absence to her, perhaps keeping in mind their fight, saying that he's busy with his side of the preparations, the pre-marriage course, and extra study circles. When she asks why he is going to so many extra study circles, in a tone of almost petulance, the conversation degenerates into a fight.

“We have so little time together nowadays as it is,” Hana complains, her voice tight. “I’m not asking you to skip a study circle, just asking why you can’t make as much time for me as you do for them.”

“We’re going to be spending the rest of our lives together,” Khalid replies, his voice frayed with impatience. “Can’t you be patient till then? I have a lot of obligations to fulfil before we get married – to my family, to my friends, to God –

“

“I’m really busy too,” Hana retorts, clutching the phone. That is another sore point, that they have to have this conversation over the phone. “But I’m willing to make time to see you. It just feels like you don’t want to make the effort _.”

“Effort?” Khalid almost explodes. He goes into a dangerous silence. “Everything I’m doing is for you! I’m trying to make sure that everything goes well and smoothly for *you*.”

“I’d rather you spent some time with me,” Hana says sullenly.

Khalid sounds like he's tearing his hair out. "I don't know what you want from me," he says in despair. "Can't you understand how much I'm doing for you? You *know* why I don't want to spend so much time together now, especially now!"

The thing is that Hana does know. But there is a demon in her, a demon of uncertainty which whispers to her that Khalid's growing allegiance to God is not a good thing for their relationship. So she pushes more for him to be with her, to reassure her with touch and presence, all the while knowing that the more he does, the more he turns from God. And that the further he turns...

...the more he will hate her for doing that to him when the fever passes.

They have already lapsed once. And she knows, that demon in her knows, that when it happened, a little part of Khalid hated himself for lapsing, and worse, hated her for not stopping him from lapsing. It was after the merisik, when his parents came to see hers. She'd gone out with him that night, for dinner, and to laugh, giddily, over the fact that their parents have given them permission. It is a huge weight off both their shoulders, that they will not have to confess the necessity of a quick wedding to their parents, and that they have gotten away with it. They had been celebrating, and it had been just like old times, before anything had happened.

Too much like old times. Hana had been exulting in it, the way that relief and happiness has taken the edge off Khalid's recent caution. He had held her hand all through dinner, and they had sat with their sides lightly touching. She had not realised how much she missed him, just the sheer physical contact of him. They'd gotten back to the car, parked in an unlit lot, and suddenly they'd been kissing. She had retained enough of her senses to know that Khalid would regret

this as soon as it was over, and that for his sake, she should stop it, but that demon part of her had urged her on. Let him prove he still wants you, it had whispered. At least in this way. Prove that you're not still together just because he wants to make things right. Let him want you more than he wants God. For isn't that the crux of it, that she is jealous of his relationship with God? So she had said nothing, had let him sweep her up and away as they drove somewhere private.

"It's like you don't want to help me be better," Khalid says now, desperately.

It is on the tip of her tongue to say heatedly, I don't! Later she is to wonder, if she had, would that have changed things? If she had said that, allowed the fight to escalate to explosion, and gotten all her insecurities out then. If there had been honesty between them at that moment...

But then he says, "I need you to help me. I want my future wife to be..." and her heart ices over.

"To be what?" she asks coldly. "I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment as a prospect."

He'd sighed, defeated.

They had made up. They could hardly do anything else. Hana cannot help wondering if Khalid feels the same way she does, that she, like Mariana, is trapping him into marriage. For she has the feeling that if he could, he would want to be free now, to pursue...

But he's not, she tells herself stubbornly. And they will just have to make the best of it. Still, their relationship is not what it once was, and although they make up, and Khalid is apologetic and as solicitous and sweet as it is possible to

be, it is in the back of her mind that he is doing it not out of love for her, but because it is the right thing to do. The thing that his God would want him to do.

She can't help hating Farid, at those times. And sometimes, she hates God a little bit too.

A tiny part of her wonders if she still would still want to marry Khalid, if she didn't have to. She never tries to answer the question, shoving it down underneath fabric and relatives and the busy hum of every day. She only knows that she is tired of fighting to keep him, wondering if he will stay. But there is no point in wondering these kinds of questions, she knows with a weariness that goes beyond physical fatigue. Not marrying Khalid now is not an option. So they forge on as they are, and their wedding day looms big and bright.

Thirteen

The news breaks in the week of Hana's wedding.

Rijal gets home to turmoil.

He knows instinctively there has been some new development with the Ilham case. He cannot park his car in his own garage because it is already crammed with cars he recognises as his relatives' – his father's brothers and sisters. They always drive the ten-minute walk over these days, in their big, purring cars – Mercedeses, BMWs, his own Jaguar – as if in silent, defiant solidarity, as if they are flying in the face of fate, defying court cases to tell them they are bankrupt.

He sees with some relief that Mariana's car is not there yet – he checks his phone and finds a short text from her saying she will be back after dinner, and that his mother is driving her crazy. He doesn't reply, preoccupied with imagining what has been going on. It might be good news, he tries to tell himself, but he does not think he is imagining that ominous silence in the air.

It takes him almost ten minutes to walk through to the gates of his own compound. He notices that the grass is getting long again, after the brutal and thorough trimming it received for his wedding, and the day's clothes are still hanging outside. The trees are heavy with fruit, even though these days he seldom sees his father pottering around their garden. Jaafar's green fingers are still legendary. He remembers Hana mentioning them. The mango tree that he'd admired at Hana's house – he remembers when Aunty Lily had had Jaafar over just to press the roots of that new mango tree into the ground. Every time it bears fruit, she sends over a basket of mangoes, without fail. The bougainvillea plants that Jaafar has not touched since they were planted are still flowering fiercely; and

they have new orchids by their front door, orchids which should wilt weakly in the humidity but which linger on, boldly alive, with that queer heavy scent that greets everyone who enters. Purple and white morning glory winds itself around one of the garage poles, unpruned. It has been a while since he has noticed or appreciated the beauty of this old house and its garden. They are not, he thinks ruefully, a domestic family at heart.

The front step is littered with scuffed home-slippers and sensible shoes, suggesting a family visit, rather than a function to attend, as if people just dropped by on their way back from work, and he can already hear noise from inside. He wonders if Sufjan is around. Rijal slips out of his own sandals and enters his house on silent feet. The living room is empty – strangely – save for his young cousins who are playing a game so noisily and intently on the big TV that his entrance fails to attract their attention. He glances to his right – to the shut wooden doors of the dining room and understands. This is grown-up business.

He goes to the kitchen, and says, “What’s going on? Why is everyone here?” to Aunty Melissa’s turned back.

Aunty Melissa takes her time in turning around, she always does. She is stirring what smells like stew in a bigger pot than she normally uses – to accommodate the visitors, Rijal guesses. The stove is full of pots and pans, and the rice-cooker is steaming away, indicating that the rice will soon be done. It is no wonder that the day’s clothes are still outside. “You’re home,” she says. “Where did your wife go?”

“She’s eating at her parents’ house.”

Aunty Melissa nods knowingly. “She had a fight with your mother earlier,” she says.

“Over what?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I just hear the fight, then Mariana go out. Very angry.”

Rijal knows that Aunty Melissa knows more than she is saying – Aunty Melissa knows everything – but he is more concerned with other issues to press her on this one. “Why do we have so many visitors?”

“Why ask me?” Aunty Melissa says, maddeningly. “I’m busy. You go ask your parents.”

“Aunty Melissa...”

She turns back to her stirring. “Something to do with the case,” she says. “I hear your Uncle Aaraf say they got verdict.”

Chills run up Rijal’s arms, but he shakes them off. No need to be worried just yet. “Good news or bad news?”

“I don’t know,” Aunty Melissa says. “But he doesn’t look happy.” She does not offer anything else.

Rijal stands in the kitchen uncertainly. He wants to be around when his parents come out of the dining room, so he is reluctant to go to his own. “Where’s Sufjan?”

Aunty Melissa frowns. “Your brother was in here just now.” She nods at a basket of clothes that Rijal sees for the first time. “He took in those for me. But I don’t know where he is now.”

Rijal looks with some interest at the basket of clothes. He does not remember Sufjan ever helping out with that particular chore before. But Sufjan, back for Hana’s wedding, has been exhibiting all kinds of new behaviour that Rijal had begun noticing a few weeks back. Rijal has even started to look out and

copy it, clearing away his own dishes, bringing his hamper down when it gets full instead of leaving it for Aunty Melissa to handle. They are such little things really, but they are things that Rijal has never had to think about. Through Sufjan's eyes, Rijal has seen just how old Aunty Melissa really is, a few years older than his own mother, and how the hands and arms, as strong as ever, are beginning to be more muscle and bone than flesh, under skin soft with fading elasticity.

Aunty Melissa picks up the basket. "I bring this out," she announces. "Otherwise your clothes smell of food."

Rijal wanders over to the stove, and in a bid to make himself useful, he gives the beef rendang that is simmering there a stir. There is a letter lying on the counter next to the stove, in a familiar white envelope edged with red and blue stripes. Airmail. Aunty Melissa must have gotten it today. He is staring absent-mindedly at the envelope, thinking of how she used to tell him news about her own family when his was falling apart, and jumps guiltily when she comes back in, wiping her hands on her pants.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," he says quickly, handing the stove dutifully back to her. He gestures at the envelope. "Did you get that today?"

She glances at the envelope and nods. "Yes."

He leans against the counter, watching her cook. So small and sturdy, is Aunty Melissa, closer to him than blood. She seems to get sturdier with age.

"How's your family?"

Is it his imagination, or is there the slightest of pauses before she answers? "They are all okay. My son is just got married a few months ago, they moving to Manila."

Rijal makes a noncommittal noise, only half-listening to her. He is waiting intently for a sound from the dining room.

“They ask me to come back.”

“For a holiday?”

“For permanent.”

The words take a while to register, he is so preoccupied with what is going on outside. When they do, he forgets all about the dining room and stares. “For good?”

She shrugs. “My son has a good job now, he say he can support me, no need anymore for me to work.”

Work, Rijal thinks dizzily. Yes of course. Aunty Melissa is here to work, not to – this is what she has been waiting for, of course, all the time she has been here, for a time when she can retire and let her own children support her as she has been supporting them, in absentia, all her life. “When are you going to go?”

“November, maybe,” Aunty Melissa says. “That when my contract finishes. Hey, you don’t tell your mother yet. I haven’t told her yet.”

November. Two months away. It may as well be tomorrow. “I won’t tell,” Rijal says dumbly, the old covenant of his childhood between them. Aunty Melissa going out to the post office in the middle of the afternoon for ten minutes, leaving him and Sufjan to their own devices with the not quite-request to not tell their mother. If Gina had known about Aunty Melissa’s mid-afternoon excursions, she would have been furious – what if someone had come into the house and kidnapped her children, she would have demanded. Or a fire had started, or – or any number of melodramatic suggestions which contrive to make his own home seem like a death trap in which the miracle is that they are still alive. They knew

the rules, the three of them – and none of them were in any hurry to see Gina scold Aunty Melissa. It was a strange and awkward paradigm – his mother, scolding the woman who looked after them during the day, was given full authority over them, allowed to scold them and feed them and make them do their homework. The lines of hierarchy were clear, and yet there was always that knowledge, encapsulated in “Don’t tell your mother”, that at any point, Rijal and Sufjan could upend the structure, simply by telling. An uneasy balance. And yet they never had, not even when they were the angriest, in the way of children with Aunty Melissa – for scolding them, for not getting their own way.

Rijal remembers Sufjan once, being furious with Aunty Melissa for making him do something – something stupid and inconsequential – like cleaning up his own toys or something like that, or scolding him – he doesn’t remember it fully. But he does remember Sufjan blurting out, “I’m going to tell Mama!” in his heated upset. And then Sufjan’s immediate shocked silence, as if he himself couldn’t believe that he had uttered those words, the ultimate betrayal.

He remembers himself saying, shocked, “Sufjan!” The world had tilted into a scary new place where Aunty Melissa was no longer the ruler of their small universe.

But then Aunty Melissa had retorted sharply, in her no-nonsense way, “You tell, tell lah!” and order had been restored. She had reassured them, in that swift dismissal of threat, of who was in charge, that they could never really dethrone her...

“They ask me to come home a few months ago,” Aunty Melissa says, as if she has wanted to say these things for a long time, and is relieved that it is finally coming out. “My son said, ‘No need to finish your contract.’ But I stay because I

wanted to see your wedding.” She smiles at him, and he catches the glint of gold tooth. “I’ve been with you long time, huh? Since you were born. And now you’re having your own child.” She shakes her head. “Time passes so quick.”

“Almost thirty years,” Rijal murmurs. He cannot imagine the house without Aunty Melissa.

“Long time,” she nods. “Too long, maybe. I have two new grandchildren, you know. I haven’t seen them yet. It’s good time to go back.”

“I can’t believe you’re going back.”

She looks pleased to hear him say it. He never says anything appreciative to her, Rijal realises. Just as he never says it to his own mother. There is never any need when you expect the person to be there forever. Or when the feelings go so deep that it would be strange to bring them to the surface in words.

“Maybe you come visit me sometime,” she says cheerfully. “You can come visit my new house in Manila.”

Rijal tries to give in to impulse and give her a hug, but the habits of a lifetime make him shy. He settles for leaning on her as she stirs, and she leans back on him. “I’ll come visit,” he promises.

“Food will be ready in a while,” Aunty Melissa says after a few moments, and Rijal nods. Everything is happening so fast. He lets go, glances at the dining room doors. He doesn’t have to go in, he thinks. He cannot help. He can go up to his room and pretend it is not happening. But suddenly he is walking towards them. He is no longer unsure, uncertain. He no longer belongs on this side of the door.

* * *

The wooden doors open easily, as they always have, and Rijal is greeted with a cold blast of air. His aunties and uncles glance up from around the large dining table toward the shallow staircase at the door where he stands, their expressions wary. His parents, sitting not exactly together, in chairs with a fair amount of distance between them, look at him expectantly, as if he is delivering a message. Instead he closes the door behind him and takes the few steps down the marble stairs. At this indication that he is not going away, his aunties and uncles turn back to the table, to their quiet discussion, and Rijal takes a seat next to his mother. “What’s going on?” he asks her, in a low voice.

To his surprise, and maybe to her own, she answers. Far too easily. As if all she has been waiting for is for him to ask. “We lost the case.”

She says it without particular inflection, but her cigarette carton is already on her lap, clutched like a talisman. And he can see the worry on his aunties and uncles’ faces. “What does that mean?” he hisses.

She shushes him, and he lowers his voice even further. “What does that mean?”

She spares him a brief glance, but her gaze returns swiftly to his Uncle Aaraf, the oldest of his father’s brothers, the CEO of the company, such as it is. “The judge is saying the company has to pay back all the shareholders, plus interest. The insurance won’t cover it.”

Rijal knows more than his parents think about the whole business – he has listened quietly at family gatherings over the years, and perfected the look of blind-deaf muteness as he eats, all the while his own guilt nags at him. If the accident with Sophie had not happened, he knows that things might have turned

out very differently. But it is something his parents have never said to him, or his relatives. They have always protected him. Maybe they have even forgotten.

But he never has, and he knows that this is perhaps the most devastating verdict the judge could have passed. It is the possibility that none of them have ever considered likely, dismissing it out of hand. Having to make a payout with interest will bankrupt the company, will bankrupt each of them, and they have all had faith in the smallness of Brunei, in the fact that the courtroom, the legal system is littered with their friends and relatives and in that fact, they have trusted in mercy over justice. The ties of family and friends could not possibly drop this axe –

His Uncle Aaraf is talking, outlining an appeal to the verdict, and he can already see the blooming hope in his relatives' faces, washing away the genuine disbelief that this could have happened – that people have ignored the family bond, the call on friendships and acquaintances of old, to rule against them. They are falling back into blind hope and postponement.

His Uncle Aaraf is saying not to worry, the appeal will take a while, and none of their assets can be seized until the appeal is over.

“What if we lose the appeal?” Rijal asks his mother, voice still muted.

His parents exchange a look, and his mother shakes her head at him quickly. Rijal understands that look – they will discuss it later.

The grown-ups, his relatives, are still talking, expressing their disbelief, going over how the verdict could have been dropped. Uncle Aaraf has already filed for an appeal, and they are gathering resources, Rijal understands from the conversations going around the room. Who best to try to get as judge, which of them knows anyone with pull in the Attorney-General's office.

“Tell Aunty Melissa to bring the food in,” his mother says to him, and he gets up. It seems like being a grown-up is oddly – not that different from being a child. He is still confused, and has questions which will not be answered till later. The only difference is that he is part of the secret now.

On the way out the kitchen, the front door opens and his Uncle Yunus and Aunty Lily stand there, both also in their work clothes, looking worried. “Your mother called us and told us about the verdict,” Aunty Lily says. “Where is she?”

He gestures towards the dining room. His Uncle Yunus looks at him and a smile cuts across the worry. “Why so smart, Rijal?”

Rijal feels shy. No one else has commented on his clothes. He has almost forgotten he has them on. Ha hasn’t even told anyone except Mariana where he has been today. “I went to that job interview today.”

Both Uncle Yunus and Aunty Lily exclaim in pleased approval. Rijal basks in it. It is a new and pleasant sensation. “What did they say?” Aunty Lily is asking. Rijal replies that he thinks it went all right, and that they said they would get back to him in the next couple of weeks.

“Rijal,” Aunty Lily is saying to him, “Can you go get your parents, please?”

Halfway there, his parents come out as Aunty Melissa goes into the dining room to begin serving the food, and he tells them that Uncle Yunus and Aunty Lily are here. His parents exchange another glance and together they move past the main living room, where his cousins are still playing video games, outside, onto the quiet front steps. The whole village is so quiet that you can hear sounds from the main road. No surprise, Rijal thinks. Everyone is in his dining room.

“What happened?” Aunty Lily is asking his mother, and Gina is explaining. Uncle Yunus looks grave, next to Jaafar, and Rijal notices that his father looks very old next to Uncle Yunus. Jaafar has not aged well – and he has not taken care of his health. His skin is easily wrinkled and worn, his eyes bloodshot and his teeth yellowing, gums blackened from years of chain-smoking. His movements, always quick, are jerky now, and his slouch, now that it is not crowned with a youthful face, looks more like a hunch. He looks like a man with worries.

Oh, he is still boyish, in some ways – when he smiles, even Rijal recognises the charm that his father has always been famous for; and his clothes have stayed the same throughout the years, the same limp, expensive white polo shirt – as if even his clothes find it too much of an effort to stay crisp – the long khaki shorts. But worry weighs on Jaafar, pushes him down, down down, and gravity does not sit comfortably on his features, as if he is constantly trying to push it away, as if it cannot find a place to settle on that restless face.

Yunus is talking to his father, quietly, and in the way Jaafar is looking at Yunus, with grim, trusting hope, Rijal thinks how much they all look to Yunus for help. Yunus is the rope they always come back to, in the end, to center themselves once again.

“Can you get through this?” Lily is asking Gina, sister to sister, as if they are once again teenagers weathering the storm of their father’s investments, and Rijal understands that she does not mean the “you” of their whole family, but the “you” of the four of them, Gina, Jaafar, Rijal and Sufjan...

“We’ve managed to put some away,” Gina is saying, Jaafar nodding in the background, “but I don’t know how much, whether it is enough –“

The front door opens with a slam, and Mariana comes out to joining them, in a whirl of cold air, and a peeved set to her painted lips.

“What’s going on?” she demands as soon as she sees Rijal. Belatedly, he sees that her car is parked behind his own, with typical disregard for how anyone will move their cars out later.

No one answers her at once. They all instinctively look to Gina, who ignores Mariana and carries on talking to Lily. “Some family stuff,” Rijal says finally. They are all very aware that Mariana has never been told anything about Ilham’s troubles. No one outside the family ever has been.

“Well, I’m family, aren’t I?” Mariana says, and her voice is too-loud in the empty afternoon.

Everyone except for Gina looks uncomfortable. Rijal tries to catch his mother’s eye, realises he is waiting for a permission that he doesn’t need. But before he can speak, his mother, who is watching to Mariana, speaks for him. Her voice, when it comes, is weary. “You might as well tell her everything,” she says to Rijal. “It’s going to be in all the newspapers tomorrow anyway.”

Rijal nods. “Let me know if anything else comes up,” he says to his mother. He feels like he is taking a step forward as he says it. Perhaps it is time for him, like Mariana, to become a full part of the family.

* * *

“What is going on?” Mariana demands, as soon as they are safely ensconced in his room. She looks aggrieved. “When I leave the house earlier, there’s no one around. I come back, and there’s a million people in the house and no one wants to tell me anything?”

“I’m going to now,” Rijal says patiently. Something occurs to him. “What were you fighting with my mother about earlier anyway?”

Mariana waves a hand. “Who knows? I was saying something about moving out, and she laughed.” She frowns. “I think your mother still thinks you’re a kid.”

“You talked to my mother about moving out?”

“You weren’t talking to her about it,” Mariana retorts. “And I don’t want to live here forever. Anyway, that’s beside the point. What’s going on downstairs? What’s the big hush-hush secret?”

He sits down with Mariana on the bed. And tells her, very simply, that Ilham is in big trouble. It is collapsing as they speak. There won’t be enough left of his grandfather’s legacy tomorrow to fill a teacup.

Mariana listens, her mouth agape and her eyes getting bigger and bigger. “There’s nothing left?”

“Nothing,” he affirms.

“But what about the appeal? You mentioned an appeal?”

“Even if we win that, we won’t win anything back,” Rijal says. “Our credibility is gone. No one’s going to trust us to handle their money. And the government certainly won’t. The best that will happen is that we will have enough not to go stone broke.”

Mariana cannot believe it. “But surely it’s not that bad, right?” she says quickly. “You say it’s been coming for a long time. Surely your family has been putting money away for this, right?”

How to tell her that none of them believed it would ever happen? And to take precautionary measures would have been like admitting defeat? How to tell

Mariana that the big cars outside, their lavish lifestyles – they are shows of defiance, of confidence in themselves, a desperate defense against fate. It can't happen if we don't acknowledge it's happening. All Rijal can do is shrug. Now that it is too late, he can see clearly his own entanglement in the determined bubble his family has created. All of them have been stuck in limbo for the last ten years, afraid to change anything for fear of plunging over the verge of the unknown. Well, now the worst has happened.

“Nothing?” Mariana whispers. Rijal thinks of the shabby house she comes from, the ambition that has always fuelled Mariana's brightness. She has married into less than where she came from.

“Nothing.”

“Who's Henry?” Mariana asks unexpectedly.

Rijal jolts. “What?”

“Who's Henry,” Mariana repeats. She is watching him now. “I overheard your Uncle Aaraf talking about him to your parents.”

“What were they saying?” Rijal whispers. He clears his throat. He had not thought his parents would ever talk about Uncle Henry. He had just assumed that the blanket silence that they preserve on that subject with him was impenetrable.

“Your uncle was saying that if he had just stepped in ten years ago as agreed, they wouldn't be in this mess now. Then your mother went mad and snapped that Henry could go to hell, they didn't need his help.”

There is a huge hollow in Rijal. “He was - he is an uncle of mine on my mother's side.”

“And?”

“And nothing,” Rijal says. “He was supposed to help out with capital ten years ago, to pay off the investors then and hush the whole thing up. But because he pulled out, Ilham wasn’t able to raise the money. Which led to the court proceedings.”

Then the question he dreads. “Why did he pull out?”

He’s never had to talk about it before. He feels like he’s been waiting his whole life for someone to ask this of him. Surprisingly, his voice is steady. His words are steadier. “You don’t know my family on my mother’s side very well, do you?”

Mariana shakes her head. “Except for your Uncle Yunus and Aunt Lily. But your mother has another brother, right? Martin?”

“Maurice,” Rijal corrects. “And Henry. Henry...used to have a daughter my age. Her name was Sophie.”

“What does this have to do with –“

“Just listen.” And she does, she sits and listens to him. He has never spoken this story out loud before, never had anyone who hasn’t heard it free of tints and hues from whispers, gossip, relatives.

“When I was eighteen, I went to Malaysia for a holiday. My parents went to arrange the capital with Uncle Henry. I was out with Sophie and her boyfriend – we’d been drinking. There was an accident. Both Sophie and her boyfriend passed away.”

“And?” Mariana prompts. Without knowing it, he has fallen silent, memory racing to catch up with word.

“I’d been driving, so Uncle Henry blamed me.”

“What happened?”

He tells her what the police told him. They'd been in a race. The road was empty. He hadn't crashed into anyone, or swerved to avoid an animal. Nothing like that. The car had simply spun out of control. He had lost control of the car. Something to do with the brakes, with friction and gas, and the car had flipped. It had been a new car. No one knows what happened.

"He was right to blame me," Rijal says, quietly.

"So he didn't help Ilham."

"He didn't help Ilham." Rijal rises, fumbles in his desk for a cigarette he desperately needs. "So I guess that's my fault too."

"Give me one," Mariana says.

Rijal is about to hand her one when he remembers. "Are you sure? Isn't it bad for the baby?"

"One won't hurt." When he hesitates, she takes it, lights it herself. Inhales deeply. "It's hardly your fault," she says impatiently. "They can't have been depending on just one person to raise all that money. It doesn't sound like your family is very good with back-up plans."

Later on, Rijal will wonder about the truthfulness of that, but at the moment, he is glad enough that she is not condemning him, and not disposed to worry about whether she is simply reassuring him for the sake of it. He watches as she strides to the window, opens it to puff out. He used to do that too, as a teenager, before he realised that he didn't really care very much whether his parents knew he smoked.

"This isn't what I thought I'd married into," Mariana says, her back to him.

Rijal feels incredibly alone. He is drained, from telling the story that has always been kept close, like a secret. “I know,” he says. He is so tired. “But it can’t be changed now, can it?” It is on the tip of his tongue to offer her a divorce once everything is settled with the baby, and he is surprised to find out that, after all, he does not want to let her go. He no longer cares whether she got pregnant on purpose, to trap him into marriage or not. She makes things happen, and he is so tired of being still.

Then she spins around and surprises him with her next words.

“No,” she agrees. “But we’ll have to change our plans.”

With those few words, Mariana carves a new future for them, and leaves him speechless.

“What else is there to do?” she asks. Incredibly, she smiles, and it is a smile that glitters with determination. “I should have known you were too good to be true. I’m used to working for everything I’ve got. Why should this be any different?”

“I’m sorry,” he says.

She tosses her hair. “What’s there to be sorry about?” and he sees that for Mariana, there is no such thing as regret, only regrouping. “This marriage was as much my doing as it was yours. I probably would have found it boring to be rich and leisurely, anyway.”

He can only watch, amazed, as she insists they go downstairs, where they find that everyone has left, and his parents are alone in the wreckage of the dining room.

“I know everything now,” Mariana says without preamble. She doesn’t wait for his parents to speak, which is probably just as well, for they simply look

at her. "I guess this is why you were so snippy about us moving out," she says to Gina. For the first time, she seems like Gina's equal.

"Well, we won't," Mariana says. "I'm going back to work next week, and Rijal had a job interview today -" he sees his parents' surprise at that "- and we'll start helping out with the bills around here once we start getting paychecks -"

"There's no need for that," his mother says stiffly. "We can take care of -"

Mariana regards her mother-in-law. Maybe she recognises the fierce pride and protectiveness that even now, his mother cannot let go of, for she says, with more tact than Rijal would have given her credit for, "It's not about need. We should start helping out around here. You've done a lot for us. And we're not children."

"I'm used to cranky family," she says later, when Rijal asks her about it. "Besides, you don't think my parents were too pleased when I wanted to become a stewardess, do you?"

He'd never thought about it before. He knows most Bruneians think of stewardesses as, at best, aspiring mistresses and at worst, in-flight prostitutes, but he's never given much thought to how or why Mariana became one.

She laughs at him. "They weren't," she says, good-naturedly. It occurs to Rijal that Mariana might be relieved at the way things are now. Before this, it was a tacit consensus that she was marrying up. But the way things are now...

"At least you got a title out of marrying me," he says.

"Mmm-hmm," Mariana says sleepily. "Me and the baby."

Rijal goes to sleep that night with the feeling that things are definitely changing.

Fourteen

Hana runs into Farid the day before the wedding.

It is entirely accidental, and wholly unwelcome. She is out picking up a few hundred wooden sticks to be bundled into confections of boiled eggs and plastic flowers and netting, and she turns around at, “Hana!”

She puts a smile on her face which is hard to maintain once she sees who it is. “Hi,” she says unenthusiastically.

He doesn’t seem to notice her decided lack of excitement at seeing him, and says, “Hi!” He must assume that since he is such good friends with Khalid, that he is also good friends with her, by proxy, she thinks with resentment. He picks up a ball of netting which has fallen from her laden arms. “Stuff for the wedding?”

“Yes,” she says. “Here, you can give that to me. I’m just going to go pay now.”

It is meant as a polite dismissal, but he holds on to it. “It’s okay, I can help you carry some of that.” Before she can protest, he is relieving her of her handful of items and walking with her to the cash register.

There is nothing forward about his attentions, nothing overenthusiastic or eager. He is just genuinely glad to see her, and she feels ashamed for being so cold. “You’re coming tomorrow?” she asks. The nikah is usually only for family, but Khalid has told her that several of his “brothers” will be in attendance. He will be coming by her house to pick her up, and both families will be going to the mosque together from there.

“Yes, insyaAllah,” he says warmly. “I’m very excited.” The desultory salesgirl finally rouses herself to start tagging Hana’s items, staring just over her shoulder as if she isn’t there.

“Great.”

He stands by her, looking as if he is trying to make up his mind about something. “Farid?”

It is the first time she has said his name, and it seem to jar him out of his indecision. “I want to tell you something,” he says in a rush.

Hana squirms inwardly. Whatever it is, from the determined glint in his eye, she has a feeling she does not want to hear it. But she is trapped while the salesgirl places her items carefully into a plastic bag. Not for the first time, Hana wishes that she was in England, where she would be free to shove her things into a bag at speed. “Umm hmm,” she says, hoping that her tone will discourage him.

“I really admire you and Khalid,” he says, unexpectedly.

Her eyebrows shoot up. What’s that now?”

He nods, reading her look of disbelief correctly. “I do,” he says. “I’m sure you’ve seen how much Khalid has changed these last couple of months.”

“Yes,” she mutters.

He is going on. “It’s been incredible. I really admire him for having the guts to change so much,” he adds shyly, “I’m also so happy that you two are getting married before you leave. You know, a lot of people think that hanging out with the study circle guys -”

“- brothers -”

He chuckles. “Yeah, brothers, we don’t approve of dating before marriage and all, so they don’t want to know about it. But Khalid – wow. As soon as he

realised that dating before marriage was wrong, he made the decision to get married. I tell you, the brothers are really impressed with him.”

Hana stares. It seems Khalid has not been entirely open with his “brothers”. She can’t help the bitter quirk of her lips which Farid evidently mistakes for a smile. “So, we all look up to you guys,” he says. He ducks his head. “We all want to follow your example. We’ll all be praying for a long and happy marriage for you.”

It can’t hurt to have that many prayers on their side, Hana reflects, feeling very old and cynical. “We appreciate it,” she says.

They are at her car now, and Farid gives her the bag. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says. “I bet you have a lot to do tonight.”

Hana smiles tightly. “Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

Once she is in the car, she allows herself another derisive smile, but there is some genuine relief mixed in there as well. She explores her feelings. Yes, she is relieved, she realizes. To know that Khalid has been hiding his sins and follies – she thinks of that dark night after their parents had given their permission – from his brothers, makes her feel, funnily enough, closer to him than she has. It is good to know that she is not the only one with secrets in the relationship, who is worried about putting up that front as the perfect couple.

You try to be good, she thinks, starting the engine, but sometimes your sins come to light anyway.

* * *

It is as if her thoughts are so bad that they spawn turmoil in her own body. Hana is having her makeup done that night, when the pains start.

She is in the living room, having her hands painted with henna while testing out her makeup artist, a ruthlessly trendy young man who her father looked at askance when he walked in the door, hair flamboyantly styled, jeans far too tight, holding a toolbox filled with cosmetics. He is Filipino and is openly effeminate.

“I want to look natural,” Hana had said firmly to him at the beginning of the session. She has seen far too many pictures of brides attempting to achieve the coveted fair skin by putting on foundation several shades whiter than they are in real life, with spider-leg eyelashes and determinedly contoured noses, unrecognisable except as burlesques of themselves.

“Natural?” he had replied, holding a brush ready. “You don’t want putih-putih is it?” No white-white?

“No putih-putih,” she had repeated. “As natural as possible.”

He had gone to work then, layer after layer of powder dusting her face, the cool creaming of liquid foundation across her skin soothing and methodical. One of her cousins – on her father’s side – is doing her inai, carefully squeezing dark maroon curves of henna in an elaborate geometrical design of flowers and circles on the backs of her hands. They are talking to each other, her cousin and the makeup artist, so Hana does not have to pay any but the vaguest of attention to what is going on. The smell of Vicks from the henna is giving her a headache, and the soft, sweet used scent of the makeup sticks the artist – Gen – is using makes her dizzy. She gratefully closes her eyes when he tells her to, so he can sweep more coloured dust on her eyelids, followed by the sure touch of eyeliner.

She does not feel very well. Her limbs are hot and cold, as if she is having a fever, and the tips of her fingers are numb. Her uterus is aching like it does

when she has her period, and there is an ominous hint of coming nausea. She wonders if she is coming down with a fever. Later she is to wonder how she managed to blind herself to what was really happening. Whether the pretense had gone so deep that she herself had started to believe in her own innocence.

“Your hands are cold,” her cousin remarks – she cannot quite remember her name, it is something like Aisyah or Nisa; her father reminded her earlier, but she cannot recall it now – looking at her, concerned. “Are you cold?”

“A little bit,” she murmurs. “Can we switch off the air con?”

The rest of the people in the living room – from her father’s side of the family, people she does not really know, but who volunteered to come and help – look up when Aisyah/Nisa switches off the air conditioning, but say nothing. They are busy wrapping preparing the traditional wedding favours, freshly boiled eggs in delicate mesh folds tied to wooden sticks decorated with silk and gauze flowers. The flowers will go in the stiff white paper bags in which are also small rattan boxes filled with traditional kuih, little glass trinkets, cheap pretty prayer beads. Hana picked out the gifts herself, and the colours, gold and white, with her mother.

The relief from the air conditioning being switched off is immediate. Without the fan being switched on, the still humidity swamps the room as condensation appears in a moist blanket on the windows and over the tiled floor. Warmth trickles back into her veins and Hana shivers a little in reaction. “Thanks,” she says to Aisyah, gratefully. Aisyah smiles and starts on her left hand. The henna on her right is ripe and shiny. “How long until it dries?” Hana asks.

Aisyah inspects her work critically. “Maybe an hour and a half,” she says. “Then we’ll squeeze lemon juice on it to make the colour brighter.”

“An hour and a half,” Hana repeats. “What if I have to go to the toilet?”

Aisyah looks alarmed, half-laughing. “No toilet till we’re done,” she says.

“I have to go soon,” Hana says. She doesn’t feel well at all.

Aisyah is concerned. “I’ll be quick.”

She is interminably slow. Hana doesn’t blame her – the intricate half-circles need precision, but she is very tempted to say the hell with it and go to the toilet anyway.

She tries to get her mind off the sickening roiling of her stomach, and think of something else. Everything about the wedding tomorrow gives her a headache – the details yet to be worked out, the timing of when Khalid’s family will come over with the hantaran, the wedding presents for her, the incomplete state of her gifts to him which will complete her dowry; they are lying in a heap of uncut gauze in the corner, so she thinks determinedly of something else. Now that it is so close, even thinking about the wedding adds to the nausea, the anxious feeling that she just wants it to be over and done with. They are so close, she thinks desperately, so close to fixing everything. To making everything right so that when her relatives congratulate her after the wedding, and look at her with that hope and pride, it will be truth instead of farce.

Her eyes fall on her little sisters. Atul and Alia are helping to wrap, Atul sighing with teenage wistfulness over all the pretty things. Ismi is watching, open-mouthed as the makeup artist draws on her face. They look so young to Hana. She never has very much time for her little sisters – they are so much younger that their lives have developed fairly independently of her own, but their little foibles and personalities are not unknown to her. Atul, especially, makes her both uneasy and competitive. Her sister is growing fast into adulthood, and she watches Hana with eyes that are assessing and resentful in equal measure. Resentful because she

knows that this is the standard against which she will be measured, assessing because she is determined, in all the headstrong nature of adolescent youth, to surpass and excel.

“Ismi, do you want to get your makeup done too?” Hana asks her little sister.

Ismi looks shy. She comes close to Hana. “Can you do my little sisters tomorrow as well?” Hana asks Gen.

“Of course,” he proclaims brightly. “No problem. Extra fifty dollars, I do your whole family. Wow, so pretty one ah. The whole family so good-looking. You all mixed is it?”

“Our mother is Chinese,” Hana says, used to the question.

Gen’s eyebrows rise. “Chinese?” he finds Lily in the midst of the chaos and goes, “Oh. I see. The one in the blue tudong is it? I thought she was Malay.”

“Chinese.”

“Oh. Convert when she marry your father is it?” His accent is a grating mix of Tagalog and American that makes his every question seem impertinent.

It is always a point of interest, Hana knows, even now, twenty, thirty years later. Even now that mixed marriages are becoming more common and are far from the taboo that they once were. Some people still frown on them, but they are the ones who have carefully preserved their bloodlines, all the way back to the bloodthirsty Malay pirates who first came to Borneo island.

Her cramps are faint and pulsing. It is not so much pain as it is an extreme discomfort, an aching restlessness in her limbs. Another hour, she can hold out for that long. A happy memory. She thinks of the first time she and Khalid made love.

A quiet winter day. It was during the holidays, so all her housemates are away, exploring Europe. They'd been making lunch, watching TV. They'd both known it was going to happen, eventually. Without saying anything about it, they'd both declined the Europe trip in order to be alone.

She loses herself in the memory, of Khalid leading her upstairs into her own bedroom, of his lavishness with soft words of love, forever, the touch of his skin against hers. It is new and thrilling, it is old and familiar and beloved. It is perfectly right. Remembering it, she falls in love again, with that Khalid, who knew exactly how to move her. He merges with this new Khalid, who hurts her with his lack of understanding. But they are the same, and her heart aches with it. Neither of them have talked about the wedding night, but she misses the old Khalid suddenly and strongly. She misses the way he used to touch her, without guilt or weight. This will be a new beginning for them, she thinks, with a fresh burst of hope. They will have it all.

The melancholy and the vertigo persists until she is released from the ministrations of her cousin and Gen. It is almost a let down when she finally escapes to the bathroom and there is no sign of anything wrong. She sits on the toilet for a few minutes, but nothing happens. She washes her hands and hesitates. She does not want to go back downstairs, to the hive of activity. Instead she goes to sit in her parents' room – her own is filled with wrappers and gauze and baskets of eggs and clothing everywhere.

She finds her father sitting on the balcony. She crosses the room quietly – he does not hear her until she is sitting next to him on the balcony, on the soft rattan chair he favours. “Hana,” he says with sweet surprise. “Are they finished downstairs?”

Her father has mostly kept out of the way of the wedding preparations downstairs – leaving it to the women. He has wandered in and out, helping with the setting up of the camps outside for the next day, where all the guests will sit. Cleaning the drains, cutting the grass, setting up extension cords for the outdoor fans. He looks like he has just taken a shower, dressed simply in old *cara melayu* trousers of faded blue satin and a white T-shirt. He is holding a Qur'an in his lap, and wearing a small white *topi* on his damp hair, that means he has just finished praying.

“Not quite yet,” Hana says. On impulse, she holds out her hands for his inspection. The henna has set, is brightly orange-red against her fair skin. “What do you think?”

It is partly a teasing question – her father has never understood the ways of females, despite being the only male in a house full of them. He dutifully goes out to buy them sanitary napkins and waits patiently as they deliberate, her and her mother and sisters, over shampoos in the grocery store, drops them off at the hair salon and wanders around the mall until they are done. When they go to fabric shops, he follows her mother obediently, but his mind is clearly elsewhere, helpless in the face of all the patterns and flowers. Sometimes he buys them fabric as presents, but his taste runs invariably towards garish, bold swirls of fabric which Hana and Lily inwardly shudder at. Hana thinks that maybe he is picking out patterns which remind him of his own mother, for she vaguely recalls, that her *Nini bini* used to wear such patterns at Eid.

Her father looks at her hands gravely. “Very nice,” he says, politely. “Very pretty.”

Her father's vocabulary of compliments doesn't run much further than that. Hana hides a smile and stares off into the night with him. There are a few stars, pinpoints of flashing gold in the deep blue-black sky. The world seems very big, and the lights that come from downstairs seem to fight valiantly against its bigness.

It is warm, and she feels her bones slide into place, almost reluctantly. It has been a long day. The discomfort in her body has subsided a little. She touches the Qur'an in her father's hands, notices that he is almost at the end. "Are you almost finished?"

"I wanted to khatam – to finish - tomorrow." He adds, "I forgot to ask you to do it. It's supposed to be good to khatam on your wedding day."

"I didn't know." She doubts she would have done it anyway – she has not picked up her father's Holy Book for years.

He repeats, "I forgot to ask you to do it. So I thought I'd do it for you."

She is touched. "I didn't know you could do that."

"You can't, really," he says, and suddenly his face is tired. "But I thought I'd try anyway."

He is always trying, her father, to walk the straight path for her. He does not know how far she has strayed. "Thank you," she says. The words are rusty on her tongue. How long has it been since she said those words to her father? Her mother? She will ask their forgiveness tomorrow, she determines, then and there. Just like she and her sisters do on the first day of the New Year, Aidilfitri. Before she passes from their hands to Khalid's, she will ask their forgiveness.

It is his turn to touch the hand she has left on the Qur'an. "I want your marriage to be blessed," he says simply.

“Like yours and Mama’s.”

He smiles. “Like mine and Mama’s.”

“Did you khatam on your wedding day?” She realises afresh that her parents never had a wedding like this. The rest of her relatives have let free with laughing, teasing comparisons to their own weddings, but not her own parents.

Her father shakes his head. “No,” he says softly. He seems sad at the thought. Not for the first time, Hana gets a glimpse into how lonely her father’s road has been. She has no doubt that her parents love each other – that has never been in question. But on matters of faith, her father has always stood alone. Lily has always supported him, enforced the rules that he has laid down gently, followed in his footsteps and agreed with everything he has said. But a follower is not the same as a partner.

When Yunus prays, he prays alone.

But her parents have made a good marriage of it, Hana tells herself. She tries to make a joke out of it now. “And you and Mama were blessed anyway.” She pats her father’s hand. “Hopefully me and Khalid will be too.”

They sit there for a while, then her father opens the Qur’an and starts reading. His voice is low and sure over the cadences of the Arabic whose rhythms are as familiar to her as Malay, but which she has never understood. Those rhythms now seem to blend in with the night, to echo a pattern in the universe that she cannot hear, only feel.

A few more hours, she thinks. That is all. A few more hours, and it will be lawful, and lies will have turned into truths.

Fifteen

She never remembers what happens herself. But this is what Khalid tells her.

He had come to the house with his contingent, already anxious. Her parents have texted him that she is refusing to come out of the bathroom. She does not remember this at all, and can only wonder at how terrified she must have been. He had to push through a crowd, past the beginning murmurs of curiosity and alarm. He had seen himself in the windows, and had been shocked by how grim and angry he had looked. He'd tried to school his face into a more neutral pose, one that seems more appropriate to the white *cara melayu* he is wearing, in an attempt to quell the insidious wave of rumours already beginning.

There had been a clutch of people – her relatives - gathered around the bottom of the stairs, and his contingent, including his parents, tactfully stay there as well, allowing him to go up alone. As soon as he had taken the first three steps – three at a time – out of the corner of his eye he saw the graceful bunches of white lace and flowers which decorate the railings, reminding him it is his wedding day - the noise had immediately dropped away.

Upstairs, everything had been quiet.

Her sisters had been standing at the top of the stairs. “Where is she?” he had asked, careful to keep his voice low so it didn't carry. They look at him distrustfully, but point towards their parents' bedroom. They are all dressed identically, in beige fabric that shimmers gold. They all have hints of Hana about them, in their big eyes, their smooth skin, their makeup carefully and playfully done. They are dolls, they are ciphers.

He had moved swiftly into the bedroom and found his future parents-in-law waiting anxiously outside what he had assumed is their bathroom. Relief had flooded their faces when they saw him. They, too, had already been dressed for the ceremony, both in the same beige-gold as their daughters, to set off the white of his and Hana's nikah costumes. "What's wrong?" he had asked.

"We don't know," Lily had said, her brow compressed in worry. "She just keeps asking for you."

That's when he had heard her. "Is that him?" A thin, strained voice from the bathroom. His heart had clenched helplessly. "Is that Khalid?"

"He's here now, lai," Yunus had called through the bathroom door. He had never heard Yunus use that endearment before.

Then he had heard the lock being pushed open. "He can come in." Then, as if already regretting it, fearful, "But only him!"

He had moved next to the door. "Just me," he had promised, so frightened. "Can I come in?"

Her parents had waited behind him. Lily had been squeezing Yunus' hand tightly. They had been worried, unsure what was going on.

He had waited for her to say, faintly, "Yes," before pushing the door open. Too far, he had realised, too late. The door had opened to show him Hana, sitting on the toilet, her face pinched in fear and pain. She had been wearing her nikah clothes, pure white, spread like a cloud around her. Her face already made-up, ruined by streaks of tears, her veil askew on her perfectly covered head. She had moaned when she saw him. "Don't open it all the way!" she had cried.

Too late, it had been too late. The door had swung open and all three of them had seen her. In an instant, it hadn't seemed to matter, any more. They all saw the blood. So much blood.

Hana had reached for him. "I'm bleeding," she had whispered, like a child.

Lily and Yunus had still been confused, and scared. "What's going on?" Yunus had asked, his voice angry, terrified.

Khalid had lifted Hana into his arms. She had closed her eyes, unable to look at her parents, maybe in a faint. "Call an ambulance," was all he had said.

It had come out, somehow, on the ride in the ambulance, as he had been sitting there watching helplessly while the paramedics worked on her. He had not been able to watch what they did, had only been able to hold her hand by her side. He could not say, afterwards, what words left his lips as he sat there with his fiancée's parents, but he knows that it came out, somehow. He had been too tired, and too scared, to worry about the consequences. He had only known that the time had come to tell the truth. There had been no choice about it, then.

Yunus and Lily had been silent, they hadn't asked any questions, hadn't looked at him accusingly. Their entire focus had been on the unconscious Hana. Their faces had seemed alike, wracked in grief intermingled with worry and fear. They had grasped each other's hand the whole time, and he had become burningly conscious of his own grip on Hana's hand, and how presumptuous and dirty it must have seemed to her parents.

* * *

When Hana wakes up, he is still by her side, on one side of the bed, Lily and Yunus on the other. They had cut her out of her nikah baju, but there are still

faint traces of makeup on her worn face, and her hair still holds some suggestion of the hairspray from that morning.

She licks her lips, hesitantly, and croaks for some water, her eyes disoriented, too tired to have any expression. She takes him in, then her parents, and closes and opens her eyes a few times, already defeated. “What happened?” she asks him, simply, her voice dry and cracked.

“You had a miscarriage,” he tells her, and waits for her eyes to dart to her parents in shock that he would mention it, the baby, the pregnancy, in front of them. He holds her hand in his, so cold. Her eyes remain on him and she sighs.

“You know, then,” she says, still not looking at her parents.

“I had to tell them in the ambulance,” he says, beyond apologies and explanations.

Hana cries then. Neither of them know what she is crying for – their lost child, her lost secret, their wedding day in tatters. Maybe it is all of those and more. He is too drained, too numb to comfort her. All he can do is sit there and hold her hand and hope it is enough. He does not have any words left.

* * *

The doctors insist she remain under observation for almost a week, and during that time, Hana has very few visitors, although lots of flowers and cards. She asks her mother how they explained her sudden collapse, and Lily replies that they just told everyone they weren’t sure what had happened. No one really pressed for details, Lily adds. Hana knows that the missing details will be speculated on endlessly.

Her grandparents come, all the way from Malaysia, to visit, as do her Uncle Jaafar and Aunty Gina. Her grandparents do not know what happened – she is able to explain it away in too-fluent lies of the doctors are still figuring it out, but it's nothing serious, while her mother stands silent. Her Uncle Jaafar and Aunty Gina come and ask her how she is doing, and leave a ridiculously expensive floral and fruit affair. Rijal and Sufjan come, to say hello and look awkward; she cannot help remembering that Rijal already knows, of course, and Sufjan leaves, sweetly, a little prayer book that surprises her.

In between, there are times of quiet.

She is lying, tired – she always seems to be tired, and sleepy, these days – and half-dozing, half-dreaming. It is late afternoon; she can tell from the window across the ward. The ward is quiet – most of the other patients are taking a nap while their families, like her father is doing now, read by their side.

It is just her and her father, now. Lily has gone home to rest for a while, and take a shower. Khalid is coming back in a few hours – he is sorting out some things, cancelling their bersanding ceremonies, calling caterers and things like that.

She is restless, despite her sleepiness. Her father looks up from his reading of the newspaper to ask, “Do you want some water?”

She shakes her head. He says, “Just let me know if you want anything,” and goes back to reading the newspaper. There is a line between his eyebrows that she has never seen before. She focuses her gaze on the front page of the newspaper; there is something about a royal visit to some kind of fishery accompanied by a blurry colour picture, and then there is an article about a raid on illegal foreign workers.

The words speak themselves. “Are you angry with me?”

For a moment she thinks her father is going to ignore her – he freezes, his eyes trained on the newspaper as if something vitally important is going on that he is afraid he will miss if he blinks. She thinks he is going to pretend he has not heard her, and keep reading. Instead he lowers the newspaper and looks in her direction – not quite at her, but in her general direction.

“I’m not angry,” he says, very gently.

“Are you disappointed?”

This time he does look at her, searchingly, as if to figure out why she would ask something like that. She does not flinch under his gaze, although it takes a lot of strength not to do so, to keep her own eyes steady under his. Her father is looking at her in a way she half-recognises. It is the way he looks at her and her sisters when they are doing something female and feminine; like blow-drying their hair, choosing bracelets and necklaces. He is puzzled, he does not understand. There is a crucial difference this time, though – and it takes her the length of his stare to pinpoint the difference.

There is no indulgence in his gaze. He is not looking at her as a father. He is looking at her as if she is an adult and a stranger, someone completely separate from him. He is holding her at arms’ length to get perspective. He is seeing her as someone responsible for her own actions, and it grieves him, she knows without him saying it, that her actions have been so flawed and faulty.

“You don’t have to answer to me,” he says at last, his voice low.

The words hit her with the force of a heavy stone. Yes I do, she wants to say. You are the only one I have to answer to, you and Mama. If I don’t answer to you, then it’s all been for nothing. Now, as her father pushes away her worship, she recognises her faith for what it is. Her parents are her gods. Their approval is

the altar at which she worships. No more, no less. It is not even a monogamous idolatry, for always in the back of her mind is Khalid, and what they will do now.

“I’m sorry,” she says, pleading.

He covers her hand with his own, but there is still that confusion in his eyes. He doesn’t know how to feel yet, she thinks. “Do you still love me?”

“I will love you no matter what you do,” he says. She cannot bear for him to look so sad when he says that.

* * *

Yunus cedes his place to Khalid when he arrives. He makes an excuse about wanting to get coffee, but is not quick enough to avoid seeing his daughter’s fiancé slide into his chair, his place, more easily than he is comfortable with.

Lily finds him in the hospital canteen when she comes. He is sitting staring at a long-cooled plastic cup of coffee, black. He had not even the heart or will to ask for milk or sugar. The newspaper lies forgotten on the table. “Yunus,” she says, coming to him. She kisses him on the top of his head, lightly, comforting. Her eyes look straight into his, those clear dark eyes that see things he does not understand.

She is fresh and refreshed, and looks, as usual, far more youthful than her age, despite the red lipstick that he always tells her she does not need but which she insists on. It is the only way in which she looks like her family, to him – Gina uses the same red lipstick, a bold statement to the world. She smells far too clean to be in the canteen, and looking at her causes that old, familiar heart wrench. He often wonders what message God is trying to send to him in this woman he loves more than is wise.

She sits across from him and he reaches for her hand, despite his unwillingness to touch her cleanliness with his grimy, hospital-stained self. He needs to touch her, to reassure himself – of what, he too, does not know yet.

O Allah, he prays, for what seems like the thousandth, the millionth time in the five days Hana has been in the hospital. Ease my heart. Help me to understand. Give me the strength and the constancy to get through this. Help me to do the right thing.

“How are the girls?” he asks.

She squeezes his hand, sure and reassuring. “They’re fine. Aunty Melissa is looking after them, and Sufjan is staying at the house tonight.”

“He’s a good boy,” Yunus murmurs. Or is he, he thinks suddenly, bitterly. He doesn’t seem to be very good at spotting the good and the bad anymore.

He feels very tired. “I see children like this all the time,” he says to Lily, staring down at her fair hands on the cheap, scarred linoleum tabletop. He does not have to explain what “this” means. “I help children like this all the time. How could I not have seen that Hana – could I have done something?”

“It’s not your fault,” Lily says, calm. He looks at her and he sees the bottomless well of empathy in her eyes. Lily understands, he sees. She aches because he is aching, but it is as if she is not surprised by what has happened. Has she been able to see all this time?

“Isn’t it?” he asks, wretchedly. “Whose fault is it, if not mine?”

“It’s not about fault, anymore.” She says, gently. “What’s done is done. Does it matter who is to blame? Can we even say anyone is to blame? It happened.”

“It happened,” he echoes.

“You know how these things happen,” Lily says, her voice softly, relentlessly pragmatic.

He nods, but does not have the energy to do anything else.

“You should go home and get some rest,” Lily says. “Check on the children. I’ll stay with Hana tonight.”

He remains where he is, his bones so heavy and old. “Khalid is with her.”

“He isn’t allowed to stay the night, you know that. Only family is.”

“It’s not like they have obeyed the rules before.”

“Yunus,” Lily says, firmly. “Go home. Rest.” She stands, tugs on his hand. “You’ll feel better in the morning.”

He stands. “Really?”

“Yes,” she promises. “You’ll see. But go home. Take a shower. Pray.”

Yunus closes his eyes briefly, leans over to give her a kiss, to rest his face against hers for a while, just a little while. It feels like he has been tugging along in life for a very long time, and he just wants to rest a while.

* * *

The house is asleep when Yunus gets home.

He closes the front door behind him quietly, although he knows that nothing short of a hurricane would wake his daughters when they are fast asleep – it is a fact which relieves and terrifies him, visions of intruders murdering them in cold blood in their beds, and them never able to wake up or scream before it is too late. His other daughters have not been told what has been going on with Hana. All they know is that she fell ill on her wedding day. Yunus doesn’t think they

will ever tell them. He cannot bear to take their respect for their sister away from them. Our addition to the family coffer of secrets, he thinks.

He has taken only a couple of steps towards the stairs when Sufjan comes cautiously out of the living room.

“Uncle,” Sufjan says, “You’re back. I thought you’d be staying the night at the hospital.”

Seeing Sufjan in his pyjamas brings on a wave of love, despite the heartsickness. Clean and fresh, just like he used to look when he lived with them during the years of Gina and Jaafar’s troubles. Yet it is not the same. Yunus knows that, and can feel grief. Years have passed, and he no longer sees Sufjan except rarely – at family functions, maybe once or twice a year. He keeps up with what Sufjan is doing, and knows that Sufjan is in his final year of university in Melbourne, and will be graduating in a few months, but that is all – he no longer knows where Sufjan is every day, what his plans are, his hopes and goals. He loves the boy as he does the stars, or the night sky – with no understanding or expectation.

“Did I wake you?”

“No, I was reading,” Sufjan says. “Are you back for the night? Shall I go home?”

Always so polite – both Rijal and Sufjan have such beautiful manners. Sufjan especially, for all the time he spent at their house when he was younger, never forgot that he was a guest. He would never ask for anything, or complain as Hana did when Yunus had to pick them up late from school. He would nod politely – Yunus had always thought it was manners, those lovely manners taught

to them by Gina and Jafar, but perhaps it is more that that, perhaps it is something in Sufjan himself.

“No, it’s late,” Yunus says. “You shouldn’t drive back when it’s so late.”

Sufjan smiles. “I’m usually out later than this in Australia. I don’t mind.”

“I do,” Yunus says firmly. “Stay, you can sleep in your old room.” He rotates his shoulders slightly to get the kinks out, and sees Sufjan’s eyes narrow in concern. To deflect any expressions of sympathy – he cannot take any more sympathy tonight - he says quickly, “What were you reading?”

Sufjan understands. When did he learn to read people like that, from whom did he learn the bottomless compassion that Yunus can see in his eyes? “The Qur’an.”

Yunus glances at the book Sufjan is holding, in surprise. “Can I see?”

Sufjan passes him the book, and the small shock of surprise kicks again. It is a good tafsir, a reputable translation of the Qur’an. The pages are marked with Sufjan’s small, elongated handwriting, and looks well-thumbed. “Which one were you reading?”

“The story of Prophet Lot,” he says. It is Sufjan’s turn to change the subject. “How is Hana?”

“Lot,” Yunus says in wonder, ignoring the question. A story of divine punishment visited on earth. It seems fitting. He looks at Sufjan, really looks at him. It is a night of surprises, it seems. “She’s doing okay. Recovering.”

“Good,” Sufjan says. He seems to be debating internally whether to say something, but caution wins out. “That’s good.”

“I’m going to make a hot drink before I go up,” Yunus says. He does not want Sufjan to go. He is reluctant, he discovers, to be alone with his God. “Do you want one?”

Sufjan shakes his head. “No, thank you.” Reluctantly, Yunus starts moving towards the kitchen. “Uncle?”

“Yes?”

Sufjan glances at him. “Truly with difficulty comes ease,” he quotes, and nods. “Good night,” he repeats, and disappears before Yunus can say anything.

* * *

Sufjan comes to see her.

“Uncle Yunus is sending the girls to school,” he tells Lily as he slides gracefully into the seat she gives up with a yawn. “He’ll be by later. I can stay with Hana till then.”

“So,” Hana says, when they are alone. “What is the family saying about this?”

“Your parents actually did a good job keeping it quiet,” Sufjan remarks, picking up the newspaper left behind. “I don’t think anyone knows. The current rumour going around is that you’re dying from some wasting disease, which is why you and Khalid wanted to get married so quickly.”

“To give me a few months of happiness before I faded away into the sunset?”

“Something like that.” Sufjan smiles at her. “But it’s better they think that than -”

“Than what really happened,” Hana finishes. She picks restlessly at the nubby hospital covers. She can hardly bring herself to meet Sufjan’s eyes. “Is my dad really upset?”

“Does he seem upset?”

“He seems off,” Hana says. “But he wouldn’t show it to me, of course. Not now.” She sighs. “Your parents know?”

Sufjan nods and forces her to look at him. “Yeah,” he says gently. Then more jokingly, “At least we have some dirt on your family now, huh? It feels like it’s always been the other way around.”

Hana cannot seem to stop her hands from picking at the bedsheet.

“So, did you hear that Rijal has a job now?” Sufjan asks.

Hana knows that this is a ploy to change the subject, but she is intrigued despite herself. “No, really?”

Sufjan nods. “He’s been going to work every day for a week. It’s crazy. He had to borrow a bunch of ties from your father.”

“Doesn’t your father have any ties?”

“He doesn’t wear a tie when he goes to work.” Sufjan chuckles. “He had to show Rijal how to put it on.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. Rijal doesn’t talk much about it, but I don’t think he hates it. I think he’s pretty pleased to be contributing, to be honest. It’s good for him. Gets him out of himself. He’s been too...inward, since Sophie. Mariana’s going back to work, too. She’s flying out to Singapore tonight. No long-haul flights, though. And she’ll have to stop in a few months, you know, because of the baby. But

they've arranged that she'll be put on ground duty then, so she'll still be working." Sufjan adds, "I guess I'll have to get a job in Australia, just to keep up."

How are your parents dealing with the Ilham thing?" she nods at the newspaper, where details of the collapse have been ongoing.

Sufjan shakes his head. "They're still trying to appeal, but I don't think they have much hope, to be honest." He reaches over to still her hands. "The money is tied up at the moment, but we've lost everything. My parents have already paid my tuition fees for the year, so I'll be able to finish my degree. After that...who knows? Maybe I'll get a job in Australia. Then I'll have an excuse to stay..."

"What are your parents going to do?"

"They're a bit shell-shocked, but they'll bounce back." Sufjan grins. "The good thing is that Mariana and my mother have stopped fighting so much, and they've found out that they actually have a lot in common. They were even talking about new business ventures the other day. Who knows what will happen with that."

"How's Mariana?"

"She's good. She's showing a little now. I was teasing her - told her she'll have to stop wearing such tight tops in a few weeks, and she hit me."

Hana swallows. "She's showing?"

"Just a little." Sufjan's expression softens. "Hey. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you – are you sad you lost it?"

She tells him the truth – she has nothing to hide from Sufjan. That is the comfort of talking to a fellow sinner, she thinks. You don't have to pretend to be better than you are. "No."

"That's good," he murmurs. "You're still really young. You're going to have lots more chances. You know that, right?"

He doesn't say *insyaAllah*, as her father, or Khalid would have done, always afraid to state certainties, knowing they are so dependent. How easy it would be to be Sufjan, she thinks, and not to weigh everything with God. To see happiness as a choice and not a bonus.

She tells him that she is not sad that she lost the baby. "I think we're not ready for it. You know the bad thing? I'm not sad over that, but I am that people found out about it."

"That's not a bad thing," Sufjan says, and she can see he understands. "This is Brunei."

"Khalid hasn't come by for two days," she admits to him. She has not said it to her parents, lying – even now, lying – that Khalid is busy and sends his regards, but the truth is that although he texts her to ask if she is doing okay, he scrupulously avoids her questions. She is too proud, she has discovered, to ask him more, but inwardly she is a mess.

"He's busy, huh?"

"He's avoiding me."

"No," he soothes. "Of course he isn't."

She had thought she wanted the comfort of lies, but she finds she cannot bear it, after all.

Sixteen

Rijal is at the hospital doing his medical check-up for work when he bumps into Khalid.

Khalid is feeding a coin ineffectually into a vending machine when he spots Rijal. “Hey,” he calls, flagging him down. “Do you have fifty cents? Stupid machine won’t take my money.”

Rijal fumbles around and hands Khalid fifty cents. He waits while Khalid gets his drink and pops the can open immediately, drinking what must be half of it down in one gulp.

“Thanks,” Khalid says, swiping at his mouth. He looks hot, his shirtsleeves rolled up and open at the neck. “I was at the ministry,” he says by way of explanation. “Couldn’t find any shady spots to park – the car was sweltering when I got into it, and I think the air con isn’t working too well, I’ll have to take it in to be serviced.”

Rijal is thrown off-center by Khalid’s sudden chattiness; they have not exchanged more than a couple of sentences since Khalid’s inclusion into the family. “What are you doing here?” he asks, choosing to ignore everything that Khalid has just said.

Khalid looks at him a little askew, cocking his head. “Hana’s being discharged today,” he says, pressing the cold tin can against his cheek. “Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“She is?” Rijal shakes his head. “That’s good.”

“So why are you here?” Khalid persists. It is, Rijal reflects wryly, a far cry from the last time he ran into Khalid. He wonders if he is supposed to know about why Hana is in the hospital or not. No one has actually come out and said why

exactly Hana is in the hospital, only that it was some sort of collapse, but Rijal has spent a lifetime around aunts and uncles who glean whole narratives from snippets of one-sided conversations, and apparently he has picked up the skill by osmosis. He made a fairly educated guess from things whispered from his mother to his Aunt Lily, from his own knowledge of Khalid and Hana in the hospital right before their wedding.

Rijal gestures at the sheaf of papers neatly bound together that he is holding. “Medical check for work,” he says. “Tell Hana I said hi, though. I’m sure my parents will drop by the house later if they can.”

Khalid doesn’t seem to want to take the hint, and walks with Rijal. “What do you have to do next?”

“Give some blood.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

“You don’t have to,” Rijal says hurriedly. He can think of few things worse than the awkwardness of having to make conversation with his cousin’s fiancé. “It’s right there.”

Khalid ignores this. “It’s on the way,” he says instead.

They walk the short way in silence until Khalid breaks it with, “So, how’s work going?”

Rijal takes pity on Khalid and responds agreeably that work is going well. He tells Khalid a little bit about his work, but does not tell him how satisfying the systematic, monotonous nature of the work he does is. There is a pride, at the end of the day, in knowing that – no matter how tedious and minute, and sometimes even, it feels, irrelevant, his work is – he has done it, he has accomplished it, and he has done it well. It feels like a new world.

“How are you finding the hours?” Khalid asks.

Rijal is confused by this question – the hours are eight-thirty to four-thirty, just as they are for all government workers – until he realises that it is not Khalid the acquaintance who is asking him, but Khalid his cousin’s fiancé, someone who has heard all about his track record, or lack of one. The familiarity, and the assumption behind it, galls him. “They’re fine,” he says, shortly. “Normal hours.”

Khalid seems to realise his gaffe and backtracks. “Just wondering,” he says, hurriedly, “because obviously I’ve never worked in Brunei before –“

No, he hasn’t, Rijal thinks, but the cases are very different. Khalid has never worked in Brunei because he has been studying overseas for the last however many years. But when he does return, it will be to much fanfare and a steady job waiting for him. The future ahead of Khalid spreads wide and shining with success, before he has even stepped on it.

But he doesn’t need that, Rijal realises suddenly. It doesn’t matter if his greatest ambition is mediocrity. At least he has some ambition now. He thinks with some surprise of the years he spent trying to keep the future from happening. It happened anyway. He would not go back to that. Mediocrity is – it is enough. It is more than enough.

He hands his card in to the small blue box in front of a mechanical male nurse, and sits down. Khalid lingers, looking as if he is not quite sure where to put his arms and legs, but eventually he sits down. “I’ll wait with you for a while,” he offers.

Rijal nods. He can’t bring himself to turn Khalid away.

They sit in silence for a while, and Rijal is just starting to relax into it, thinking that Khalid is going to pretend to be as absorbed in the dubbed cartoon that is on TV as he is, when Khalid says, awkwardly, “So, how are you, Rijal?”

Rijal draws on manners and says, “I’m fine, Khalid.”

“Are you really?” Khalid persists, and that is when Rijal realises Khalid is not just trading pleasantries.

He looks at Khalid, who looks right back at him. For the first time, Rijal notices the worry on Khalid’s face, and how young the uncertain mouth and scrunched-up forehead makes him look, and realises that Khalid is scared.

“I’m fine,” Rijal says more gently. He cannot pinpoint exactly what Khalid is scared of, but he can guess that it has something to do with the way Khalid is avoiding going to see Hana, and his need to know if Rijal is fine. Rijal feels his way through his next few words cautiously, as if he is moving very carefully through a crowded room in the dark. “Mariana is in her third month now, you know. She’s doing well.”

Khalid seems to relax, ever so slightly, but the restless tension is still thrumming through him, and he throws back the last of his soft drink and then methodically starts to crush it inwards. “That’s good,” he says, lamely. “Third month? Is she starting to show yet?”

Rijal laughs, and feels as if he is dealing with a shy child. “She started using her bump as an excuse to go shopping a week ago.”

Khalid nods, his hands still squeezed tightly around the hapless aluminium can. “You did the right thing,” he says, but it sounds like a question. “Marrying her. Right?”

The picture is coming in clearer to Rijal, and he is not sure he likes the way it is turning out to be. He has not spared much thought for either his cousin or Khalid, but he realises now that when he did, he always assumed that they were handling matters a lot better than him and Mariana. For one, no one seemed to know about Hana's pregnancy, and Khalid never displayed any worry, or let anything slip under the confident, easygoing demeanor he normally has. It is as if he is seeing Khalid all over again, and in an instant, Khalid's normal stoicism is gone. Khalid is asking him for reassurance, but Rijal does not know how to reassure when the stakes are so high. He had nothing to lose in marrying Mariana – and Khalid has the world in front of him. He honestly doesn't know whether Khalid is doing the right thing. Whether Hana is doing the right thing. Rijal knows that he himself would probably not have still married Mariana if the baby had been taken out of the picture, but that was because Mariana and he had not had the kind of relationship that Hana and Khalid had had –

Or had they? Rijal feels as if he is at the edge of something – the boundaries of right and wrong and reality, and instead of getting clearer, everything is getting darker and lighter at the same time, shadows sharpening into technicolour blackness. He has always assumed, in fact, that Hana and Khalid are spheres and galaxies away from him and Mariana, orbiting a different world, but what if, in fact, they're not? What if Hana and Khalid are exactly like him and Mariana, only shaded by their ability to keep a secret –

He cannot deal with that now, and he does not know, he does not want the responsibility of answering the question he knows Khalid is really asking. *Am I doing the right thing?* So he answers the question he hears, as honestly as he can.

“I did the right thing,” Rijal says, cautiously. And even he is surprised by how certain, and grown-up his voice sounds. As if he has taken the confidence Khalid has shed, and is wearing it on adult shoulders. He can understand now that Khalid doesn’t want the specific, he wants the general. He wants a universal dictum of truth, some kind of code of conduct that Rijal simply cannot, is not equipped, to give him. We all have to find our own way, he thinks.

Khalid nods again, and his mouth seems to firm in resolve. “Thanks, Rijal,” he says, and gets up, finally. “Good luck getting your blood taken.”

Rijal grimaces in response, and that brings the tiniest of smiles to Khalid’s face, the handsome young face that Rijal always saw as so remote, but now sees as just that – handsome and young. Khalid doesn’t know what he’s doing. None of them do.

* * *

Once Hana is back home, she does not see Khalid for three days.

She calls him a few times, but he does not pick up the phone, texting back only that he’s sorry, he was busy when she called. He makes no offer to call back, or to come over. It is the longest time they have ever gone without speaking since they got together.

Her parents won’t let her leave the house, citing doctor’s orders, and when they ask where Khalid is, and when he’s coming over, she lies that he’s busy, and pretends that everything is okay. Her pride takes a severe bruising over those three days.

He comes on the fourth day, not with flowers, as she’d expected, but with a paler face than normal. Otherwise, he looks just as he always does, and she hates

him for that, for looking as if he has done nothing wrong, when she has been waiting for him, restless and unable to stop worrying. She hates herself even more for being so weakly happy to see him, despite the anger.

He comes after Lily and Yunus have left for the day, so the house is empty except for the maid. Despite that, Hana leads him into the living room rather than the bedroom to talk. Khalid seems relieved at that as well, which makes the hate in Hana grow a little bit more.

“Where have you been?” she asks bluntly, as soon as they have sat down.

Khalid looks uneasy, and does not answer, not straight away. “How are you feeling?” he asks in return.

“I’m fine,” Hana says. Not that you care, she wants to add, wants to fling his absence in his face. The broken pride, the worry and the hurt all add to the rage. Inexplicably she wants to cry.

“Are you sure?” Khalid asks. “You’re completely recovered?”

“I’m. Fine.” Hana repeats.

Khalid nods. “Alhamdulillah.”

Hana flinches at the religiosity of the phrase. They sit there in silence for a while.

“I’m sorry I haven’t come by, or called,” Khalid says, at last. She is fiercely glad to see that he looks miserable. “I was thinking things over.”

“What things?”

“Us,” he says simply, and she is suddenly very afraid. She wants to stop him there, to take his hands, the way they always do when they are fighting, a link to keep them together even as their words take them apart, but she cannot. She simply cannot – something stops her, something about Khalid’s misery, some last

vestige of her own pride, stops her from reaching out. She is frightened at this – the space between them seems insurmountable. He cannot be – he won't say it.

“What about us?” she asks, in a low voice, the anger gone. There is only numbness and a dread that grows.

“I think we should talk about us.”

“What about us?” she repeats.

“I've been thinking about where we should go from here,” he says. He glances up at her from his propped hands, but she can only wait. “What the right thing to do is. What – have you been thinking about this?”

“I think you've already decided for the both of us,” she says dully.

He shakes his head with a sudden vigour. “I haven't,” he says. “I don't know what the right thing to do is. And there's no one...I can ask.”

He is as cut off from his brothers as she is from him. One last risk, then. She lays her pride in front of him. Her last offering, a desperate attempt on the altar. “I still want to get married.”

He doesn't look at her. “We don't have to.”

Bitterness. “*You* don't have to,” she bites out. She flings out her arms. “You haven't lost anything. A boy who has lost his virginity and repents isn't a bad boy – he's just a good boy who's lost his way. A girl – a girl who has lost her virginity has lost everything. No one else will want me now.” Her future, crashing away. Is this all their relationship has become, an attempt at respectability?

“I'm not saying I won't marry you,” he says, with, of all emotions, annoyance. She does not remember Khalid ever being annoyed with her before. Angry, yes, impatient, yes. But annoyance...it is an emotion of indifference, and it chills her.

“Do you still love me?”

“I don’t think you’re good for me,” he says, as simple as that. Lily’s words come back to her. *Our power and responsibility as women*. She has failed at her duty. She can tell it costs Khalid to say the words...for all his quiet, Khalid still loves her. It lifts her, gives her a bit of hope, even as his words hurt her unbearably. They are perhaps the most hurtful things he could say to her. She is not good for anyone. She is not even good.

“So you don’t love me anymore,” she goads.

“I don’t want to love you.”

Her eyes fill as suddenly and sharply as a pinch. “I see.”

“But I want to do the right thing,” he finishes. He finally looks at her. His eyes are filled with pleading. “I’ll leave this decision to you,” he says, and she can see the whiteness around his mouth and eyes. He wants her to let him off the hook, she realises, and her mouth tastes like dust. “If you think that the right thing to do is for us to get married, then I will.”

“I don’t want you like this,” she almost says, but some deeper part of her holds her back, calculating. Khalid is trapped by his own morals, and she holds the key.

“I talked to Farid before our wedding,” she says, only vaguely realising what she is saying. “He said that your brothers look up to us, for getting married, you know?”

That hits him, she sees. She can practically see him falling into the trap that she only recently recognised as her own. He wants, desperately, to be the kind of person that his brothers would look up to. So she feels no guilt when she says that they should still get married. They should try again to turn the lie into truth.

* * *

Yunus finds the jongsarat lent to him by his father hanging forgotten in the closet. He had hung it there, he remembers, to take to the mosque that morning for Hana to put on, because it is too heavy and uncomfortable to wear for the ride over. He touches the fabric. *Flowers in a Mirrored Lake*. It is perhaps the most valuable possession of his family that he remembers growing up. An heirloom from his great-grandmother, who had been a jongsarat weaver. It has been a long time since he has gone hungry or fought for his father's attention amidst his nine siblings, but the jongsarat seems even more valuable to his eyes now than it did to the young boy who sucked in his breath when his mother showed it to him for the first time.

He should give it back, he supposes heavily. There is no need for it now. He had been so moved, he remembers, as if it was a very long time ago, when his father had offered it for Hana's wedding. Maybe he can understand his father a little bit better now, and his father's betrayal when he married Lily. He has never been able to regret that decision, but he can mourn, now, all that he gave up.

"Why am I so angry?" he asks Lily, as she comes silently up behind him. She has noticed, he knows, the fact that although he has not neglected his prayers, he no longer lingers on the mat. "It's not like I haven't seen this all before. And I've always been able to put it aside."

"You're not angry at Hana," she says. "You're angry because you don't think it's fair that your daughter, who you thought was your reward, has just turned out to be another test."

He forgets to breathe. Even now, she can surprise him, with how well she has followed his thoughts. “Yes,” he whispers.

She watches him with those steady eyes. “You forgot that she’s only human, Yunus.”

“No,” he denies, shaking his head. “I never forgot that.”

“You forgot that you’re only human,” she persists. “And that this life on this earth isn’t always fair. There is no such thing as heaven on earth.”

He closes his eyes. “How did I not see? Was I deliberately blind? Have I been blind about everything?”

“No,” she says, so tenderly that he wants to lean on her and weep.

“I must have been.”

“She made a mistake, Yunus.”

“And she lied to us about it.”

“Isn’t that part of the mistake? Isn’t it better that she did? Would you have preferred it if she had come to us, without shame, instead of respecting you and your values so much that she tried to hide it?”

“I have to give this back to my father.”

She watches him pack the jongsarat, with careful, shaking hands, and lets him leave.

* * *

His father is alone in the front room. The house is not empty, Yunus knows – he can hear the faint sounds of someone in the kitchen, and movements in the bedrooms upstairs, but for now his father is alone, reading the newspaper. He looks up, surprised to see Yunus.

“How’s your daughter?” he asks, once they have greeted each other. “Is she recovering?”

“She was discharged today,” Yunus tells him.

“That’s good,” his father says.

Yunus sets the package down next to him. “What’s that?”

“It’s the jongsarat,” he says. “We won’t be needing it any more.”

“She’s not getting married any more?”

Yunus thinks of Hana, and how Khalid hasn’t come to visit. “We’re not sure, yet.”

“Keep it,” his father says. “Just in case.” He adds, “We can always come get it if we need it.” He picks the package up and pushes it insistently into Yunus’ hands. “Keep it.”

His father is getting upset, and Yunus swiftly takes the package. “All right,” he says. “Just in case.”

“Good,” his father says, and he looks so old that Yunus has a brief pang. Maybe his father, too, has regrets over things he has done. Unbidden, for the first time in many, many years, he sits down on the sofa he remembers from his childhood. The other pieces are long gone, save this sofa.

“How are you, Abah?”

“I hope she gets a chance to use the jongsarat,” his father answers, apropos of nothing. “She looks like your mother, you know.”

No, he doesn’t know. Nothing about Hana’s features suggests his mother to him, but he does not think it is the time to argue with his father. “They all do,” his father says wearily, gesturing. “All the grandchildren. There’s something of your mother in all of them.”

It is the most his father has spoken to him in years. “Blood tells.”

“It does,” his father agrees.

They sit in silence then, for a while, then his father begins talking to him. Telling him, in stilted sentences, the family news. Nephews he doesn't know, aunties who have passed. And at the end of it, when his older sister comes out of the kitchen to tell his father that there is food if he's hungry, and Yunus gets up to go, his father says to him, “You should come by more often.”

Yunus nods, and bends down to kiss his father's hand.

Seventeen

A year later

They are all at Farid's wedding.

After taking the obligatory picture with the happy couple, Hana and Khalid move out of the way and escape back to Uncle Jaafar's house. Khalid wants to watch for a little while, so they stand on Uncle Jaafar's marble front steps in their stockings and watch the festivities.

It is just after noon, and the festivities, although big – Farid's family, which is also Rijal and Sufjan's family, is extensive, and Hana understands from Khalid that the girl's family is equally large – are nowhere near as lavish as Rijal's one had been. Bigger than their own, though, Hana thinks, and enough time has gone by that almost all the bittersweetness of their own wedding has faded away. A quick mosque nikah, and no reception, using the excuse that they had no time to rearrange one, with their having to fly to England to do their Masters so soon after. They will be celebrating their first anniversary in a few days, and some relatives have been nudging them to have their belated reception then, but Khalid has flatly refused. He has done that a lot over the last year, Hana thinks, drawn lines in black and white, as if to make up for that time when he couldn't tell what was grey, and had to leave it to her.

It has not been an unhappy marriage, so far, but nothing like she had once imagined it would be like. They have had good times, almost like old times. They know too much of each other not to rub along comfortably enough. They share too many secrets for them to be anything but family. If it is not the bliss that she had dreamed of, if there are sometimes silences over things they cannot talk about, if Khalid sometimes disappears for weekends to attend study circles with his

brothers – well, he always tells her he is going. He always tells her when he will be back. And he treats her as carefully and kindly as she could wish. If the declarations of love are gone, at least it has been replaced with deferential kindness.

“They look good,” Khalid says now. She inspects the bride and groom. The bride is not pretty, but she is pleasant looking, and her face is now wreathed in dimpled smiles. Farid is not having any success hiding his ecstasy, and they cannot seem to stop touching each other, the hands always held, proudly.

“They look happy,” she says.

“They didn’t even date, you know,” Khalid says, wonderingly.

She knows. He has told her. But she lets him say it again, knowing that he is still, after all this time, envious. “They arranged everything through their parents. Today is the first time that they’ll be alone together.”

“It’s good,” she says, gently. She has become used to that yearning regret, that occasional guilt. She used to get annoyed by it, wondering why he wasn’t able to let it go. Whether they would always have the past yoked to them. She asked him once whether he didn’t think that God would forgive them both. Whether he didn’t believe in divine mercy. He had said that he knows God is forgiving, but that he doesn’t want to forgive himself, or to forget. He never wants to make the same mistake again.

Khalid nods. “It’s good.” His hand finds hers. “I haven’t been the best husband to you, have I, Hana?”

She is taken aback. “Can’t complain,” she says, trying to lighten his mood.

He shakes his head. “I’ve been angry with you for so long,” he says.

He has never admitted it, even when she can see him chafe at the bonds they have placed on each other. They are both so young, she thinks. "Because I made you marry me."

"Yes." He turns her palm into his, touches it with an affection that she had forgotten.

"But it was the right thing to do," he says now, and something of the old Khalid comes into his eyes.

She is afraid to hope. "Was it?"

"It was," he says. "I was wrong to try...I thought you were bad for me. But then I was too cowardly to face that it was my own weakness that I was afraid of, when it came to you." He leans his face against hers. "You know I love you?"

"I haven't heard it for a while."

He hugs her. "We will never have the beginning that Farid and Dina have," he says. "But we can try to have the same ending."

* * *

Yunus watches his oldest daughter laugh over a plate of food with her husband. He has missed her, he thinks. During the last year. When she left, things had not been easy between them. They had not spoken of it, but there had been a discomfort, and on his part, a disillusionment that he doesn't think will ever go away. He has channelled his worry on to his other daughters, become more watchful. He is never sure of himself any more.

"Have you eaten?" Lily asks, coming to him.

She has been a rock in the last year, the one who had patiently kept lines of communication open between him and Hana when he would fall into silence,

and who keeps him from being overprotective when Atul announces that she wants to go out with her friends. Atul is sitting for her O'Levels this year and part of him prays that she will not do well, so that he will have her for another two years, at least. To watch over.

“I'm not hungry,” he says.

Sufjan comes by. His sinjang is long gone, and his songkok, if he had been wearing one at the beginning of the day, is similarly lost. He seems to get taller and tanner every time he comes back from Australia on holiday, Yunus marvels. He is always alone, though, even though both Gina and Lily have been plaguing him to bring his girlfriend back with him. He always replies that they'll meet her when they go visit him in Australia. It is his way, he has confided in Yunus, of gradually bringing his parents around to the fact that he is applying for Australian permanent residency. Although he is sad to think that Sufjan will be making his home so far away from them, Yunus understands that Sufjan does not have a future in Brunei. Not now, with Ilham long gone and carefully forgotten.

“The food is excellent,” he says. “It's not Aunty Melissa's cooking, but it's still good.”

“It must be strange not having her around,” Lily remarks. “How's the new maid working out?”

“Megawati? She's all right. She's not used to doing things my mother's way, so my mother's been going a bit crazy trying to train her. After thirty years, you know – but I suppose it keeps life interesting for Mama.”

“I think life is interesting enough for your mother with her new business,” Lily says dryly.

Sufjan laughs. “They’re not doing badly,” he says cheerfully. “They’re in debt, of course, but Mariana says that’s normal for a business in its first year. And it keeps them busy. Especially my father.”

“He complains that he hasn’t gotten paid in a while,” Rijal says. He, like Sufjan, also looks taller, despite that permanent hunch and the paleness of his skin. He holds in his arms three-month-old Nurul Sofya, who Lily immediately gravitates to.

“He doesn’t do much,” Sufjan replies. “Makes the occasional delivery.”

“Not for that,” Rijal says. “He says Mariana should pay him for being a baby-sitter.”

Lily gives the baby to Yunus, who cuddles it close. She is beautiful, he thinks admiringly. He feels a melting inside him. She is fighting the air, and he gives her a finger to play with, which she attacks ferociously. Little Nurul Sofya.

“Any siblings on the way?” Lily is asking Rijal.

Rijal laughs, and Yunus marvels again, at how much more easily it comes to Rijal these days. Fatherhood has been good to Rijal. He has stuck to his job at the ministry, and has been, Gina tells them proudly, studying on the side as well, in hopes of a promotion. Of course, she had added, he has to study, because Mariana keeps on him. That had been said with a hint of satisfaction. Yunus suspects that Gina is, after all, glad that Mariana has turned out the way she has. Rijal and Mariana have been talking about wanting their own place, but Gina has told Lily secretly that they are thinking of just extending the current house, so that they can keep staying together. Otherwise the house is too quiet, she had said.

“Maybe,” Rijal says mysteriously. Lily’s eyes widen.

“What?”

“Rijal!” Mariana complains, pinching him. She has not lost all the baby weight, but it sits well on her. “You’re going to start off all sorts of rumours. We’re trying,” she tells Lily. “That’s all.”

“Yes,” Jaafar says with satisfaction, appearing and taking Nurul Sofya from Yunus. “You want lots of siblings to play with, don’t you?” he coos. “So that Nini doesn’t have to entertain you all day.”

“Nini loves entertaining him all day,” Sufjan murmurs to Yunus.

“Jaafar, your brother is looking for you,” Gina calls from the front door. Unlike Jaafar, she refuses to be called Nini, and has instructed them that she is to be called the Chinese equivalent, Ah Ma.

Jaafar stands, but doesn’t relinquish, as Yunus had hoped, the baby. “By the way Yunus, if Hana and Khalid are doing a reception for their anniversary, they’re welcome to use our jongsarat.” he says.

The room gradually thins out. Rijal is telling Lily that they are hoping to be able to visit the Phillipines in the next few years. “Not anytime soon,” he says, “we need to save up enough money first. But Aunty Melissa wants to see Nurul Sofya. And I’d like to see Aunty Melissa again.”

The idea that Rijal has any conception of savings is a miracle. Yunus looks at Lily, but she is smiling at Rijal and doesn’t see him.

“That sounds nice,” Hana says, from where she and Khalid have joined them. They are holding hands, Yunus notices, and something in his heart softens. He has had his suspicions, and his worries, that their marriage has not been altogether happy. But it is hard to tell, over phone calls and a continent of distance. They have only been back for a week, and although they have said that they’ll come stay with Yunus and Lily as well, they have stayed with Khalid’s family

during that time. That has been another wrench, another bit of his daughter that he has lost.

He checks the time. "It's time to pray," he says, and excuses himself. To his surprise, Khalid joins him. Without talking, they pray together, and at the end, Khalid salams him, as customary. "Forgive me," Khalid also murmurs, that automatic and ritual saying. Yunus finds himself echoing it back to his son-in-law, and his heart softens further. He tells Khalid to go on, he will be out in a minute, and allows himself to rest his forehead back on the prayer mat. *Leave it there*, he can hear Lily saying. *Leave it all there*.

Maybe not all, he thinks, as he stands, his heart lightened, but a lot of it.

It is late afternoon when they make the move to leave. They are saying their goodbyes, and lavishing kisses on Nurul Sofya, when Hana and Khalid exchange glances. "We have our things with us," Hana says to Yunus. "We were thinking that we would come stay with you this week?"

"Of course," Lily says quickly. "Your room is all ready. Isn't it, Yunus?" They all turn to look at him, and it hurts his heart that there is a question in Hana's gaze.

"Of course," he says.

* * *

Hana and Khalid follow behind her parents, but the car takes itself, almost, down the roads that have changed only a very little since as far back as she can remember. Down the highway that links Gadong and Bandar, onto the highway that everyone calls the "Supasave" highway, after the big supermarket at the end of it. The clusters of dark forest that line the road are unchanged, always shadowy,

always with the crumbling light-brown earth, its everlasting sameness. They are the same trees, the same leaves, probably, the same old blue sky that never seems any younger for being lit anew everyday. Even the sun is old and tired, quietly resting in its yellow-white glare, just before it flares into the rich colours of sunset, at the corner of her eye. She was always being reminded as a child never to look directly at it, never to stare too long, or she would go blind.

Down the Supasave highway, past the new municipal building. Its quiet white newness and the barrenness of the land that has been cleared to allow it to emerge, its empty grey concrete parking lot, the parking lines still brightly clean are the only sign of change along that highway. Further down, to the Shell station that has been there forever and a day, the roundabout that only recently had traffic lights installed and which are turned off during the day and only turned on during the noon and afternoon rush hours. Round, round, past the turn-off for the airport, five minutes away now, past the turn-off for the Berakas school, renowned for its troublemakers, the bold, loud, daring boys whose black eyes in brown faces always seem to know too much and see too much as they loiter on the road in their white uniforms, sleeves rolled impatiently up, shirts untucked, songkoks never on properly, if on at all.

Down the Serusop road, past the desultory shophouses on the right, and her old ugama school on the left, deserted now on the weekend, but usually with students tucked neatly away in rows of Qur'an chanting without understanding, then the Teguhraya sprawl of shophouses, the fabric shops lined up next to the textbook shops, the cafes that are famous for one dish each, never for the overall quality of their food. The bakeries, the kedai runcits selling everything that is cheap and miscellaneous – the ubiquitous green and white, blue and white Japanese

slippers that every student who goes overseas brings to use as toilet slippers, the beach paraphernalia with colourful, crude drawings of flowers that don't occur in nature, cartoon animals, the packs of nails, the – oh, she doesn't even know, only that the small random necessities of the universe always end up in those kedai runcits.

It all goes past her, the world holding itself still and carefully in place as she moves through it. The new sixth-form college built on ruins of the old sixth-form college, ruthless restoration so that the brightest students in the country can study in buildings different from the identical government schools, the large airy new Hua Ho Department Store that, on its opening, had cars lining up for two or three miles down the highway.

Then, houses. The road narrows, cools, slows. Hills and inclines you cannot see over, bends that her car takes automatically. Vegetation – forest and houses mildly jostle for space, the houses allowed to nestle in between. She has been down this road, driven and driving, more times than she can count. Every day of her school life, four times a day – to and fro from morning school, then agama school in the afternoon.

She could close her eyes and tell you all the houses that they will pass, whose inhabitants she does not know, the houses themselves more alive for her, than the people in them.

The long sloping blue-roofed palace that belongs to someone vaguely royal and which is all clear green grass framing a driveway that she has never seen a car on, two miles from the front gate. It looks so incongruous next to all the other houses on the road, this royal house miles from everywhere.

Then a family house – left over and built before the Japanese came, she is sure. Flat, rectangular, with a veranda over the front door. Always a cacophony of shoes on the front step, and a range of different cars under the corrugated tin roof of the garage. The small bungalow which is half hidden by all the plants that clamber over the front gates, with the beautiful miniature garden which is a harmony of cheerful flowers and neatly trimmed grass. The blue house – blue walls, blue roof, blue cars in the garage. The owner is famous – he is called the Blue Man and hardly anyone knows him by his real name. Do you know Haji Ravoo? Who? The Blue Man. Oh yes...

Her father used to tell her about him on the rides to school, when she asked why his house was blue...

She is almost at the turn-off to her own house. The house on one of the many hills that run up and down the straight road she is on that goes through seven villages. Hers – *her* village – Kampung Tanah Jambu. The address she memorised in primary school and writes, almost reflexively, even now in adulthood, on everything she owns; luggage, notebooks, forms.

At the turn-off – *the one right after the Shell station on the left* – is how she always describes it to friends – and they are pulling into her own driveway. As if she has never left. Her mother goes ahead to unlock the front door, and her father comes to see if he can help with the luggage, but Khalid already has it and is walking towards the house. Hana stands there with her father, and for a moment they look out together from the driveway, at the setting sun. In a few minutes, she knows, the muezzin at the kampung mosque will turn on the speakers, and the call to prayer will sound. “Welcome home,” her father says, trying, she knows, to be teasing, but it comes out serious.

They walk into the house together, and as they close the front door, the call to prayer is just beginning.

**CHRISTIANITY AND THE CANON: READING THE CHINESE AMERICAN
CANON THROUGH THE SACRED**

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of PhD in
Creative Writing in the Faculty of English and American Studies.
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Christianity and the Canon: Reading the Chinese American Canon through the Sacred (Abstract)

By exploring the reasons why study of the religious trope has been so neglected in Chinese American literary study, this thesis seeks to understand the critical paradigms which have dominated and shaped Chinese American literary discourses. This thesis will do this by looking seriously at the history of the formation of Chinese American literature and critical study, and the ways in which it has been influenced by American social and political movements such as the feminist and civil rights movements. Having established the state of Chinese American literature and literary discourse, the thesis will then go on to examine the ways in which these external influences have caused grave misreadings which have severely limited the scope and understanding of critical discourse. This thesis will then correct these misreadings by using Amy Tan's works as a case study for performing a critical reading of the religious trope in order to open critical discourse up to new and alternative readings that will ensure the continuation of fresh, relevant and vibrant dialogue within Chinese American critical study.

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Introduction

Despite the fact that Chinese American literary study has now firmly established itself as a valid and relevant field of academic inquiry, this thesis seeks to argue that the critical paradigms in which the field continues to operate are influenced and limited by the historical and ideological backgrounds from which the field emerged. Such limitations have effectively stunted the growth and progress of Chinese American literary study, keeping debates insular and reactive rather than pro-active. This thesis would seek to provide an alternative critical approach to pre-existing ones, in the hopes of allowing Chinese American literary study to remain fresh, vibrant and relevant.

I mark the inception of Chinese American literary study as it is known today with the publication of *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American writers* in 1974, under the aegis of “The Editors”, Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Hsu Wong. It is within this anthology’s introduction that the initial parameters and terms are laid out which continue to shape the debates that contain the field of Chinese American literary study. In 1994, in an introductory essay entitled ‘Come All Ye Asian-American Writers of the Real and the Fake’ and with the support of “The Editors”, Frank Chin expanded in much more controversial detail on the terms boldly laid out in *Aiiieeee!*. The fierce negotiation of these terms was to result in the “pen wars” that defined the two opposing camps of Chinese American literary study in its initial stages. An exploration of these pen wars and their long reaching impact on the field form a substantial part of the first chapter of this thesis. For now, it is only important to note, as Chinese academic King-kok Cheung does, that:

It was Frank Chin and his associates who, in their prefatory essays affirming cultural dynamism, set forth most of the terms of debate on what counts as Chinese American literature. Controversial as these views are, they represent the first clear articulation of the possibilities of a Chinese American literary identity (1997: 40).

Noreen Groover Lape also notes that “Chin’s perspective has become so basic to the field of Asian American literary criticism that few critics disregard it’ (2002: 145). [I would venture to add that the critics who do disregard it do so at their peril. Chin’s work has been found to be problematic and flawed over the decades. However, it remains so fundamental to the field of Chinese American literary study that most critical paradigms today are still a response to his work. Such responses and debate were initially galvanizing, and were instrumental in establishing Chinese American literature as a serious, important and relevant field of study. However, this thesis seeks to argue that such a responsive critical paradigm has ultimately limited Chinese American literary and critical study. This thesis would argue that it is necessary to recognise the extent to which Chinese American literary discourse continues to engage with the terms first argued by Chin and “The Editors”. It is only with this recognition that Chinese American literary discourse will be able to challenge and liberate itself from this paradigm – this process will give Chinese American literary study a renewed sense of vigour and purpose. Such recognition entails a deep investigation into the roots of the establishment of this paradigm. This thesis would propose to conduct this

investigation by exploring the gaps that the existing critical paradigms have failed to address.

By looking at the ways in which critical and academic study have neglected a major theme in Chinese American literature, it will become possible to critically explore the paradigms upon which Chinese American literary study has been predicated. This thesis has chosen religion as the theme to be examined. The main reason for this choice is religion's ubiquity as a theme from the earliest Chinese American texts, and its therefore baffling absence from the field of Chinese American literary study.

The establishment of this ubiquity and its neglect in critical studies of Chinese American literature forms the first part of the first chapter. The chapter will then go on to examine more closely the historical and contextual reasons for this neglect, in order to more clearly understand the forces and gaps which have shaped the debates of Chinese American literary study. The second chapter will then look at the figure of Amy Tan and how her appearance in the marketplace was a major factor in both triggering and highlighting the limitations of Chinese American literary study. The third chapter will perform a critical reading of religion as it is developed in Tan's body of work, as a practical attempt to overcome the limitations of Chinese American literary study thus far. It will then be possible to think more seriously about the directions in which Chinese American literary study should begin to move if it is to remain as vibrant and relevant as it was throughout the 1980s.

It has become academic practice for any study of Chinese American literature to first establish its own limitations, as such limitations inevitably obscure and marginalize large chunks of what might be understood to be Chinese American literature. Such marginalization has further reaching consequences within the field of Chinese American literary study, subject as it has been in the past (and arguably, continues to be) to marginalization and ghettoization, than it may have in other fields. The biggest limitation that this thesis recognises for itself has been the necessity of limiting the definition of Chinese American literature to texts written by those of Chinese American descent and/or background, in English. This thesis recognises that the first part of this definition – “written by those of Chinese American descent and/or background” – is problematic. It will become increasingly problematic as, firstly ethnicity becomes more pluralized, and secondly, as it applies an oversimplified sense of homogeneity to texts by Chinese Americans. This oversimplification would seek to limit themes and forms that can be written by Chinese Americans. Conversely, it would also seek to group an otherwise disparate body of work under an ethnic umbrella. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this thesis, which has taken as its focus early seminal works by Chinese Americans, the adoption of this criteria (which has also been the practice of most Asian American anthologies) is sufficient.

The second part of this definition, “in English”, while likewise regrettable, is similarly unfeasible to surmount. To date, there has only been one critical study, Xiao-huang Yin’s *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s*, which has been able to integrate Chinese language literature into the study of Chinese American literature. Even a brief overview of this critical study, however, would be

sufficient to understand how prolific Chinese language writers have been. An in-depth study of their contribution to the body of Chinese American literature is sorely needed. The language barrier has obviously been the biggest obstacle to such a study, which might conceivably provide the greatest challenge to the critical paradigm as it exists in Chinese American literary study.

This thesis would also like to briefly note the convention used throughout of discarding the hyphen between Chinese and American. The hyphen has generally been recognised in the Chinese American literary community as denoting a dual identity that emphasises an Asian rather than American point of origin, and as such has been deliberately discarded by most Asian American intellectuals (Cheung, 1997: 6). King-kok Cheung explores this de-hyphenation eloquently in her introduction to *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. Maxine Hong Kingston argues, “the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight...without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun: a Chinese American is a type of American” (1997: 6). This thesis has chosen to adopt the terms that the Chinese American literary community have set for themselves.

By establishing these limitations and terms at the outset, this thesis hopes to avoid casting into the shade issues and writers who are important and relevant to the continuing genesis of Chinese American literary study. This is not a comprehensive study of Chinese American literature; nevertheless, I hope that this thesis will prove to be a starting point from which Chinese American literature can be re-examined and re-imagined.

Chapter One

Representations of Religion: The gods of Chinese American literature

Chinese American literature is rife with gods, ghosts and the otherwise supernatural and divine. From Amy Tan's kitchen gods and their wives, to the early Christianized Chinese that dominated Sui Sin Far's body of work, to the Jewish-Chinese-American Mona of Gish Jen, Chinese American literature lacks neither altars nor worshippers. Yet serious academic study of the religious aspect of Chinese American literature seems limited to a 1997 essay entitled 'Genocide or Redemption? Asian American Autobiography and the Portrayal of Christianity in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*', by Patricia Marby Harrison, published in the *Christianity and Literature* journal, one by Patricia L. Hamilton in 1999 ('Feng Shui, Astrology, and the Five Elements: Traditional Chinese Belief in Amy Tan's 'The Joy Luck Club'), and a third by Sheng-Mei Ma, in 2001 ('"Chinese and Dogs" in Amy Tan's 'The Hundred Secret Senses': Ethnicizing the Primitive a la New Age'), the latter two of which do not address Chinese American literature as a whole, but which concentrate on specific cultural aspects of Amy Tan's novels. Harrison's 'Genocide or Redemption?' is the only study which addresses the roots of the religious aspect within Chinese American literature, and the only one to acknowledge how significant it is to the genres, themes, and historical background which have shaped the literature as well as critiques of it.

This chapter aims to query this critical neglect closely. To begin with, I will aim to establish exactly how pervasive the religious theme is in Chinese American literature. I propose to do this by examining the significance of the religious

theme in the works of the seminal figures of Sui Sin Far, Jade Snow Wong, Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston. These four writers have been fundamental to the development of Chinese American literature and criticism in its initial stages. Sui Sin Far and Jade Snow Wong's works are recognised as the first Chinese American literary works to have received a significant degree of public readership. Frank Chin is acknowledged to be the father of Chinese American literary criticism, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* was the first Chinese American text to achieve critical and popular acclaim. Kingston is also known as the mother of contemporary Chinese American literature. This chapter will aim to trace the development of the religious theme through the works of these four writers. In doing so, I will establish the significance and ubiquity of the religious theme, making the absence of its study from Chinese American literary study clear and significant. This chapter will then go on to critically consider the historical and contextual reasons for this neglect by looking briefly at the beginnings of Chinese American literature as well as Chinese American critical and literary study.

Finding God

Although it has become popular to associate Chinese American literature with the intercultural matrilineal trope, I would argue that religion as a theme occurs with more regularity, and is additionally a theme which recurs on all sides of the gender and generational divides. A general map of the religious theme in Chinese American literature must begin with Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton) whose work has undergone a recent revival of interest by academics such as Annette White-Parks.

Sui Sin Far was born as Edith Maude Eaton to an English father and Chinese mother. She was the earliest Chinese American to produce a body of fiction relating to the Chinese American experience. Some of this body of fiction was recently republished in 1995, in a volume entitled *Mrs Spring Fragrance and Other Stories*. Most of Sin Far's works are gently moralistic in tone and theme, and aim at humanizing Chinese Americans and describing the Chinese American experience, although not in the exoticized, sensationalist way of Mark Carson, the white reporter in her short story, 'Its Wavering Image'.

The religious theme in Sin Far's work is surprisingly balanced and subtly complex; particularly considering the works that were to follow it. The imperialist, assimilationist bent of mission schools¹, the social, cultural and racial distinction between "Christianized" Chinese and non-Christianized Chinese, the portrayal of Americanization versus Christianization, and the material benefits that the latter brought to the former, and the tensions and compromises between Confucianism and 'the new religion' (Sin Far, 1995: 49) were threads and motifs which permeated her work, and which later Chinese American writers were to pick up and weave into their own writings.

¹ Harrison notes in her essay however, that historically mission schools and Asian conversion in general were viewed as "a way to ensure that they would leave America, presumably to return to their home country to continue Christian work." She suggests that assimilation was not the aim of conversion, but rather had the ultimate aim of removing the Chinese from America. She also notes that while Christianity then became "a mark of exclusion rather than acculturation, properly "sanitizing" the United States from any undue influence the Asians might have on American culture" (i.e. assimilation) this was a temporary rather than permanent measure.

In Sin Far, however, the theme had yet to evolve into a trope – she was careful never to generalize between race, culture and religion in the way that later writers were to do. Her characters were individual, nuanced and three-dimensional, able to distinguish and separate the clauses of what was being offered under the all-encompassing umbrella of Christianity:

“I like learn talk and dress like you,” she [Chinese protagonist] would respond to attempts to bring her into the folds, “but I not want think like you. Too much discuss.” And when it was urged upon her that her father was a convert – the Mission ladies declaring, to the Protestant faith, and the nuns, to the Catholic – she would calmly answer: “That so? Well, I not my father. Beside I think my father just say he Catholic (or Protestant) for sake of be amiable to you. He good-natured man and want to please you” (1995: 120).

In this way, Sin Far articulated the motives of the ‘Rice Christians’ – those who converted for the material or social gain implicit in conversion, but she also gave voice to those who were genuine converts.

The Chinese mind requires two religions. Even the most commonplace Chinese has yearnings for something above everyday life. Therefore, he combines with his Confucianism, Buddhism – or in this country, Christianity (1995: 56).

What is most striking about Sin Far’s work is that it is immensely difficult to sum up. Her Chinese men are sometimes heroes and sometimes villains, as are her

white characters, who sometimes rise above their times and are sometimes a product of them. For every Christianizing, well-intentioned but intensely racist Anna Harrison (who tears the family of the titular Chinese reared, white boy-child Pat and Chinese girl-child Pan apart in her insistence, “But he is white!” (White-Parks, 1995: 223)), there is also a far-sighted, discerning Adah Charlton, who is more able even than the Chinese Pau Lin’s husband to understand the cultural difficulties and mistranslations which Pau Lin is facing (*The Wisdom of the New*), perhaps one of the first characters within Chinese American fiction to draw on the feminine bond. Her characters understand that ‘one does not need to be a Christian to be religious’ (Sin Far, 1995: 126) but also do not devalue the Christian religion, while carefully separating Christianity as a religion from the Americanization that missionary movements often offered in tandem with faith.

Americanizing does not always mean improving or even civilizing. It ought to, but it does not. The majority, however, it is safe to say, benefit by stepping into the Westerner’s light, more particularly those who have met with genuine Christian people and have had the privilege of entering into and seeing something of the beauty of the truly Christian American home. I lay great stress on the word “genuine,” because an insincere Christian or one to whom religion is but a form, does great harm to the cause of Christianity (1995: 140).

In essence, however, the overall arch of Sin Far’s work seems to isolate context as the key factor in producing behaviour. Her fiction highlighted, more than anything else, the unjust state of the American laws and systems that led to people

behaving the way they did, in reaction to and against it. She historicized, rather than essentialized, the mindsets and behaviours of her characters – we see this the most in the two parallel stories ‘The Wisdom of the New’ and ‘The Americanizing of Pau Tsu’ in the *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* collection. In these two stories, we see almost identical plots being played out – the Chinese husband in America sends for his Chinese wife from China. Upon her arrival, the wife learns that her husband is friends with a white female, and is subsequently confused and made jealous by said friendship, exacerbated by the husband’s insistence on the wife’s ‘Americanization’. The major difference between the two stories is in the ending – ‘The Wisdom of the New’ ends tragically, with the wife choosing to poison her son rather than subject him to the Americanization that the husband insists upon, while ‘The Americanizing of Pau Tsu’ ends with reconciliation. The inclusion of these parallel tales is meant to indicate the minute details on which the fate of each family turns – one is a love marriage, the other is not; one husband decides to explain his decisions a fraction too late, while the other is in time. Regardless, the actions and their consequences are identical and further emphasize that it was circumstance rather than divine fate or destiny, which drove the protagonists to behave in the ways that they did.

It is significant that Sin Far gave her fiction a historicist framework, and it has bearing on her nuanced and complex portrayals of the religious theme. Sin Far was to be followed by Jade Snow Wong and *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, a text which, being autobiographical, concerned itself with a more personal perspective. Wong’s text picked up on the theme of the Christianized versus non-Christianized Chinese, and the main thrust of her protagonist’s story focuses around her and her

father's struggle to reconcile the independence due to her Christian self, and the traditional Confucian decorum which he cannot completely renounce – 'Daddy became as serious about Christian precepts as he was intent on Confucian propriety. It was a blend which was infused into all his children, by example as well as by instruction' (Wong, 1965: 10). It is a lifelong struggle, but in the manner of a traditional bildungsroman, it is resolved by the end of the text. This resolution is brought about by Wong's attainment of success and her father's recognition of that success. More pertinently, however, this success is couched in the terms of the triumph of Christianity over Chinese tradition:

Daddy replied, "Chinese legendary symbolism has been passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation until the origins and true meanings have become lost. Superstition, combined with economic reasons, account for many of the formalities you witnessed today. But most Chinese do not analyse or question symbols; they are blind followers of tradition. Only those who have become Christians have the courage to question forms of action" (1965: 170).

Although Christianity is not explicitly equated with Americanization within the text, there is no doubt that the realisation of Jade Snow Wong's individual success is only possible through the freedoms which the text indicate Christianity bestows upon her. Her major struggle is against the patriarchal, Confucian-influenced traditionalism of her father, which 'centred around reverence for his ancestors' (Wong, 1965: 90) and sees Jade Snow Wong's attempts to remove herself from the family life as disrespect and betrayal. In contrast to Jade Snow Wong's desire

for something more than contribution to the family business is her mother, who silently and systematically goes about the family business, sacrificing without sound and deferring unconditionally to her father's wishes. Wong's work valorizes the liberties that American daughters are allowed, and contrasts them favourably with her own constraints and her struggles to claim those same liberties. Her inferior position within her own Chinese family, and the constricted fates that are described for her older sister and her mother make this struggle a sympathetic one. It is, however, significant that the text indicates that her attempts to claim these liberties are only successful through Christian channels.

Yet her eventual success is shadowed. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong comments on this phenomenon, saying that:

In general, the female writer's relationship to American culture is much more vexed than the male's, for, given her subjected position in Chinese patriarchy, the woman's first contact with Western ways typically had some liberating effects. However, the imperialistic or racist aspects of Westernization might play out in the long run (1997: 47).

Wong ends up financially independent and personally fulfilled – however, the closing scene of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* sees Wong, as part of her business, working industriously on pottery to sell in a display shop window. The performative aspect of this industry is significant. Particularly after the Second World War, Chinese Americans were held up to other ethnic communities as the model minority – industrious, assimilationist, silent. Wong's text is instrumental

in adding the religious dimension to this model. The text seems to suggest that her success and assimilation come at a price.

Wong's place on the Chinese American literary map also signalled the start of autobiography as a mode for Chinese American literature. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* has influenced many of the more popular contemporary Chinese American texts, which, in the same autobiographical vein, echo the paradigm of the Confucian East versus the Christian West. Confucianism and Eastern religion become amplified into a trope for an abusive patriarchal system at odds with the individualistic, loving Christianity of the West. Some examples of these include Pang-Mei Natasha Chang's *Bound Feet and Western Dress*, and Adeline Yen-Mah's *Falling Leaves*, both autobiographical works pivoting on the central protagonist's struggle to break free of this oppressive patriarchal regime. The roots of this particular genre lie in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, the first such work of its kind in regards to Chinese American literature; although obviously (and significantly) *Fifth Chinese Daughter* has its own roots in such traditional Western rags-to-riches tales as *Oliver Twist*, *The Little Princess* and so on; tales in which the central protagonist overcomes adversity and ultimately triumphs materially and morally. *Fifth Chinese Daughter's* traditional narrative of triumph over adversity is problematized in the context of Chinese American literature by the association of rags with the Chinese tradition of Confucianism and riches with Americanized Christianity.

Fifth Chinese Daughter's place in Chinese American literature has been challenged, however, by Frank Chin, whose work marks the next significant

development in the mapping of the religious theme. Chin's works have been primarily valued for their articulation of Chinese American literary identity, and their rigorous argument for Chinese American masculinity in literature. The roots of Chin's dedication to the establishment of a distinct Chinese American literary identity and the defense of Chinese American masculinity can be traced back to two factors. Firstly, his experience with the reality of racial and social inequality in the post-war period, and secondly, a deep preoccupation with the historical erasure of Chinese Americans from American history, particularly the forgotten history of the Chinatown bachelors prior to the Magnuson Act of 1943. Much of Chin's work occupies itself with reclamation of this history. However, Chin also provides the first cogently expressed articulations of the religious theme within Chinese American literature, an aspect of his work that has been largely overlooked. These articulations inform his ethnic nationalist and gender stances, but academics and critics have largely ignored their importance, for reasons that will start to become clear in the second half of this chapter.

Chin presents faith in Chinese American literature as politicized and racialized, and he deals in particular with Christianity, insisting on a dichotomy between an essentialized Chineseness which he argues is incompatible with religion of any kind, and the subsequent hypocrisy and race betrayal of those Chinese who embrace Christianity. Chin's hypothesis of what he terms a 'Christian Orientalist agenda' hinges upon a deep suspicion of the autobiographical form.

The works of Kingston, Hwang and Tan are not consistent with Chinese fairytales and childhood literature. But how do we account for their

consistency with each other and with that of the other Chinese American publishing sensations of the past? [...] That's easy. (1) All the authors are Christian. (2) The only form of literature written by Chinese Americans that major publishers will publish (other than the cookbook) is autobiography, an exclusively Christian form, and (3) they all write to the specifications as opposite morally from the West as it is geographically (1991: 8).

Chin's hypothesis, however, is weakened by his failure to rigorously define exactly what he means by a 'Christian Orientalist agenda' or 'autobiography'. In particular, his definitions of 'autobiography', such as they are, have fuelled much of the debate over what he has allowed to be called Chinese American literature. He ties this form firmly to Christianity, and his objection to autobiography as a form is on the basis of its religious roots, and the destructive nature of that religion to the Chinese race.

I don't do autobiography. The autobiography is not a Chinese form. It's a Christian religious form descended from confession. The first autobiography ever written was Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. The next autobiography Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. Western culture is religious. Chinese culture is not. Chinese are not born sinners. Chinese are born soldiers. No matter what else we might be, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief, we are all born soldiers. The first Chinese autobiography ever written was Yung Wing's *My Life in China and America*, published around 1910. He was a Christian. All systems of Western thought, philosophy and religion are systems of perfecting the perpetual state through mass conformity. All systems of

Chinese thought are systems of perfecting individual personal integrity. The perpetual state in Chinese thought is, by definition, immoral. That's the mandate of heaven. Kingdoms rise and fall. Nations come and go...To the Chinese confession is an act of moral submission, betrayal. Chinese do not confess. Chinese do not submit themselves to judgement (1998: 400-401).

Chin categorizes autobiography as a genre as Christian, confessional and therefore subservient to a social agenda that seeks the destruction of the Chinese as a race. Stephen H. Sumida historicizes this view in his afterword to the anthology *Growing Up Asian American*.

As elsewhere in missionaries' campaigns to convert "heathen people in California the act of teaching English literacy to rescued women was aimed at enabling the converts not only to read the Bible but also to confess their sinful, pagan pasts and to make way for a new Christian life. Whatever the Chinese American convert's past, it was thus intertwined with a culture their "rescuers" considered not simply inferior, but sinful. Writing such an "autobiography" for the missionaries had to be quite different from the "confessing" to people of the same culture. In such an autobiography, a confession implied an apology to a higher authority. Chinese American history today inherits this history (1993: 402).

Sumida provides a historical and cultural motive for the use of autobiography as it had been co-opted by the Christian missionaries who were often the first point of contact for immigrants newly arrived to America from China. Yet the Chinese

American writers who Chin classifies as writers of autobiography have confused his definition, as they form a combination of fiction and non-fiction writers.

I see all persons of Chinese ancestry, all of them born to speak English in Australia, in New Zealand, in England, in Indonesia, and in Singapore, writing the very same Christian white racist autobiography, the same old Yung Wing, Leong Gor Yun, Pardee Lowe, Jade Snow Wong, Virginia Lee, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Gus Lee, on and on, the same old book about the same old Chinese Christian me me me, wanting to be free of a Chinese culture so misogynistic and morally despicable it doesn't deserve to survive (1998: 388)

Chin's definition of autobiography is problematic. While Pardee Lowe and Jade Snow Wong's works are self-confessed autobiographies, Virginia Lee, Amy Tan, Gus Lee and David Henry Hwang (who is not mentioned in the above taxonomy, but who has elsewhere been denounced as a "fake" by Chin), have all written works of fiction rather than autobiography. In his seminal essay, 'Come all Ye Asian-American Writers of the Real and the Fake', Chin sharpens his pen ('Writing is fighting' (1991: 35)) on one main point of attack to divide the 'real' Chinese American writers from the 'fakes' who write 'autobiography' - he condemns Kingston, Hwang and Tan's use/misuse of Chinese fairytales, folklore and myth. Their re-working of traditional Chinese stories – Kingston's *Fa Mulan* in particular, although subsequent critics in Chin's vein have targeted Tan's (fictitious) prefatory swan story to *The Joy Luck Club*, and criticized Hwang's re-working of *Madame Butterfly* as falling prey to the same Orientalist stereotype of

the effeminate Asian male that it attempts to subvert – have enraged Chin. He argues that these re-workings are essentially Christian re-writings of Chinese myths in service of that same destructive agenda. He argues instead for the preservation of fairytales, folklore and myth in their original form, and that memory and migration do not have the fluidizing effect that Kingston, Hwang and Tan suggest that they do.

Myths are, by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths. New experience breeds new history, new art and new fiction. [...] Her (Kingston)'s assertion that the Chinese who settled and established Chinese America were any less literate; had an ethical intelligence any less informed by any less effective myths, any less explored, challenged and deepened into any less of a living language by any less of a literature, theatre, poetry, painting [...] is corroborated only by belief in the Christian social Darwinist stereotype (1991: 8).

Chin's suspicion of re-writing may have stemmed primarily from his understanding of the absence of Chinese American history in the annals of American history. In particular, the reclamation of the lost history of the Chinese Americans who worked on the great American railroad project in the 1800s, was an issue that deeply affected Chin as a teenager and which became a theme that featured prominently in his own fiction. Chin's dedication to reclaiming this lost history and amplifying what he viewed as the marginalized voices of Chinese American men can also be surmised to be partly behind his suspicion of Chinese

American texts which found popular and widespread readership, accustomed as he was to remaining on the margins. In any case, it certainly solidified his disapproval of the re-working of historical fact, coming as he did from a background which had seen Chinese American history effectively written over and out.

Chin categorizes autobiography as both fact and fiction that wrote against the Chinese American identity as he defined it. Chin's inclusion of fiction within autobiography may also have had its roots in history. The history of autobiography in Chinese America has been closely linked with the creation of a fictional identity. In the early immigration era of the Chinese to America, 'paper sons and fathers' (Chin, 1993: 401) were the term used to refer to the creation of paper autobiographies meant to fool immigration authorities into allowing Chinese men into America on the basis of constructed relationships. During this time, 'the writing of an "autobiography," in this period of Chinese American history, became associated with the creation of a fictional identity for strategic purposes' (1993: 401).

Harrison, in her examination of Chin's seminal essay, however, points out the problem with this slippery definition of autobiography.

For all his insistence on associating autobiography with historical accuracy and truth, Chin himself makes little distinction between fiction and autobiography. As his refusal to distinguish between Asian American fiction writers and actual autobiographers reflects, Chin initially begins criticizing

autobiography in terms of genre but soon shifts to considerations of representation in autobiography when he criticizes some Asian American writers' portrayals of their culture. [...] Chin's view turns on a double understanding of *representation* as "an artistic depiction or portrayal" as well as "standing in for, advocating, serving as a spokesperson for" the Asian culture. Thus the artistic rendering of Asian culture should be the same as advocating Asian culture (1997: 50).

Chin's position as the arbiter of the 'real' and the 'fake' in Chinese American literature is one that he accepts, despite its unpopularity. He says,

In Asian America, I'm the designated Asian male for saying there is no Chinese fairy tale that teaches "the worth of a woman is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch," no matter what *The Joy Luck Club*, the Amy Tan novel or Wayne Wang movie, says. If they insist such a story exists and was as influential as they say, it should be a simple matter for them to present the text, to prove it's real, and the toys and art inspired by the story to demonstrate its influence (1998: 226-227).

Chin's argument, however, fails to take into consideration that neither Tan nor Kingston have argued for the historical accuracy or literary faithfulness of the fairytales, folk tales or myths that they write into their fiction; on the contrary, their subversion of traditional stories makes up a great part of their approach to Chinese American literature. His definition of autobiography, while providing

some insight into his ideas about the religious theme, are too problematic to be of much help in understanding his taxonomy of Chinese American literature.

Chin's conceptions of Christianity, historical authenticity and genre are so bound up that it is surprising that academics have for so long been able to ignore the religious aspect of Chin's agenda. Yet Chin's 'Christianity' has been re-read and re-defined as a general objection to white racist practices rather than an engagement with the term 'Christianity' as Chin has introduced it to Chinese American literary discourse. Over his body of work, Chin has made a deliberate choice to use Christianity as a trope to stand in for Americanisation – this is a significant choice in light of how Sin Far and Jade Snow Wong have chosen to represent Christianity's links with Americanisation.

Chin presents Christianity as another method, concurrent with immigration laws and general discrimination and prejudice, of emasculating Chinese men and enforcing assimilation. He returns repeatedly to the idea that to embrace Christianity is to embrace an annihilation of earlier self; that Christianity is purely Western in origin and conception and as such it is only by assimilating and destroying everything Chinese about the self that one can become Christian. Chin postulates that this is in fact the main aim of Christianity – that Christianity is simply a tool for cultural, racial and gendered imperialism, rather than an end in itself. The basic incompatibility, or perception of incompatibility of Christianity and Chinese or Chinese American identity is a trope that Chin uses repeatedly in his works. In his essay, 'A Chinaman in Singapore', (in which he ruminates upon a Western-centric English syllabus) he states that 'being a Christian Chinese is

like being a Nazi Jew; it cannot be done. The Nazi craves the death of the Jew, the Christian the extinction of the Chinese' (1998: 73). He attributes this to a fundamental schism between Chinese cultural mentality and the tenets of Christianity.

Harrison's dissection of Chin's seminal essay, 'Come All Ye Asian-American Writers of the Real and the Fake', historicizes and resists this conflation of the religious to a trope. In her essay 'Genocide or Redemption? Asian American Autobiography and the Portrayal of Christianity in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*,' she targets the cultural and religious inaccuracy of Chin's trope, by historicizing the circumstances in which the 'antagonistic relationship between Christianity and Asian American culture' (1997: 147) occur. She points out that 'Chin's sweeping condemnation of Asian American autobiographical writing' (the basis of which is this antagonistic relationship) 'must be limited to historical acts of racism and enforced assimilation that occurred in the name of Christianity and that in turn impacted Asian American writing; his critique, however, has little to do with Christianity itself as a religion or value system' (1997: 147).

One of Harrison's concerns in the paper is with rescuing Christianity from the relationship drawn between it as a religion and Americanisation as a set of (racist, imperialist) practises. Like Chin, she agrees that Christianity has been a tool for these practises – unlike Chin, she argues that it has not been a subservient or mutually agreeable relationship, but rather that Christianity has been hijacked; not just by the historical entities who committed atrocities in Christianity's name, but

also by Chin himself in making Christianity stand as a trope for Americanisation. Harrison, in deconstructing Chin's remarking of the trope, targets two main flaws of definition. The first, and most relevant here is how she takes issue with Chin's conflation of historical and cultural identity with religious identity. She argues that Chin's conflation only seems to apply Christianity and American culture, and disregards some Asian religions, such as Buddhism, pointing out that such a tactic sounds 'more like a personal objection than a theological argument; they reveal that Chin's criticism has less to do with religion than with resentment of the racism he sees in the Asian historic experience with white Christianity' (1997: 149). She argues that Chin is wrong to place the fault with Christianity instead of the socio-political agenda of Western imperialists.

However since it is not the purpose of this section to show how Chin's remaking or redefinition of the trope is factually or historically unjust, but rather to establish how and why he did redefine this trope, the deconstruction of Harrison's paper need not go further. It is simply worth mentioning here as a reminder, before the paper delves more deeply into the trope, that how the trope is used in Chinese American fiction does not necessarily bear any relationship to the actual religion or value system being used – it is more significant to explore how and why the trope both draws on and remakes the religion within the context of the fiction which is being created.

In fact, part of Chin's use of the religious theme as a trope seems to be in order to challenge the conflation of Asian cultural, historical and religious identity.

It's as if the idea of Chinaman six feet tall offends their religion, shakes their faith, and sorely dislocates the shoulders of their reality. "Chinese are never taller than five foot six." "I think Chian Kai-shek is six foot," I say, having no idea how tall Chian is. "Chian converted to Christianity," they say. I know better than to ask what Christianity had to do with Chian's height (1998: 5).

In this extract, it is the Americans who conflate religious and racial identity. Chian Kai-shek is exempt from the stereotype of Chinese never being taller than five foot six because he has converted to Christianity and is therefore, effectively, no longer Chinese. By accepting and then reversing this conflation to target American Christianity rather than Asian 'heathenism', Chin forces the reader to challenge the conflation of culture, religion and race. He argues that

American culture is not a fixed culture. There is no one American culture. What we call American culture, like American English, is a pidgin marketplace culture. That's the mandate of heaven. But much of America wants a dictated, strictly Judeo-Christian culture and is deaf, dumb, and blind to reality. They're freaked with the fascist myth of the Tower of Babel, afraid of languages they don't speak and cultures like the Chinese that do very well without religion or organized superstition (1998: 208-209).

Chin's deliberate remaking of Christianity into a trope to represent Americanisation is a challenge to what he sees as the attempt to flatten and homogenise Americanness. Chin's work therefore draws strongly on this

dichotomous relationship between the non-Chinese/Christian (the American ‘strictly Judeo-Christian culture’) and the Chinese/non-Christian dichotomy (the multiplicity implicit in use of ‘Tower of Babel’, non-religious Chinese who ‘do very well without religion or organized superstition’).

In the previous works of Sui Sin Far and Jade Snow Wong, a relationship was drawn between Christianity and Americanisation, but it is in Chin’s work that this relationship evolves into a trope. Yet Chin’s remaking of this relationship into a trope is limited and problematic. It draws attention to what he considers as the problem facing the Chinese American community – their exclusion from American identity unless they assimilate by rejecting Chineseness (by converting to Christianity) or perform as a model minority, but the alternative that he offers is similarly limiting. Chin’s resistance to this problem is ultimately an attempt to reappropriate and subvert this discourse by firstly, homogenising American identity in turn (that is, to equate Christianisation to Americanisation), and secondly, to insist that all Chinese who convert are race traitors. Furthermore, because Chin uses this trope within his non-fiction essays that deal with the formation of a Chinese American literary identity, and not in his fiction, it is not always clear how far this trope is meant to be taken literally.

Thus far, Chin. Close on his heels chronologically came Maxine Hong Kingston, who was to emerge as the heavyweight of Chinese American fiction, both critically and popularly. Her engagement with the trope proffered by Chin was to pave the way for Amy Tan’s re-imagination of it.

Kingston's work is not as explicitly involved with the Christian religious theme as Chin's, Snow Wong's or Sin Far's. Nevertheless, it forms a crucial undercurrent to her body of work, working in tandem with her reflections on Chinese American spirituality, particularly in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. In fact, her emphasis on Chinese American spirituality and ghosts is emblematic of an altogether different approach to what she termed Chin's 'political/polemical harangue' (Leiwei Li, 1998: 45), stating that she saw 'no furthering of art' (1998: 45) through this method. Rather than focus on the Christian/American part of the dichotomy that Chin has drawn, Kingston instead chooses to explore the Chinese/non-Christian discourse.

It is particularly in *China Men* that the discourse is examined.

"Are you a Christian?" my mother asks periodically. "No, of course not."
"That's good. Don't be a Christian. What *do* you believe in?" "No religion. Nothing."
"Why don't you take the Chinese religion, then?" And a few minutes later, "Yes, you do that," she'd say. "Sure, Mom. Okay." (1981: 200)

I looked up "religion" in the *American-Chinese Dictionary* and asked my mother what religion we were. "Our religion is Chinese," she said. "But that's not a religion," I said. "Yes it is," she said. "We believe in the Chinese religion." "Chinese is our race," I said. "Well, tell the teacher demon it's Kung Fu Tse, then," she said (1981: 269).

In these two excerpts from *China Men*, it is the Chinese American protagonist who queries the conflation of her race and her religion, and her Chinese mother who urges that conflation. *China Men* has in fact taken on Chin's trope - race loyalty has become the new religion. The mother's anxiety over the possibility of the protagonist becoming Christian is really an anxiety over her Americanisation, and the loss of her Chinese self. This is made clear when the mother urges the protagonist to 'take the Chinese religion' instead of naming Buddhism, Taoism, or Confucianism. It is the Chineseness of the religion that is important, and not the religion itself. By having the Chinese mother be the one to reject Christianization/Americanization, conversion becomes something undesirable. Americanization thus also becomes something fraught with anxiety, with the Chinese American protagonist resisting the conflation of Chinese culture with religion on the one hand and negotiating what it means to be American on the other.

This negotiation is further complicated by the story of Bak Goong, one of the grandfathers, who 'went to Christian church once or twice, but they talked "baptism" and he quit. He asked the converts, "Who's the pig that got caught?" They didn't even talk like China Men any more, the salt gone from their speech. "Thank God," they said instead of "Your mother's cunt" (1981: 113). Bak Goong's experience with the Christianizing of missionaries provides a useful historical backdrop to the Chinese mother's concerns about Americanization and Christianity. It also highlights the changing concerns of the Chinese Americans as the novel moves from the first half of the twentieth century to the second. The protagonist is able to independently clarify her concerns about religion by

referring to the dictionary; her mother and grandfather learn their English from the missionaries, who have their own agenda.

Kingston's contribution to the religious theme in Chinese American literature lies not just in her representation of Christianity, however, but in *China Men's* exploration of religious fluidity, and can be examined using the following few extracts. The first is the anecdote of the immigrant whose mother haunts him until he returns to China to perform the religious rites that should have been performed at her funeral.

He set off the firecrackers near her grace, not neglecting one Chinese thing. He hurried home to America, where he acted normal again, continuing his American life, and nothing like that ever happened to him again (1981: 176)

"Living under women's legs," said the superstitious old-fashioned men from the backward villages. The legal father decided that for a start in the new country, he would rid himself of Chinese superstitions; this curse would not count (1981: 57)

The partners did not tell her that they hardly ever celebrated holidays. Neglecting the planting and harvest days made no difference in New York. No neighbours looked askance. And there were no godly repercussions (1981: 73).

Religious conversions, particularly in the case of new immigrants, are a common phenomenon. However, the three extracts concern themselves not just with the casting away of old gods for new ones as part of the move to America, but also with the changing of the religion itself. Robert King, in *Orientalism and Religion*, remarks that this phenomenon stems from the view that ‘religion is largely a matter of personal belief rather than of communal involvement’ which is ‘a prominent feature of modern Western religious consciousness’ (1999: 12). Certainly in the three extracts above, there is a sense of deliberate removal from the previous community along with the physical removal from China to America. The man who discharges his spiritual debts to his mother then hurries back to his ‘normal’ life in America, free at last from all lingering links to China. The legal father from the second extract, in ridding himself of the ‘Chinese superstitions’ is really ridding himself of the ‘backward villages’. And in the third extract, the partners are just as happy to have shed the neighbours’ askance looks as well as being free of godly repercussions. If Christianity has come to mean Americanisation, and these unnamed other religions Chineseness, there is a sense then that the new immigrants of *China Men* have already been forced to relinquish China as a point of originary culture. Rather than holding on to it, then, the changing of the religion suggests the forging of a new identity.

In the first extract, for example, it is no longer that the immigrant does not actually *believe* in the old superstitions – he actually goes all the way to China in obedience to these superstitions – but that he chooses to leave it behind *despite* his belief, as if he can write his own fate. What is being drawn here in *China Men* is

the line between belief and reality, choice as well as change, which foreshadows the way in which Tan will develop the trope.

In the second extract as well, the phrasing is significant. The legal father decides to ‘rid himself’ of Chinese superstition – however, the next qualifier, ‘this curse would not count’, suggests that it is not that the curse does not *exist*, but that he is choosing to ignore it. The legal father has become god of his own religion, taking what he pleases, changing what he pleases. He is writing his own religion.

The third extract is from the perspective of three of the bachelor men who have left China in hopes of a better economic future in America, and who end up running a laundry together in New York. Their ‘and there were no godly repercussions’ seems to suggest a complete disillusionment with the old beliefs, including the idea that America would prove to be their financial salvation. However, what follows the extract is also significant. Upon the arrival of one of the men’s wives from China, he remarks, ‘His wife brought back the holidays. She made the holidays appear again’ (1981: 73). The couching of the return of the old ways in terms of ‘holidays’ – the utilitarian language of the worker, rather than the divine language of ‘godly repercussions’, suggests that it is purely a practical rather than theological concern with the immigrant. This points to the adaptation of belief and culture, again highlighting this choice, this picking and choosing that is *China Men*’s main contribution to the trope.

This change provides a new entry into the religious theme in Chinese American literature, and a new addition to the trope. Certainly it was something that Jade

Snow Wong's father, with his struggle to work with both his Confucian ideals and Christian beliefs, had not envisioned. The deliberate selection of certain practices and the neglect of others bleeds over from the religious trope, of course, into the other cultural practices which are passed on, particularly in Kingston's work, and is a bone of contention between Chin's and Kingston's camps in Chinese American literature. This will be more fully explored in the following section.

The aim of this section of the chapter has been to establish the major part that the religious theme has played in Chinese American literature. It was a significant theme in the early Chinese American writings of Sui Sin Far and Jade Snow Wong, and informed many of Frank Chin's pronouncements on Chinese American literature, pronouncements that were to have a profound impact on the way that Chinese American literature developed. It has also been possible to trace an engagement with these pronouncements in Maxine Hong Kingston's work. As all four of these writers were critical figures in the development of Chinese American literature, the neglect of a theme that forms a significant part of their body of work needs to be addressed and rectified if the study of Chinese American literature is to progress.

It would be useful, then, to explore more critically the reasons why examination of the religious theme has been so neglected in Chinese American literary study.

'Writing is fighting' - The pen wars

It can be proposed that this neglect – which becomes particularly apparent when examining the extent to which the religious theme has influenced the work of

critical figures such as Sin Far, Snow Wong, Chin and Kingston in Chinese American literature – is due to two main factors. Firstly, the forefronting of the gender and ethnic nationalist debates within Chinese American literary study, has dominated the field of discourse since its inception in 1974 with the publication of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*. These debates have virtually pushed to the side any other discussions of literary theme, influence and merit. It is only in the last decade or so that other discourses have begun to emerge within the field. Discourses of literary form, of poetics, and of themes other than the historical validity of myths and folktales, the representative responsibility of the Chinese American author and the emasculation of the Chinese American man versus the strong and positive depictions and explorations of the Chinese-American mother-daughter relationship (in a nutshell) - are for the first time being allowed serious space for discussion within the arena of Chinese American literary study. This is evidenced by the publication of recent works such as Josephine Nock-Hee Park's *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* in 2008, Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi's *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature* in 2005, and even Wenyin Xu's *Eating identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* in 2008.

The dominance of the gender and ethnic nationalist debates within the field from 1974 until about a decade ago were a natural consequence of the conflation of several factors. The civil rights movements which peaked in the 1960s in the United States naturally made the questions of hyphenated identity and equality the subject of intense focus; within Chinese American literary discourse, this

translated to the scrutiny of a work's 'authenticity',² entangled with a concern over racist or Orientalist implications thematically and in the choice of genre. Likewise, the resurgence of the feminist movement beginning in the early 1960s was both trigger for and in turn triggered by the literary significance of the female empowerment movement and the female focus of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in 1975.

I have previously marked the inception of Chinese American literary study from 1974 with the publication of *Aiiieeeee!* by editors Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Hsu Wong, because it is within that anthology's introduction, penned by 'The Editors' that the first boundaries that were to inevitably shape the Asian American and Chinese American literature were drawn. Frank Chin's introductory essay to *The Big Aiiieeeee!* in 1991, was to controversially expand on the ideas first laid out in 1974's *Aiiieeeee!*. It was this essay, 'Come All Ye Asian-American Writers of the Real and the Fake' in particular, which was to cement Chin's position in the Chinese American literary community, as the father of Chinese American literary criticism.

In this essay, Chin, with the support of 'The Editors', was to lay out the criteria for inclusion into the Chinese American literary community. This perspective included the initial distinction made between writers of the 'real' and the 'fake' – the latter referring to writers who were complicit with the 'Christian Orientalist agenda' through their thematic use of the East-West cultural conflict; amongst

² The definition of "authenticity" was to become a point of dispute within the Chinese American canon, and this will be dealt with in more depth in the coming chapter.

them Jade Snow Wong, Virginia Lee, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and David Henry Hwang. These writers were accused of exploiting their statuses as Chinese Americans to provide an inaccurate and exploitative perspective on Chinese American culture, a perspective which emphasized the dual holds that their Chinese cultural heritage and American nativity had on them. The essay also accused this perspective of idealizing the American cultural aspect at the expense of Chinese racial and cultural identity. In particular, the essay targeted the emasculation of the Asian male, and the misuse of traditional Chinese fairytales, folktales and myth in order to provide a Chinese American cultural identity that pandered to Western stereotypes about the exotic, the primitive and satisfied the American need for a model minority. The essay also included the problematization of hyphen usage when it came to Asian American identity and the difference between appropriated, Americanized Chinese writers, and Asian American literature. Ultimately, the essay called for Chinese American writers to be answerable to a representative responsibility to the community, for representations about Chinese America to be positive, and in particular to include positive masculine role models. It can be speculated that much of Chin's criteria was influenced by an awareness of and engagement with African American literature and the Black Arts Movement. Many of *Aiiieeeee!*'s stated aims echo the desire for a distinct cultural aesthetic and a rejection of white involvement, that were major points of debate over the duration of the Black Arts Movement. These criteria were also perhaps influenced by a desire for Chinese Americans to take control of their own representations that stemmed from his lifelong fight against the erasure of Chinese American history from American history. Chin never fully advocates a separation of Asian American literature from the dominant

literary canon, but he was to grow increasingly disillusioned with American publishing strategies as Kingston and Tan's works became more popular.

It was with the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in 1975, that many of the issues, first voiced in *Aiiieeeee!*, took on the vehemence that were to form the 'pen wars'. The term was first used by Chinese American critic Amy Ling, although it is a pre-existing Chinese term for literary arguments, to describe the resultant explosion of literary debate, initially between and spearheaded by Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, although Amy Tan was to quickly become involved in Kingston's camp. The pen wars were made all the more significant because of the similarities between Chin and Kingston's particular backgrounds - both had been students at UC Berkeley in the early 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement (Park, 2008: 8) - and exacerbated by the immediate critical and popular acclaim that Kingston received for *The Woman Warrior*. This reception far surpassed any reception of previous Chinese American (or Asian American) texts, winning Kingston the General Nonfiction Award from the National Book Critics Circle in 1976. If Chin and 'The Editors' were the fathers of Chinese American literary criticism, Kingston was undoubtedly the mother of Chinese American literature. In light of all these factors, it was no wonder that these pen wars and the controversies outlined within were to dominate Chinese American literary discourse.

These pen wars were to set the stage for the direction which Chinese American literary study was to take. Chin and Kingston butted heads most vigorously over the subjects of representative responsibility and Kingston's insistence on

subverting and re-writing traditional Chinese folktales, fairytales and myths, in direct opposition to Chin's prescriptive model of writing. Chin's conception of representative responsibility was of literature that adhered closely to social and historical reality in order to debunk current stereotypes about Chinese America. He argued that what little knowledge there was about Chinese America had come from racist depictions of Chinese villains or emasculated Chinese men from the movies and television, such as Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu. Chin's objection to Kingston's texts stemmed primarily from the suspicion that readers would not have the resources to decipher Kingston's deliberate ironies and subversions, and would take her depiction of Chinese America as literal, factual and historical. As such he urged Kingston either to categorize her work as fiction, or to represent Chinese America in a more positive way.

So after reading the galleys of *The Woman Warrior*, Chin expressed to Kingston his strong reservations not about the book but about classifying it as autobiography. He then advised Kingston to "go for fiction with this book if you can and dump the autobiography. As fiction I can like your stuff without necessarily liking or agreeing with the narrator or any of the characters and credit you with subtleties and knowing lapses I can't give to an autobiographer" (1998: 52).

Critics and academics who have recognised the deliberate literariness and blurring between fictionalized fact, historical fact and remembered fact in *The Woman Warrior* have since lauded Kingston for expanding and pushing at the boundaries of autobiography and memoir as a genre. Kingston herself, however, has since

admitted that the choice to categorize *The Woman Warrior* as autobiography initially was not her own, but her publisher's. Certainly despite her initial resistance to the role of representative of the Chinese American community which was thrust on her by her readership and by the Chinese American literary community, Kingston has acknowledged that it was perhaps an inevitable role to inhabit, because of the relative scarcity of literature that has emerged from the Chinese American literary community. She sighed in 1982 that 'when someday a great body of Chinese American writing becomes published and known, then readers will no longer have to put such a burden on each book that comes out. Readers can see the variety of ways for Chinese Americans to be' (Leiwei Li, 1998: 63). Until then, however, she acknowledges that 'terrible stereotyping has been done to us Asian Americans...our writing has an important task: to show ourselves as real human beings, to show our feminist contributions' (ed. Ling 1999: 58). Despite agreeing with Frank Chin on the representative responsibility of Chinese American literature however, Kingston remained firmly opposed to the prescriptive style that he advocated. Her approach to tackling the stereotyping that both she and 'The Editors' have committed themselves to struggling against has been through the subversion and appropriation of Chinese myths and folklore. Her response to 'The Editors' condemnation of such methods in favour of a more confrontational, adversarial approach, has been steadfast. Despite her appreciation for Frank Chin's work, for example, Kingston maintains that 'the genre *I* am avoiding is the political/polemical harangue, which I dislike because a.) it keeps the writer on the surface of perception, b.) it puts the Asian American writer on the same trip as the racist; we provide the other half of the dialogue, the yin to his

yang, as it were, c.) the blacks already wrote that way in the '50s; all we'd do is change black faces to yellow, no furthering of art' (Leiwei Li, 1998: 45).

Misreadings of Kingston's works as factual and ethnographical, however, have caused tension in the Chinese American literary community over her stance. An anecdote by Elaine H. Kim illustrates the tensions that exist within the subject of representative responsibility.

I recall the annoyance felt by a friend of mine when her non-Asian friend presented her with a copy of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, saying, "Now I finally understand you." Maxine Hong Kingston is writing about *her* Chinese American experience and *the* Chinese American experience, but she has always stressed the need for many stories to speak out and express the diversity of Chinese American life (1982: xix).

The visibility of *The Woman Warrior* in contrast to the relative invisibility of the works in *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!* has been a point of contention for the reason illustrated above. Despite the multiplicity of voices showcased in *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, the anthologies were largely unsuccessful in their bid for mainstream readership. This lack of success has been instrumental in *The Woman Warrior* being read as general ethnography rather than as an individual experience, and as heavily fictionalized experience, at that. As such, *The Woman Warrior's* sometimes unflinchingly unflattering depiction of Chinese American culture and the Chinese American male in particular, has been the cause of much anger in the Chinese American literary community.

A sample of the critical and popular reviews of Tan's work in the 1980s when she first published *The Joy Luck Club*, suggests that her work was also prone to the same ethnographic generalisations. It quickly became clear that the reading public were not always observing the line between autobiography and fiction - between historical, representative *fact* and artistic license.

Of all the young women who babysat me when I was a child, I remember only one: a brilliant graduate student in chemistry who was getting her PhD with my father. I remember her because she was Chinese and she told me how her feet had been bound as a child. [...] Remembering those fragmented, blurred stories, I am grateful to Amy Tan for showing me the world from which they sprang. *The Joy Luck Club* is a splendid first novel (Willard, 1989: 12).

Both Kingston and Tan have resisted this pigeonholing, this casting of their texts 'outside of the realm of literature' (Tan, 2004: 31) and into 'sociology, politics, ideology, cultural lesson plans in a narrative form' (2004: 308). Resisting Chin's prescriptive approach on the one hand, and unable to deny that their approach has led to misreadings and misappropriations, both Tan and Kingston acknowledge the precariousness of their positions as the foremost best-selling, and most widely studied Asian American writers in America today.

The issue of representative responsibility and the role that Chinese American literature plays in ethnic nationalism has thus understandably been an area of

much dispute. The subject itself tends to be inflammatory, and continues to engage Chinese American writers today. Two of the most well-known Chinese American literary figures, Amy Tan and David Henry Hwang, have responded to the debate by articulating their wariness of being included under the umbrella of Chinese American literature. Hwang has attempted to place his work outside of such socio-political concerns, remarking that, ‘on the questions of responsibility, I believe the multicultural artist is no different from any other, in that she or he is finally answerable not to an ethnic community, nor to an artistic community, nor to the nation at large, but only to his or her artistic conscience’ (ed. Ling, 1999: 226). Tan has likewise tried to evade being a representative for the Chinese American community, stressing the individual, fictional nature of her work. She states that ‘I am alarmed when reviewers and educators assume that my very personal, specific, and fictional stories are meant to be representative, down to the smallest detail, of not just Chinese-Americans, but sometimes all Asian culture’ (Tan, 2004: 305). She has also continued to stress the American nature of her work, resisting a literary ghettoization. ‘I hear that my books and essays are now on the required-reading lists for courses in ethnic studies, Asian-American studies, Asian-American literature, Asian-American history, women’s literature, feminist studies, feminist writers of color, and so forth. I am proud to be on these lists. What writer wouldn’t want to be read? But there’s a small nagging question that whispers into my ear once in a while: “What about American literature?”’ (2004: 306). Tan is articulating the concern that to allow the label of Asian American to be affixed to her work is to wrongly exclude her work from a wider context.

Other Chinese American writers, however, found strength, solidarity and purpose in the label. As artists, many of them, like Chin, drew inspiration for their sense of identity from the African American arts movement, and there have been many collaborations across racial and cultural lines (ed. Ling, 1999: 7). Some Chinese American writers have embraced their representative responsibility as prescribed by Chin and 'The Editors'. C.Y Lee, for example, is comfortable with his fiction's overlap with ethnography. 'A lot of people are ignorant of other cultures. As a result they enjoy seeing anything different-lifestyles, tribes, animals, social life, customs and so forth. There's the ethnographic appeal of something different. The purpose is to draw us closer and enhance understanding' (1999: 15). Gish Jen also remarks that 'I support social responsibility in writing. I think I'm a rare writer in saying that. Most writers argue for artistic freedom. But to imagine your images have no effect on what happens in society and the way people see themselves is completely naïve. I think also that you are a better writer as you start considering questions like representation' (ed. Ling 1999: 223). Her approach to correcting the stereotypes that have plagued Asian American representations has been to openly align herself with the Chinese American label while striving to keep her representations strictly 'antiexotic' (1999: 220). David Wong Louie, one of 'The Editors', takes a similar approach, arguing that 'as long as publishers label Asian American writing *their stuff*, Asian American writers are not competing with other writers. It's like putting us in the Chinese laundries' (1999: 201). Like Jen, Louie resists the ghettoization of his work by taking an antiexotic approach. Both writers are wary of publishing strategies that are eager to capitalize on the popularity of Chinese American fiction that could be used as ethnography. Jen comments that 'it was understood that nobody wanted to read about Asian Americans, even from

the literary magazines. I got letters that said point blank, “We prefer your more exotic work.” That was from the *Paris Review*. I still have the letter. Things about China - stuff like that. They were more interested in stories about China than little Asian American girls running around New York’ (1999: 227-228).

It becomes clear that although all the Chinese American writers had little to disagree on in their opposition to literary ghettoization, the methods that they employed fell into two camps. Writers like Kingston, Tan and Hwang were vilified for writing China as well as Chinese America, even if those depictions were clearly fictional. In turn Kingston, Tan and Hwang rejected the limitations that were placed on their artistic methods, arguing that that in itself was a form of literary ghettoization. Tan argues strongly against this prescriptive writing.

Yet some minority writers believe that’s what fiction by minority writers should do: tell people what to think. These writers believe, for example, that if you’re Asian American, you should write about contemporary Asian Americans – none of that old-China stuff – and that your work should be exclusively for Asian Americans and not a mainstream audience. If your work is inaccessible to white readers, that is proof that it is authentic. If it is read by white people, that is proof the work is a fake, a sellout, and hence the writer is to be treated as a traitor, publicly branded and condemned (2004: 316).

Kingston, Tan and Hwang’s popularity, coinciding with their strongly held beliefs, has been a cause for much suspicion. Chin proposes that it is their ethnic

nationalistic betrayal that has allowed them to achieve mainstream success. He argues that their unflattering depictions of Chinese America and their focus on female stories is all part of the same Christian racist agenda to negatively portray Chinese America and to emasculate Chinese American masculinity. He argues that it is this pandering to popular stereotype that has allowed them to achieve success. Chin seems to consider that the feminist agenda was complicit in the racist agenda. It is this consideration that has led critics and academics to label Chin's work as deeply misogynistic. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that Chin had, in his lifetime, not only observed the passing over of Chinese American male-centric texts, but had also dedicated much of his work to the reclamation of a Chinese American history that was male in its concerns and themes.

Certainly the males within Tan's texts have been marginalized characters – catalysts to events rather than events in themselves; even their brutality serves as a means rather than an end. Hwang's attempt to subvert the Orientalism of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* in his re-telling of news reports featuring a male Chinese opera singer masquerading as a female mistress to a French diplomat, *M. Butterfly*, also came under fire for reinforcing the stereotype of the effeminate Asian male rather than subverting it.

However, Kingston's second work, *China Men* in 1980, was a project to reclaim the lost history of the Chinese who worked on the great railroad project, a reclamation which Chin, too, found compelling as a theme and which features in his own works. Nevertheless, it can hardly be argued that the bulk of Chinese American work during the mid-1970s to mid-1980s to come to popular and

mainstream attention, was female-centric. (In fact, any reference to China and/or mother-daughter relationships was enough to warrant press statements to the effect of 'If you like Amy Tan, you'll like this,' such was the extent to which Amy Tan had become a byword for Chinese-American fiction, and Chinese-American fiction a byword for matriarchal family sagas.) It was this gender and thematic emphasis, coupled with the popularity of Kingston and Tan's work that led Chin and his cohorts to assign such heavy political, social and racial significance to the relationship between the two. The gender debate, enmeshed as it was with the ethnic nationalist debate and representative responsibility, became a subject for much dispute.

The debates over these issues (categorized by Jingqi Ling in *Narrating Nationalisms* as 'the extent to which particular Asian American literary works confirm or challenge hegemonic or cultural assumptions; the nature of ethnic authenticity invoked by Asian American writers in their self-representation; and the issue of political responsibility faced by Asian American writers and critics' (1998: 139)) continues, and is unlikely to be resolved until, as Kingston envisions, a much greater body of Chinese American voices in literature are heard. For now, it is not the aim of this paper to resolve these issues, only to acknowledge them and to show how the inception of Chinese American literary study was inevitably dominated by these discussions.

I. Reader

The second reason, perhaps, for the absence of academic study of the religious theme, despite its significance in Chinese American literature, is the issue of the

lack of self-reflexive readers and critics. Self-reflexivity has become common academic practice, particularly in the study of postcolonial and minority literatures, where ingrained social and cultural attitudes might affect readings of culturally and politically diverse literatures. Chinese American literary study, being fairly young as a field of discourse, has tended to address the issue of self-reflexivity only in recent years.

This is an issue that Helena Grice explores in her study, *Negotiating Identities: An Introduction to Asian American Women's Writing*. Based on Abel's model of self-reflexive reading, she argues for a 'white reading strategy' which would acknowledge the importance of race in white reading, contending that, 'recognising whiteness as both a standpoint and as a set of cultural practices [...] white self-criticism may be able to offer a useful contribution to the study of black and ethnic texts by serving to endorse the racialization of whiteness and to emphasise the role of race in the reading process' (Grice, 2002: xi). Grice acknowledges that while these debates have already been 'thrashed out' (2002: xi) in African American studies, she contends that the 'still nascent status of Asian American studies means that its boundaries and aims remain in constant re-negotiation, and issues such as white involvement in the field are only now being tentatively addressed' (2002: xi). She cites prominent Asian American scholar Sau-ling Cynthia Wong as a fellow advocate of the method, noting that:

In boundary crossing situations there is often an asymmetry of power that we don't realise. People in the dominant culture who are accustomed to believing their own reading position to be transcendent, universal, unbiased,

tend to see those invested in ‘minority’ literatures as caught up in identity politics. In fact, they are caught up in their own identity politics too, only it’s been “naturalized”, made invisible. There are certainly limits to any critical endeavour (2002: xi).

Although Grice and Wong are primarily referring to racial reflexivity in reading, it should be noted that for the readers of Chinese American texts, race, religion and culture were not always distinct from one another, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. The conflation of race, religion and culture primarily arose out of a lack of attention to or knowledge about cultural difference – resulting in misreadings of nuance or tone. For example, the reading Tan’s re-telling of myths literally, or without irony. And although Wong is an advocate of self-reflexive reading, she also suggests that it has its limitations. She argues that due to a fundamental familiarity with the culture and cultural practices that Chinese American literature emerges from, ‘it certainly helps to be Asian American when one is interpreting Asian American literature’ (2002: x). Although she concedes ‘the theoretical possibility that non-Asians can manage to do excellent criticism on Asian American literature’, she adds, ‘I haven’t seen a whole lot of these scholars yet’ (2002: x). This critical attitude has no doubt discouraged many scholars, both Asian and non-Asian alike.

These two stances reveal part of the reason why study of the religious trope within Chinese American literature has been so neglected. Firstly, the lack of self-reflexivity from readers has meant that the gaps in cultural knowledge applied to Chinese American texts have not always been apparent. In particular, although

much attention has been paid to the issues of identity politics, particularly as they apply to the negotiations around Chinese heritage and American culture, this attention has failed to recognize the reader's own conflation of race, culture and religion, falsely attributing everything that is non-white, non-Christian, and non-American, to Chinese racial identity. As such, the religious theme has often been subsumed under considerations of race and culture, rather than as a distinct and separate theme of study.

Secondly, the elitist nature of Asian American studies, which privileges members of Chinese American descent, means that there is naturally a fear of approaching religion as a sensitive and very culturally nuanced aspect of Chinese American society. Even Chinese American writers have been lambasted with critique as to their qualifications to represent Chinese America. For example, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong devotes a paper, 'The Sugar Sisterhood: Situating the Amy Tan phenomenon' (1995) to Tan's use of a Chinese phrase, '*tang jie*' to show how her 'shaky grasp of the Chinese language comes to fortify' (Ma, 2000: 96) a primarily female white Orientalist readership in their position. Under such intense critical scrutiny, with the possibility of such far-reaching socio-political implications, it is not surprising that critics and academics are wary of placing themselves in such a position. Under such conditions, it is not surprising that the religious theme has not been taken up for study.

In order to surmount apprehensions regarding self-reflexive reading, Richard King suggests a methodological programme which involves two types of 'thick description', which he explains is 'one that contains a high degree of contextual

richness—that is, an attention to the sociocultural and historical circumstances which contribute to the meaning’ (1999: 77). The first type would be ‘an immersion in the contextual complexity and richness of the phenomenon under consideration’, and to counteract this immersion, the second type would be an incorporation of ‘a self-reflexive examination of the cultural context and prejudices of the interpreter’ (1999: 80). This second type would attempt to ‘clarify those factors present in the approach of the interpreter that directly impinge upon his or her conception of the subject matter’ (1999: 80). Instead of treating these factors as a negative, however, King suggests ‘positively highlighting them in one’s analysis’ (1999: 80). This inclusive approach to self-reflexivity must have a positive effect on Chinese American literary discourse.

Over the course of this chapter, I have attempted to establish two things. Firstly, by looking at key figures in Chinese American literature, I have hoped to show that religion has formed a significant aspect of Chinese American literary themes, as well as informed many of the major debates in Chinese American literary discourse. Secondly, I have mapped out the historical and contextual reasons for the neglect of the religious theme as an area of study in Chinese American literature. With these in place, it is now possible to examine the uniqueness of Amy Tan’s place in Chinese American literature, and how her critical and popular reception highlights the need for fresh approaches to reading and understanding Chinese American literature.

Chapter Two
The Amy Tan Phenomenon

The previous chapter examined the historical and contextual reasons for the neglect of the religious theme as an area of study in Chinese American literature. This chapter will aim to establish Amy Tan and her body of work as a critical juncture for this neglect. By examining Amy Tan's place in Chinese American literature, and the factors which have contributed to her success, this chapter aims to show how these factors have triggered and highlighted the limitations of Chinese American literary study. This chapter will argue that the significance of Amy Tan's body of work places her as the natural starting point from which Chinese American literature should be re-assessed.

The 'Amy Tan Phenomenon', a term coined by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, remains unparalleled in the Chinese American literary marketplace (1995: 174). Each of Amy Tan's five novels has been a New York Times bestseller. They have collectively been translated into 35 languages worldwide. *The Joy Luck Club* was adapted into a critically and commercially successful film in 1993 and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* made its debut with the San Francisco Opera in September 2008. The novels have also won numerous awards, including the American Library Association Notable Book, Commonwealth Gold, New York Times Notable Book, Booklist Editor's Choice, as well as being finalists for the Orange Prize, a collective critical achievement for fiction which remains unmatched by any other author in Chinese American literary history. Having also written two children's books (one of which was adapted into an Emmy-nominated television

series) and a memoir, *The Opposite of Fate*, Tan also remains one of the most prolific writers of fiction in Chinese American literature.

Alongside Kingston, Tan's novels are a staple of 'required reading' in a multitude of high schools and universities across the United States, and her essays and stories can be found in hundreds of anthologies and textbooks spanning across buzzwords that range from American and Asian American literature, feminist literature, gender studies and authenticity studies. Tan herself is invited to lecture frequently and internationally, and serves as an editor for the Los Angeles Times Magazine, 'West', as well as a prominent spokesperson for literacy.

Tan is easily the most commercially successful figure in Chinese American literature. More significantly, she has been so since the publication of her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, in 1989, thirteen years after Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, which was the only other text until that point, to receive such critical and popular acclaim. It was *The Joy Luck Club* that heralded the arrival of Chinese American literature into vogue, and into mainstream consciousness. It is a lot to claim for one novel, but it is not insignificant to note that two years after *The Joy Luck Club* was published, both Jung Chang's highly acclaimed *Wild Swans* and Gish Jen's *Typical American* came onto the market. In fact, the 1990s was a prolific decade for Chinese American literature, seeing the publication of Anchee Min's debut novel, *Katherine* (1995), Gish Jen's follow up to *Typical American*, *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), Pang-Mei Natasha Chan's *Bound Feet and Western Dress* (1997), Adeline Yen-Mah's *Falling Leaves* (1998) and its rewrite for children, *Chinese Cinderella* (1999), the revival of Sui Sin Far's body of work,

Mrs Spring Fragrance and Other Writings (1995), as well as two additional novels by Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) and *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995). Tan also published two children's books in the 1990s, *The Moon Lady* (1992) and *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994).

This is not to say that prior to Tan's work, fewer Chinese American texts were being written. As Xiao-huang Yin documents in her extremely well-written and comprehensive analysis of *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s*, Chinese American literature had become of increasing interest since Kingston's *The Warrior Woman*. From 1976 onwards, works such as Eleanor Wong Telemaque's *It's Crazy to stay Chinese in Minnesota* (1978), Shawn Hsu Wong's *Homebase* (1979) and acclaimed playwright David Henry Hwang's *FOB* (1979), not to mention Kingston's follow-up to *The Warrior Woman*, *China Men* (1980) were published. However, none of these works apart from Kingston's garnered the critical or popular attention that the works of the 1990s were to receive.

To suggest that Tan and *The Joy Luck Club* were the catalyst for this sudden explosion of popularity of texts centered around the Chinese American experience is only partly true. To say instead, perhaps, that Tan's *Joy Luck Club* became the locus of articulation for all the concerns and crossings that made Chinese American literature able to come suddenly into vogue, would be more accurate. The way in which Tan achieves this is worth examining briefly, as it provides an entry point to an examination of Chinese American literature.

Three factors can be considered as being instrumental to Tan's achievement of a unique place in Chinese American literature – a place which straddles popular and critical acclaim, mainstream and literary success, and an appeal to ethnic minority readers as well as readers from the dominant culture. These three factors – timing, accessibility, and familiarity - can be extracted and extrapolated from the following extract from Tan's essay, 'Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects'. An examination of these three factors will show how factors that have contributed to Tan's popularity have also limited the discourses governing Chinese American literary study. Tan's appearance in Chinese American literature triggered many of the debates around which Chinese American literary study formed, but such central attention to Tan and these debates has constricted the discourse.

I remember being an English major in 1970 (at a time, by the way, when there were fewer than 450,000 Chinese-Americans in all the United States, including Hawaii). In the American literature classes I took, I read Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and so forth – no American writers who were women or minorities. It didn't bother me – or rather, I didn't question that it could be any other way. During those years that I was an English major, the only female novelist I read was Virginia Woolf; I had originally thought there was another, Evelyn Waugh, who, I later discovered, was very British and a man. The only minority writers I read were in a summer school class I took called "Black Literature," where I read Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison – but again no books by women. I didn't even imagine there was such a thing as a book by

an Asian-American woman; Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* didn't come out until 1976.

'The Woman Warrior didn't come out until 1976' – The timeliness of The Joy Luck Club

There are three significant points to be taken from this, which may help to unpack the occurrence of 'The Amy Tan Phenomenon' further, for it should be remembered that despite the sudden prominence of Chinese American texts, Tan remains unrivalled commercially. The first point is in regards to Kingston's placement in Chinese American literature. The time lapse of 15-20 years between Kingston's *Woman Warrior* and the sudden and expansive explosion of Chinese American texts into the mainstream literary marketplace is indicative of a generational lapse. That is to say that the women who were writing and being published in the 1990s were of a different era to Kingston. Kingston's successors, and their responses to *The Woman Warrior*, were not her contemporaries (Dave, 2001: 658). Huntley, in her overview of the Asian American literary tradition leading up to Tan, suggests that the 1980s was a significant decade for the Asian American literary community, citing Cathy Song, Garrett Hongo, Li-Young Lee as poets who were honoured with prizes and awards during that period, and Genny Lim and David Henry Hwang as playwrights who won similar accolades in their fields. As mentioned earlier, the 1970s according to Yin were also not a fallow period for the Chinese American literary scene. Yet with the exception of Hwang, none of the artists were ever what could be called 'mainstream' or 'well-known', unlike the writers who came into public recognition in the 1990s. Jung Chang, Adeline Yen-Mah and Anchee Min are all best-selling authors in their

own right, with Jung Chang taking the 1992 NCR Book Award and the 1993 British Book of the Year Award for *Wild Swans*, Anchee Min making the Richard and Judy bestseller list with *The Last Empress* and Adeline Yen-Mah's *Falling Leaves* becoming a surprise international bestseller.³

The question, then, is why? Why should Asian American literature of the 1990s have found it so much easier to break into the mainstream market, than that of the 1980s? It was not simply a case of genre, as, although Chinese Americans (including Chinese Americans writing Chinese language literature in America) were, like other ethnic minority communities producing large amounts of poetry in response to socio-ideological and institutionalized oppression, they were also producing comparable amounts of prose. It is more pertinent to note that the writers who came to attention in the 1990s were all female, and were, in large part, writing autobiographical or semi-autobiographical texts.

The time frame here is significant. It has already been mentioned in the previous chapter that part of the reason that studies within Asian American literature have remained so constricted to and dominated by the gender and ethnic nationalism debates since 1974 were the civil rights movement and the resurgence of the feminist movement in the 1960s which made such questions of immediate and relevant importance. Published in 1976, Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* was being read by a second-generation Chinese American Tan, fresh out of college.

³ It should be noted here that Jung Chang and Adeline Yen-Mah should not be counted under the Asian American literary umbrella, but rather as part of the British Asian canon. Their inclusion in this particular section of the paper is due to their bestselling status in America during the period discussed.

Likewise, the literature that would be written in response to the genre and that Kingston had opened up with her work, would be written by women of Tan's age and generational zeitgeist – a generation that would experience exclusion and discrimination in a very different way from Kingston and her contemporaries. (Kingston herself was born in 1940, the same year as Frank Chin.) Amy Tan, Gish Jen, Anchee Min, Jung Chang and Pang-Mei Natasha Chan were all born in the 1950s, meaning that they would come of age around the time that the civil rights movement was being born, but long after the Magnuson Act of 1943 was passed, legally ending the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In other words, they would come of age in an era when legislated discrimination had ended, and when the American socio-political landscape was newly beginning to recognise that the practical day-to-day effects of racism and discrimination were more subtle and nuanced than legislative action could recognise. As Xiao-huang Yin puts it, 'although the "iron cage" (outright exclusion and overtly institutionalized racism) has been dismantled, the glass ceiling (covert, sinister prejudice) remains a problem for the Chinese and for other Asian Americans' (2000: 186). Tan and her contemporaries would face the subtle racism of exoticization, the pressure to assimilate, and a consumerist mentality towards all things Asian or 'Oriental' rather than the outright exclusion that Kingston and Chin's generation had undergone. Richard King articulates these two kinds of racism as being two different forms of the same Orientalist discourse. He suggests that the first form is 'generally antagonistic and confident in European superiority; the second, generally affirmative, enthusiastic and suggestive of Indian/Asian superiority in certain key areas. Both forms of Orientalism, however, make essentialist judgments that foster an overly simplistic and homogenous conception of

Indian/Asian culture' (1999: 116). It was the second form of this discourse that would affect Tan's generation. This form of Orientalism manufactured and privileged an essentialist Asian culture that originated in conceptions and stereotypes of Asia. In Chinese American terms, these stereotypes often originated from depictions of China and the Chinese in popular media, including the figures of Charlie Chan, Fu Manchu, and the idea of the Yellow Peril. This form of Orientalism would then superimpose these expectations on Asian American identity and culture, dismissing or marginalizing the American nativity of Asian American identity. In resistance to this exoticization, Chinese Americans sought refuge in affirmations of quintessential American identity. This anxiety would often manifest itself in rejection of or impatience with the previous generation's inability or unwillingness to assume the same control over American culture and language. In addition to these expectations of identity, the rise of capitalism and a global marketplace meant that this form of Orientalism would manifest itself in the increasing commodification of Asian culture as it could be distilled into tangible goods such as food and clothing, and intangible goods such as religious practice and experience.

In response to this commodification and exoticization, the idea of authenticity began to take on new importance. The idea of authenticity had always been the locus of certain tensions in Chinese American literary criticism. Chin's initial distinction between the 'real' and the 'fake' was of particular importance in his criteria for inclusion in Chinese American literature. For Chin and 'The Editors', authenticity became a matter of adherence to certain themes. Themes of Chinatown, Chinese American bachelorhood and masculinity were categorized as

‘real’ or ‘authentic’. Themes that explored the dual personality trope, looked back to China, or criticized Chinese or Chinese American culture, history, society or patriarchy, were condemned as ‘fake’ or ‘inauthentic’. Positive or negative representations of Chinese America became bound up with these conceptions of authenticity.

Although these criteria were quickly challenged and debunked, the idea of authenticity continued to have a certain weight. In response to the commodification and exoticization of Asian culture, audiences began to seek a form of authenticity in literary representations of Asia and Asian America. This authenticity also became entangled with ideas of positive or negative representations. In literary terms, the authentic came to mean that audiences familiar with the first form of Orientalist discourse that was antagonistic to Asian culture, came to require a degree of accessibility to Asian culture that could only be offered by a qualified ethnic insider. Audiences were no longer willing to accept value-laden representations – particularly negative representations – of Asia or Asian America, unless these representations or value judgments were being offered by an ethnic insider. This was partially due to a fetishization of difference that was a result of the commodification of Asian culture. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong articulates this shift in sensibilities by suggesting that audiences were able to enjoy the same Orientalist tropes of the past, as long as they were assured that the tropes were being delivered by someone with ethnic qualifications. Such qualifications would allow them to disassociate themselves from complicity with Orientalist discourses of old, which was understood to have packaged Asia

and Asians for the West based on Western understanding of a manifestly different culture. Wong suggests that:

The white middle-class book-reading and book-buying public of the post-civil rights era, likewise touched, has learned to enjoy its exotica flavoured by the rhetoric of pluralism and an awareness of domestic and global interethnic connectedness. An unself-consciously ingratiating invitation to the cultural sightseer, such as the tourist brochure-style, zoom-in description of San Francisco Chinatown in the opening paragraph of Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, has a decidedly old-fashioned ring to it and no longer carries the persuasiveness it once possessed. Indeed, this type of writing is no longer produced by any Asian American writers of note...a credible cultural middleman for the contemporary "mainstream" reader needs to demonstrate, in addition to access to an authentic originary culture (or the appearance thereof), some sophistication regarding the limitations of monologism (1995: 191).

Wong goes on to suggest that the popularity of Tan's body of work can be attributed to her successful ability to manipulate this exoticization and commodification of Asian culture, and to occupy the position of the ethnically qualified. She remarks that 'Amy Tan fits the bill [of cultural middleman] well...whether by design or not, she manages to balance on a knife edge of ambiguity, producing texts in which Orientalist and counter-Orientalist interpretive possibilities jostle each other' (1995: 191).

Wong argues that Tan is a middleman able to serve Chineseness in a form palatable to her audiences, and to do so in a way that draws attention to both the foreignness of the culture, and her credibility in providing the all-important authenticity. This qualification lies in her membership of both the Asian and American communities. This ethnic qualification relies on a problematic slippage between ethnography and fiction. This qualification suggests that Tan's fictions are successful because of audience's awareness of Amy Tan, the Chinese American writer, and the blurring of that identity into the Chinese American narrators that populate Tan's body of work.

Wong also argues that Tan takes advantage of this position to deliberately exoticize China and Chinese America in order to appeal to her readership's desire for the exotic under the guise of authenticity. In this way, the 'authentic' came to mean what was most similar to old stereotypes of China and the Chinese. Wong dwells at length on this manipulation in 'The Sugar Sisterhood: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon' (1995), by targeting what she sees as deliberate mistakes in Tan's deployments of the Chinese language in order to reinforce old stereotypes.

Wong is not the only one who has criticized Tan for seeming to 'revive Orientalist tropes as if she rejects them' (Ma, 2001: 34). In her essay "'Chinese and Dogs' in Amy Tan's 'The Hundred Secret Senses': Ethnicizing the Primitive a la New Age' (2001), Sheng-mei Ma also accuses Tan of 'romanticizing the Orient in the stock images of silk, jade, porcelain, and so forth [...] Tan's consistent mis-managements of the Chinese language and culture is calculated to bring forth a fictional universe at once aesthetic and abominable, at once uplifting and

degrading, in the exact Orientalist formula' (2001: 41), suggesting that Tan's accessibility lies in her ability to tap into and use popular generic Oriental images which the public is familiar with.

Tan has generally responded to these accusations by stressing the fictional nature of her works. I would also argue that Tan's body of work generally subverts these processes to a degree that has gone unrecognized by Wong and Ma, but will dwell at more length on this subversion in the following chapter. For now, it is sufficient to comment that these issues of commodification, exoticization and Orientalist discourse found a compelling roosting point in Tan's work, coming as it did at such a time in American history.

As Sheng-mei Ma has remarked in a study of schizophrenia in relation to Asian American and Asian diaspora literatures, the literary response to this was that 'the authors who grew up in the tumultuous 1960s in the United States are particularly prone to creating the split personalities we see in Asian American literature' (Dave, 2001: 658). Examples of this include Tan's daughters, who in their late thirties and forties are still struggling to reconcile their mother's overt Chinesenesses with their own Americanization and Gish Jen's daughters (Mona and Callie) who alternately embrace and reject Chineseness in favour of being Jewish, black, and WASPs. This was not a purely female theme. David Henry Hwang's work also plays close attention to these identity politics. In *F.O.B* (1983), for example, there is a clear attempt to delineate a distinction between ABCs (American Born Chinese) and FOBs (Fresh Off the Boat – a colloquialism used to refer to first generation immigrants) and their perception by non Chinese

Americans. *M.Butterfly* (1986) also revolves around the eponymous Butterfly's continuous and fluid slippage between male and female, subservient to authoritation. However, due to the simultaneous popularization of the civil rights movement and classic feminist concerns from the 1960s, it was only natural that gender solidarity would cross racial lines and would enable women to identify more strongly with the female-centric texts that were being published, especially those which concerned themselves with giving females a voice, and triumphing over patriarchal pressure. Women born into the 1950s-60s, coming of age in the 1990s, were able to identify with their ethnic sisters on the basis of gender. Indeed as the feminist movement ripened and matured and became increasingly racialized (and vice versa; racial understanding also evolved into a gendered understanding of race), it was only natural that women of colour became of increasing interest in academic and publishing circles.

Therefore the receptive atmosphere to the emergence of Chinese American literature was markedly different in the 1990s to any of the previous decades. In response to a new awareness of theories of Orientalism, diaspora and hybridity, American academic and literary study appeared more ready to query what it meant to be American alongside being a member of a cultural and ethnic minority. The 'split personalities' which Ma references, and which had always been a concern of Asian American literature, became particularly prominent in Asian American literature of the 1990s. It questioned more aggressively what it meant to be a minority in a dominant culture, and also how to reconcile ethnic background with the dominant culture – in essence, how to be both Asian and American. These questions perhaps took their cue from African American identity queries of

the previous two decades, in which female identity, female black identity, black American identity and other permutations were given significant attention and were heavily racialized and politicized. This line of questioning was challenged by Frank Chin as counterproductive and backward, and he argued that the popularity of the query was more evidence of the victory of the ‘white racist stereotype’ (1991: 51). Chin maintained that this identity crisis and the lie of the dual personality was a method of whitewashing and marginalizing the reality of Chinese history. He states that ‘for Chinese America, there was never a period when white Christian missionaries and their Number One children were not the only examples of Chinese American history, culture, and writing (1991: 51). For Chin, the popularity of this archetype signified the triumph of the white racist stereotype that all Chinese Americans were model minorities whose greatest desire was to quietly integrate into society. Chin posited that the dual personality archetype also encouraged the idea that Chinese and American identities were fundamentally separate, and to bring the two together, they needed to be broken in some way. In essence, Chin believed that the dual personality was a broken identity. This idea is borne out in the figure of *Mona in the Promised Land’s* (1991) Callie, who remarks that ‘There is being Chinese and being Chinese,’ (1997: 167).

Instead of Wheaties or an English muffin, Callie is eating *shee-veh*, with assorted pickled and deep-fried condiments, something like what they parents used to eat in China. Of course, Helen and Ralph now prefer raisin bran – less work, they say, and good for your performance. (This last being a delicate reference to their alimentary output.) Still, Callie eats on, saying

she didn't understand what it meant to be Chinese until she met Naomi (Jen, 1997: 167-168).

Mona in the Promise Land humorously but accurately pinpoints the difference between Chineseness as a racial, ethnic heritage, and Chineseness as a commodity – Helen and Ralph, with the adaptability of first-generation immigrants, and nothing to prove as regards their cultural background, are able to shrewdly choose from options available the best breakfast product for their needs. In contrast, Callie, their daughter, first spends the first part of her life attempting to assimilate, with limited success, due to Helen and Ralph's imposition of Chinese cultural tradition in American surroundings in order to achieve for Callie the status of a model minority. All this achieves for Callie is to keep her apart and separate – although in some ways admired – from her American peers. Never quite American, and chafing at the limitations of the Chinese American identity imposed on her – which her peers see as Chinese and her parents insist is the only way to be American - Callie tries instead to occupy a wholly Chinese identity. With no link to an originary Chinese cultural heritage, Callie attempts to literally ingest a Chineseness that has already been lost to her, originating as it does from the mother country. Callie does this because it is the in-between state, which is unbearable to her – the 'dual-personality' of being Chinese American. She is always seen as an ethnographic blueprint by the dominant culture, and yet painfully aware at home that she is extremely distant from the origin culture and space which the dominant culture would use her to understand. 'Callie is indeed sick of being Chinese, but there is being Chinese and being Chinese' (Jen, 1997:

167) Spelt out here is the attempt to reclaim an identity that is whole instead of the broken, marginalized identity that has been offered.

In contrast to this model, Chin referred to himself as a ‘Chinatown Cowboy’, claiming fully for himself a whole identity that placed emphasis on being an ‘American-born Chinese’ (1994: 204), an identity which emphasized American nativity and had no links to the unknown, originary China. He insists that the popularity of Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land* and *Typical American*, in which the titular Mona and her sister Callie perpetually ping-pong between Judaism, Chineseness and assimilation, and Tan’s daughters, always caught between their suburban American lives and their Chinese mothers, have rewritten history. This rewriting is conducted in such a way that white America - and not the protagonists, in their eventual acceptance of self as both Chinese and American – is always the ultimate winner, in its desirability and its position as the goal. Due to the high visibility of these works, there emerged a sense of representation that Chin contends fiercely against – that all of Chinese America struggled between Chineseness and the desire to blend into white America.

This position is partly generational, and also perhaps partly to do with a status which the Japanese Americans have already named as *Nisei*, *Nikkei*, and *Sansei*. Chin, having lived through institutionalised and overt racism, as well as being a fifth-generation Chinese American, is a living example of what lies beyond the American Dream of so many first-time immigrants⁴. As such, he and his

⁴ It should be noted that Chin’s stance with regards to immigrants has shifted somewhat over the years, and he has expressed in more recent years a new interest in creating work that is more relatable and accessible to immigrants; prior to this, he has always been focused on the second and

contemporaries were particularly sensitive to exclusion in re-writings of history, as they were of a generation that was not offered the choice of whether to assimilate. Feminism and assimilation were new concerns and ideologies that the Chinese American women writers of the 1990s faced in contrast to the Chin/Kingston generation⁵. The fact that these concerns were being projected into an arena which was more open than ever before to not only recognizing, but sympathizing with and having dialogue about these concerns, helped with the popularity of these texts. In many ways, however, this timing also confined the discourse to these concerns. While these concerns are still relevant, room needs to be made to consider more recent discourses.

This is illustrated most aptly by the reception to Amy Tan's body of work, which remains one of the most widely-studied Chinese American texts. The timing of Amy Tan's publications is placed squarely at the nexus of these concerns. As Wong puts it, Tan's texts work as a confluence point for a large number of discursive traditions coming into vogue at the time of publication: "mainstream" feminist writing; Asian American matrilineal literature; quasi ethnography about the Orient; Chinese American "tour-guiding" works; post-civil rights ethnic soul-searching; the "Chinese *Gone with the Wind*" genre; multiculturalist rhetoric; and Reagan-era critiques of materialism" along with "the literature of immigration and Americanization" (Wong, 1995: 202). Although this worked to the advantage of Tan's texts and contributed widely to their popularity, that study has remained constricted to the themes and discourses popular at the time of conception can be

third generation Chinese in America, seeing them as more in need, as they have no experience of the "origin" culture.

⁵ The Chin/Kingston generation perhaps had more in common with the mothers of Tan's works, rather than the daughters.

made clear by even a brief study of the critical works available on Tan. These critical works remain confined to these thematic and critical paradigms, and have largely declined to venture beyond them, to the detriment of Chinese American literary study. Tan's popularity and position in Chinese American literature is therefore problematic – she remains a reference point for studies of Chinese American literature, and as such, subsequent approaches and studies have focused continually back onto the discourses which enclose and limit interpretations of her work.

Mainstream or Literary - Tan as an 'accessible' Kingston

Despite the higher visibility of Chinese American literature currently, Tan, Hwang and Kingston remain the popular faces of Chinese American literature. This is due, in large part, to the conflation of two factors - the timing of their placement in Chinese American literature, with their commercial success. They were the earliest Chinese American (or Asian American, for that matter) writers to gain widespread mainstream commercial success with their works. It is because of this commercial success that they have become the figureheads of Chinese American literature, to the extent that hardly any study of Chinese American literature would be complete without mentioning these three, almost always in tandem. Their phenomenal popularity has led to Tan and Kingston – and to a certain extent, Hwang – becoming such a byword for Chinese American literature, that a large number of works on Chinese American literature are beginning to be prefaced by warnings similar to this one: 'Many professors equate Asian American literature with Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and (perhaps) David Henry Hwang. Often we talk about Asian American literature only in terms of *The Woman*

Warrior, which supposedly appeared from a historical vacuum in 1976' (Harker, 1993: 602).

The remark regarding the supposed 'historical vacuum' prior to Kingston's appearance on the scene is an interesting one. Because of their mainstream success, Kingston and Tan remain the first point of contact with Chinese American literature for many readers. Despite Frank Chin, Louis Chu, Pardee Lowe, Jade Snow Wong, Virginia Lee and Sui Sin Far's importance in shaping Chinese American literary discourse, they remain marginalized writers in the sense that they are only likely to be known and experienced by students on an introductory course on Asian American literature, or specialized scholars and academics. Therefore to all intents and purposes, Chinese American literature, even for writers such as Tan, *did* emerge from a historical vacuum. As Kingston proudly says,

Today, almost every month a wonderful new book by an Asian American is published...I can't keep up reading all of them. When I started reading and writing...I was lucky to have Jade Snow Wong and Pearl S. Buck. I think that my role in Asian American literature is that I write in such a way that it helps our work to be taken seriously as literature, not merely as anthropology, entertainment, exotics (Yin, 2000: 229).

Even Kingston, engaged and invested as she is in Chinese American literature currently, had virtually no knowledge of Chinese American literature as a body of work prior to her publication of *The Woman Warrior*. What knowledge she did

have was of a rudimentary general kind – knowledge of a Nobel and Pulitzer prize winning author (Pearl S. Buck), and perhaps the most famous Asian American woman to date, (Jade Snow Wong), a woman who, during the 1976 U.S Bicentennial, was named as the person who best represented the Asian American community (Yin, 2000: 146).

The range of Asian American texts now available, although still far from an exhaustive representation, and still only slightly closer to the ideal which Kingston once dreamed about, an ideal in which ‘readers can see the variety of ways for Chinese Americans to be’ beyond simply the foot-bound, the novelty item and the exotic, is still qualitatively larger than it used to be (Leiwei Li, 1998: 63). Yin even suggests that thematically, Chinese American writers are beginning to flourish beyond the traditional immigrant experience themes, and that nowhere is this more apparent than it is in poetry, citing Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Alex Kuo as writing primarily about nature and David Rafael Wang about sex, amongst others (2000: 234). However, the examples that she gives are both dated (1970s) and relatively unknown. Furthermore, poetry as a genre remains a relatively inaccessible medium for much mainstream readership.

Chinese American prose has a lot of popular appeal, and many Chinese American novels have been found on bestselling lists in recent years. This can be partly attributed to the renaissance in ‘things Chinese’ (Yglesias, 1991: 1) that may also be tied to China’s economic development. Another part of this popularity can also be attributed to the deceptively accessible nature of Chinese American fiction, and this is particularly evident in receptions of Tan’s work.

Unlike *The Woman Warrior*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife* and Tan's other novels have received little stylistic attention, with critics and academics choosing rather to focus on Tan's thematic content. Although being 'mainstream' does not necessarily preclude literary quality, Tan's popularity has seen the literary nature of her work sidelined for more thematic concerns. Stephen King relates:

One night while we were eating Chinese before a gig in Miami beach, I asked Amy if there was any one question she was *never* asked during the Q-and-A that follows almost every writer's talk—that question you never get to answer when you're standing in front of a group of author-struck fans and pretending you don't put your pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. Amy paused, thinking it over very carefully, and then said: 'No one ever asks about the language.' [...] But Amy was right: nobody ever asks about the language. They ask the DeLillos and the Updikes and the Styrons, but they don't ask popular novelists' (2000: xi).

Using King's framework, Kingston is the DeLillo and Tan the 'popular novelist' of Chinese American literature. Tan's debt to Kingston, in the field of Chinese American literary study has been dissected and then assume. The two writers are often spoken of in the same breath. Hailing from the same ethnicity, gender and religion (Adams, 2005: 26), *The Joy Luck Club* is universally regarded as the successor to *The Woman Warrior*, both thematically and stylistically. Amy Ling, noted Asian American literary studies scholar, calls *The Joy Luck Club* 'an echo

and a response and in parts a continuation and expansion of *The Woman Warrior*' (Adams, 2005: 27). It is hardly possible to read a discussion of Tan's work without Kingston being mentioned, so strong is the perceived relationship between the two women and their works. Yet the consensus on the nature of this relationship seems to be that *The Joy Luck Club* is a gateway beginner's text to *The Woman Warrior*, with 'accessible' becoming a euphemism for 'easy'. While *The Joy Luck Club* follows a more deceptively traditional linear narrative than *The Woman Warrior*'s fragmented narrative, it is by no means stylistically lacking. Yet critical reviews have overlooked Tan's linguistic and stylistic choices, with *Publishers Weekly* describing *The Joy Luck Club* as 'on the order of Maxine Hong Kingston's work, but more accessible, its Oriental orientation an irresistible magnet', and Grice as 'something of an accessible *Woman Warrior* without tears' (Grice, 2006: 7). The immense readability of Tan's works, in fact, have been mistaken for and appropriated into an underestimation of their literary and aesthetic quality. A review from Yem Siu Fong for *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, exemplifies this attitude.

In reading Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, I heard my mother's voice and mine, sometimes speaking to each other, more often missing the words that are spoken and not heard. I wondered then why I hadn't written those words that flowed with simplicity and imagination across the pages of *The Joy Luck Club*' (1990: 122).

This attitude suggests that the novel was a mere transcription of factual experience, and dismisses its creation as a literary work. Where the deceptive simplicity of the

writing was not being underestimated, reviewers more interested in the descriptive, sociological details that could be extracted from the text were overlooking the aesthetic, formal and structural integrity of the novel. One such example of this is Orville Schell's famous early review of *The Joy Luck Club*, in which he applauds Tan's plot, offering it as a panacea to the racial and national tensions between America and China.

And when at last she steps off the plane to embrace these errant relatives who have grown up on the other side of the divide that once separated China from the United States so absolutely, we feel as if a deep wound in the Chinese-American experience is finally being sutured back together again (1989: 3).

Schell's envisioning of *The Joy Luck Club* as a mirror to a utopian social reality not only ignores the complexities of the Chinese American experience as it is offered in favour of a determined insistence on a resolved social conflict, but also in doing so ignores the deliberate ambiguities that the final scene insists on. This dismissal speaks clearly of the role that Tan's fiction was being made to play for Chinese American literature – a role of ethnography rather than fiction. Furthermore, there is a suggestion that this ethnography offers a resolution to racial and national tensions. This is generally attributed to Tan's penchant for ending her novels happily. *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* end with the protagonist (the daughter) coming to terms with and fully embracing the mother figure through a deeper understanding of the mistranslations and cultural distances which have heretofore governed their

relationships. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, as in *The Joy Luck Club*, although Olivia (the daughter) loses Kwan (the mother figure) to an enchanted Chinese village, there is still a reconciliation prior to the separation, and additionally Olivia is reunited with her estranged husband.

These happy endings of Tan's have caused some critics to accuse her of glossing over the ongoing racial tensions within Chinese America, and of suggesting that the tensions are of the past. Ma in particular argues that Tan ends all her novels on the same note; 'the rediscovery of Chinese-ness beneath the protagonist's American veneer', and that for such a formula to remain viable, 'the celebration of Chinese-ness in Tan must be traced back to the American-ness of the author and her readers. The embrace of ethnic origin presupposes a source culture eager to be embraced, or one that is malleable enough for the author's fancy' (2001: 33). King-kok Cheung warns that such works, which 'stress the ability of Asian Americans to assimilate and to accommodate to the basic rules of American society' *prior* to their rediscovery of their Chineseness, is problematic (1997: 18), insofar as it offers Chineseness up as a commodity for properly assimilated Asian Americans. It should be noted that Tan is not the only writer who has come under scrutiny for her use of the happy ending – Gish Jen too, has been criticized for 'overly optimistic' endings which suggest, as Orville Schell's earlier review did, that the tensions and explorations and adjustments of the Chinese American experience, have been resolved. I would suggest however that Tan's so-called happy endings are not as unambiguous as they have been perceived. In particular I would draw attention to the fact that the triggers for these reconciliations and new understandings have been at the expense of the mother figures. For example, in

The Joy Luck Club and *The Hundred Secret Senses*, acceptance of the mother figures come about only after their deaths, which dominate the endings of both novels. The same note of mortality is the trigger for *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*. *The Bonesetter's Daughter* ends with LuLing, the mother, still in the grips of the degenerative Alzheimer's disease that initially prompted Ruth's journey of self and matriarchal discovery. Pearl's sudden and irreversible diagnosis of multiple sclerosis in *The Kitchen God's Wife* is what prompts her reconciliation with her mother. In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Bibi's death triggers and fuels the plot, and it is only in death that she is able to find the peace and understanding that she has sought for in life, at the close of the novel. These ambiguities seem to me to suggest that Tan's texts are making salient points about retrospective rather than immediate understanding, and it is interesting that it is only with the death/decay of the mother figures that the daughters are allowed to heal their tensions over identity. The dismissal of these ambiguities seems to suggest an unwillingness to engage with continuing social and racial tensions. Nevertheless, while these arguments are relevant and important, and stress the responsibility of literature to social reality, once again they limit discourses of Tan's work to thematic importance.

Helen Yglesias remarks, 'In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, without sacrificing a social breadth we cherish as readers, Tan hews closely to one woman's story' (1991: 3). Tan's work, especially in the early 1990s, seemed to be valued for its sociological benefit, as if she were a travel writer spinning amusing anecdotes rather than for its aesthetic quality as fiction. Many readers and reviewers failed to recognise that much of the 'social breadth', and 'broad historical sense' that Tan was praised for,

is more often than not, inaccurate or exaggerated for the purpose of story. This is exemplified in Tan's wry retelling of one of her reader's requests:

My editor at Putnam tells me that over the years she has received hundreds of permission requests from publishers of college textbooks and multicultural anthologies, wishing to reprint my work for educational purposes. One publisher wanted to include an excerpt from *The Joy Luck Club*, a scene in which a woman invites her non-Chinese boyfriend to her parents' house for dinner. The boyfriend brings a bottle of wine as a gift and commits a number of social gaffes at the dinner table. Students were supposed to read this excerpt, then answer the following question: "If you are invited to a Chinese family's house for dinner, should you bring a bottle of wine?" My editor and I agreed to turn down that permission request (2004: 306).

Tan's writing style – often in the first person and taking on an autobiographical tone – is so deceptively accessible (despite this style being a deliberate aesthetic choice) that it is often mistaken for fact rather than fiction. Her status as Kingston's 'accessible' successor, although partly thematic, also stems from this style, so straightforward, particularly in comparison to Kingston's stylistic and formal playfulness. Tan's place and importance in Chinese American literature, however, have meant that critical treatments of her work have often influenced critical treatments of subsequent Chinese American texts. The lack of serious critical appraisal of Tan's formal, stylistic and aesthetic choices have created an absence of this kind of critical inquiry in Chinese American literary study.

Attention to thematic content has overshadowed other discourses, and critical approaches to Chinese American literature need to address this neglect if it is to move forward and progress.

'Falling leaves return to their roots' – Amy Tan's literary ancestry

The third point, and perhaps the least discussed in Chinese American literary discourse, is the fact that Tan's literary influences lie firmly *within* the classic American literary sphere. Tan has openly discussed the fact that, prior to writing *The Joy Luck Club*, Kingston was the only Chinese American writer that she had come across (perhaps explaining in part why the two works are so distinctly intertwined), a fact which had resonated with her deeply. Although critics and readers have recognised this – thus her status as Kingston's literary successor – they have failed to move beyond this to recognise her other influences, reading Tan as having emerged from a literary vacuum of Kingston alone.

The fundamental failure to recognise the error of this fact, not only of Tan, but of Kingston and her predecessors, has influenced critical and commercial reception of Chinese American texts since its inception.

Clearly the validation of identity aids in shattering the literary glass ceiling – for example, Kingston's recounting of how she was 'made possible as a writer': 'I found Jade Snow Wong's book myself in the library, and was flabbergasted, helped, inspired, affirmed, made possible as a writer – for the first time I saw a person who looked like me as a heroine of a book, as a maker of a book' (Yin, 2000: 149). However, a lifetime of ingesting classic English and American

literature, and the ‘historical vacuum’ of the Asian American literary sphere prior to Wong and Kingston, meant that most Chinese American texts up to Amy Tan were naturally influenced by non-Chinese American sources. Jade Snow Wong owes more to Charles Dickens and Frances Hodgson Burnett than she does to traditional Chinese literature. Sui Sin Far’s texts have more in common with the works of fellow Canadian L. M. Montgomery, and Frank Chin’s works, in their anger and energy, call to mind African-American texts of the DuBois period. Wenxin Li, in her call to resurrect Sui Sin Far as a prominent figure in Chinese American literary history, comments on what she sees as the tragedy of Sui Sin Far falling off the map from the 1910s to the late 1970s, but more importantly, documents the history of a Chinese American literature which grew into being out of, not a literary vacuum, as previously suggested, but certainly a literary atmosphere that was, by and large, free of traditional *Chinese* or Chinese American literature (2004: 124). When Amy Tan speaks of her literary influences, and how she came to writing, the writers that she recalls are important for their gender, their racial diversity, and their contributions to the genre of magical realism. She does not name any Chinese or Chinese American writers, although she later comments that Kingston, too, was an early influence.

I didn’t start reading fiction again regularly until 1985. I don’t think it was coincidence that most of what I read was by women writers, among them: Flannery O’Connor, Isabel Allende, Louise Erdrich, Eudora Welty, Laurie Colwin, Alice Adams, Amy Hempel, Alice Walker, Lorrie Moore, Anne Tyler, Alice Munro, Harriet Doerr, and Molly Giles. I was not gender-exclusive: I also read works by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Raymond Carver,

David Leavitt, Richard Ford, and Tobias Wolff. But mostly I read fiction by women, because I had so rarely read novels by women in my adult years, and I found I enjoyed their sensibilities, their voices, and what they had to say about the world. I was feeling again the thrill I had felt as a child choosing my own books, falling in love with the characters, reading stories because I couldn't stop myself. Now I kept reading, day and night, until I couldn't stop myself from *writing*...when my first book was published, in 1989, I was at the advanced age of thirty-seven. Interviewers asked me why I had waited so long to write fiction. I could answer only, "It never occurred to me that I could." By that I didn't mean I lacked the desire...I didn't think I could because I wasn't an expert on white whales or white males (2004: 318-319).

It becomes increasingly easy to recognise the gap between the traditional Chinese 'talk-story' which *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Hundred Secret Senses* have too-often been compared to, and the reality of Tan's literary background – a bevy of female, minority, ethnic writers, and the traditional white male writers of her early American education. This is not to argue that there is no relationship between Chinese talk-story and Tan's work, or that two disparate genres and styles should not be compared. It is, however, to argue that when the structure of *The Joy Luck Club* is likened to a *mahjong* table, or a Chinese puzzle box, or when E. D. Huntley posits that, 'by crafting her novels as records of the act of storytelling, Tan is working in an honoured and ancient Chinese tradition called *talk story* (*gong gu tsai*), a felicitous combination of genres from Chinese oral tradition articulated in local vernaculars in narrative form,' an entire, and

more likely, source of critical comparison is being overlooked (1998: 24). As Dunick puts it, ‘scholarship about Chinese American literature became more recognized and integrated into the university curriculum after the highly successful *Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, but imposing the same critical paradigms on the works of Amy Tan (and perhaps other Chinese American women writers) has confined and distorted the discussion of Tan’s texts’ (2006: 16). Reading Tan as a descendant of Kingston alone, or even reading Tan as a foreign writer – the *gong gu tsai* comparison – is either to misread Tan, or to misplace her in a genre that is unhelpful to understanding her works, both internally, and within the context of Chinese American literature.

A key example of this is how Tan’s use of form has been read. Talk story, mahjong table, certain Buddhist conceptions of Zen, and the Chinese puzzle box mentioned earlier – what has been overlooked is the basic frame story. *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Hundred Secret Senses*, certainly, are fairly obvious examples of frame stories. *The Joy Luck Club* is also structurally a frame story, made slightly more complex due to the many individual stories contained within the greater frame of Jing-Mei (June) Woo’s finding out about her half-sisters after her mother’s death, leading to her decision to go to China to meet them at the end of the story.

Tan’s debt to the postmodern form, as well, is something that has been largely neglected. The fragmented nature of the mother’s stories, the rewriting of known histories (particularly in the mother’s cases), the resistance to clear delineations of reality and dream – are traditional postmodern techniques, as is the thematic

preoccupation with identity, boundaries and flux. Yet exploring this debt has been eschewed in favour of either sociological dissection or an attribution to influences beyond the American literary sphere. This disparity of treatment is something which needs to be dissected further, but for now, it is more important to summarize that Tan's debt to classic American literature is part of what makes her works so readable. Her forms and themes are familiar, although misread as exotic and foreign – which is, as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong has already pointed out – part of their appeal. Nevertheless, the mistaken tendency to refer Chinese American literature back to traditional Chinese sources is exemplified in studies of Tan's body of work, and the fallacy of this approach should be kept in mind when considering Chinese American literature. There needs to be a resistance to the tendency to place Chinese American texts only in comparison to each other, to the exclusion of all other influences.

Saving Fish from Drowning – The failure of the Amy Tan Phenomenon

Thus far, this chapter has explored The Amy Tan Phenomenon in detail. The chapter has established that the three main factors to Tan's success have been timing, accessibility and familiarity. It has also tried to show that these three factors have limited critical discourses in Chinese American literature, and that these critical paradigms continue to constrict Chinese American literary study. If Amy Tan's popularity can highlight such limitations, it would be as well to look briefly at her one work that comparatively, has not achieved as much critical and popular acclaim. *Saving Fish from Drowning* is Tan's fifth novel and the only one to venture beyond America, and beyond the mother-daughter paradigm (although the main protagonist and storyteller, Bibi Chen, is both Chinese-American and has

negative memories of her mother figure, the novel is populated by a cast of characters who take over the story).

The critical reception of *Saving Fish from Drowning* is mixed, but it is generally agreed that it is one of Tan's weaker works. The general consensus seems to be that there is too large an ensemble of characters, and that the humor which the novel aims at, falls flat. There is agreement that the novel works best when it sticks to the themes that Tan has explored in her other four novels, what Barbara McMichael of the *Seattle Times* terms 'the perplexities of mother-daughter relationships and the complexities of cultural interfaces' (2005: 1), and becomes tangled when it explores imperialism, human rights, and a largely one-dimensional cast of characters (who are not Chinese American). I would agree that for mainly stylistic reasons, *Saving Fish from Drowning* is not as easy to enter into as Tan's other novels. For example, it frequently draws attention to itself as a novel, and employs a number of narrative tricks to keep the reader aware of its standing as a work of fiction. However, I would also argue that this novel offers a lot of insight thematically into Tan's other novels, and stylistically into her narrative technique.

Nevertheless, this abrupt departure from her usual mother-daughter formulations coupled with a relatively poor reception, begs the question: is Tan being penalized for daring to venture outside the box of acceptable Chinese American themes – a box which she, in large part, helped to define?

Saving Fish from Drowning was published in 2005, sixteen years after *The Joy Luck Club*. The study of ethnic and minority literatures is no longer in its infancy, and for better or worse, the event of 9/11 has moved the focus of hybrid literatures in America beyond the Chinese American, on to the Arab American. Beyond that, both the advent of the Internet and advanced globalisation have created an atmosphere that is not only receptive to, but eager for texts which explain and explore identity in a world that is increasingly borderless (or at least has a more fluid conception of borders). One would imagine that in this kind of atmosphere, the boundaries of what defines a Chinese American text would enlarge into greater inclusivity. Yet what the greater part of the reviews call for in Tan's work, is a return to the themes of her previous novels. They suggest she would be better off returning to her mother-daughter territories. 'Amy Tan is wonderful at old fictions of ancient lands; let us hope she will return to that territory in the future' (2005: 2), suggests Solomon. This comment reveals much of the limitations of Chinese American literary study still – it fails to recall, for example, that Tan's fictions are based in America rather than in 'ancient lands'. This desire for Tan to keep her fiction in the realm of the familiar and the accessible suggests that Chinese American literature is still being held to certain ethnographic expectations that are limiting and unproductive.

In this chapter, I have briefly mapped out an overview of Chinese American literature, and the uniqueness of Tan's place in it. Within this mapping, I hope it has become clear that the factors which have contributed to Tan's popularity have also limited Chinese American critical discourses. These limitations suggest that a critical reassessment of Chinese American critical approaches needs to be

undertaken. Tan's work in Chinese American literature has functioned so far as the starting point from which writers such as Gish Jen, Anchee Min, David Henry Hwang and so on can be explored. As such, her body of work needs to be re-examined if the field of Chinese American literary study is to break free of and move beyond the fundamental misconceptions and feuds which have shaped it thus far.

Keeping in mind the fallacies of the critical approaches so far, it is hoped that a fresh and new examination of the neglected religious trope within Tan's work can function as a starting point from which a new understanding of and fresh perspectives on Chinese American literature can begin. Having traced the ubiquity of the religious theme in Chinese American literature, the following chapter will begin to perform a critical reading of the religious in Tan's body of work.

Chapter Three

Kitchens, Gods, Wives: The religions of Amy Tan

The first chapter of this thesis aimed at establishing the ubiquity of the religious theme in Chinese American literature. In tracing the religious theme, it also established an intertextual relationship between key Chinese American works in developing this theme. Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston's treatment of the religious drew on each other's and previous treatments of the theme in Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*.

The previous chapter established the importance of Amy Tan's works in Chinese American literature, and their place as the juncture from which critical approaches, already influenced by Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston's pen wars, begin to solidify into critical paradigm. It also mapped out the key limitations of Chinese American literary study which critical study of Amy Tan's oeuvre has helped to highlight.

This chapter hopes to look more closely at the contributions of Tan's works to the religious theme, and in doing so help to develop fresh thematic and critical approaches for the study of Chinese American literature. I believe that careful delineation of the religious theme in Tan's body of work can help in resisting the conflation of race, religion and culture. This in turn can help to free Chinese American literature from the homogenizing effects of such a conflation, and do justice to the complex and fluid nature of Chinese American literary identity. This examination will have recourse to the intertextual responses to Sui Sin Far, Jade Snow Wong, Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston's work in Amy Tan's texts.

The first part of this chapter will focus on Tan's treatment of Christianity, the religion that has been the subject of most significant attention in Chinese American literature. The chapter will then go on to examine Tan's treatment of religions that have traditionally been associated with Asia and Asian America. Although this is a thematic approach to Tan's work, by addressing a theme that has been neglected in Chinese American literary study for too long, I hope this reading will serve as a stepping stone in opening up Chinese American critical discourse.

It is useful to note at this point that Tan's treatment of religion is as pervasive as that of previous Chinese American literature. All five of her novels, as well as her memoir, deal seriously with religions of the East and the West. Despite this, it continues to be a theme largely ignored by academics and critics, for the reasons outlined in chapter one. Where there have been studies, they have been confined to theological discussions comparing religions as they are portrayed in Tan's work and the real world practice of such religions; for example, Patricia L. Hamilton's 1999 article 'Feng Shui, Astrology, and the Five Elements: Traditional Chinese Belief in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*'. The exception to this is Sheng-mei Ma's "'Chinese and Dogs'" in Amy Tan's "The Hundred Secret Senses": Ethnicizing the Primitive a la New Age' (2001), which echoes Chin's frustration with Tan and Kingston's treatment of the religious, although Ma substitutes 'Christian Orientalist agenda' with 'yuppie' 'New Age' (2001; 30) consumerism. Ma, like Chin, accuses Tan of playing on the Orientalist fantasies of her mainstream following of white, middle-class suburbanites. Where Chin accuses Tan of using the emasculation of Asian males in order to fulfil the Orientalist

trope that non-white males are neutered or feminine in nature, Ma updates this accusation by accusing Tan of primitivizing Eastern religions in order to fulfil the Orientalist trope of non-white identity as being fundamentally animalistic in nature; closer to beast than to man. Despite this relative scarcity of material, Chin and Ma's critiques of Tan's treatment of religion provide an excellent and appropriate starting point from which to begin charting the progress of the religious trope through Tan's work.

The limitations of this study unfortunately preclude an in-depth exploration of each of Tan's five novels. To this end, this chapter will primarily respond to Chin and Ma's critiques using Tan's most recent two works, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) and *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005). *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, on the whole, revisits and revises many of the religious themes which were drawn out in *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) and *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) within Tan's familiar and trademark matrilineal, intercultural setting, and as such is a suitable text to operate as representative of these earlier works. *Saving Fish*, Tan's most recent novel to date, has been received as an anomalous break from this usual setting. I would posit, however, that *Saving Fish* is not so much a break as it is an inversion of Tan's other works, and that it is within and through this difference that more light can be shed on Tan's treatment of the religious theme as it has progressed through Chinese American literature.

'Girls of New Destiny' - The Missionaries

Both Chin and Ma's accusations of Tan's pandering to the Orientalist fantasies/agenda of her mainstream audience are predicated upon her treatment of

the exotic. Their definition of the exotic has generally referred to those aspects of Chinese American culture and tradition which have drawn on an Asian rather than an American source and nativity. The term 'exotic' in this sense carries with it connotations of 'manufactured otherness' (Huggan, 2001: 13). Chin and Ma would stress that Tan deliberately exaggerates and emphasises these instances of difference in order to appeal to her audience. The exotic is thus commodified.

Chin's critiques emerge out of, as previously discussed, a problematic definition of Christianity and autobiography. However, the mainstream popularity of such works as Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Pang-Mei Natasha Chang's *Bound Feet and Western Dress*, and Adeline Yen-Mah's *Falling Leaves*, which are treatises to the positive relationship between success, Westernization and Christianization, is indicative of a body of work in which missionary Christianity is complicit with Chin's feared annihilation of Chinese American culture and ethnicity.

Chin's decision to group Tan within this category is, however, puzzling. The subject of Christian missionaries has been shown to be a major theme within Chinese American literature, featuring with almost unmatched regularity across all the major works which previous chapters have covered. Tan's work is no exception to this, and in fact deals with the subject in more detail than any previous Chinese American literature, with the possible exception of Sin Far's texts.

Certainly, the Christian missionary movement within Tan's work is portrayed in a generally positive light, providing opportunities, privileges and humanitarian aid which were otherwise unavailable to the Chinese, particularly women. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, for example, it is the missionaries who fund and run the orphanage to which LuLing, thrown out by her family after her mother dies, is sent. They provide a home and prospects – which, although limited, are more than the girls can expect elsewhere – to similarly unwanted women and girls: 'Most of the girls were like me, the love children of suicides, singsong girls, and unmarried maidens. Some were like the entertainers GaoLing and I had seen on Beggars Lane – girls without legs or arms, a Cyclops, a dwarf. And there were also half-breed girls, all of them fathered by foreigners, one English, one German, one American' (Tan, 2001: 221). They also receive unwanted babies, the deformed products of incest, and provide a refuge for women like GaoLing, who run away from their abusive, opium-addicted husbands. Despite their relative poverty, the missionaries turn no one away. In a society that has little use for women, the missionaries provide sanctuary, education and opportunity – and this is a role, which is emphasized throughout Tan's body of work. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, it is the missionary movement that establishes the first Chinese school that girls are allowed to attend (Tan, 1991: 101), and which provides English lessons for the mothers when they arrive in America in *The Joy Luck Club* (Tan, 1989: 262). Historically, the educational avenues through which Christian missionaries work have been criticized for their complicity with an agenda of cultural imperialism (ed. Maria Hong, 1993: 402). However the missionaries in Tan's works often go above and beyond the call of duty. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, after the Japanese occupy China, Miss Grutoff refuses to abandon the orphanage despite

knowing that staying will mean her capture and imprisonment in a prisoner-of-war camp. She also sacrifices her personal savings in order to smuggle the orphan girls to Peking. Additionally, during the peak of the turmoil in China, she is able to procure a visa at great personal expense for one of her Chinese friends to escape to America.

Despite this positive portrayal however, it is important to note an important point that effectively debunks Chin's argument for a Christian Orientalist agenda (that seeks to use Christianity as a tool to suppress or annihilate Chinese identity). This is that, contrary to the usual depiction, Chinese protagonists in Tan's work are not passive receptacles of the missionary movement. In fact, I would argue that Tan's Chinese protagonists practice agency when it comes to religion in a way that characters in other Chinese American texts after Sui Sin Far do not. Tan's protagonists are active and engaged – they view Christianity with the polite pitying respect of a host towards his guest. Witness, for example, LuLing's reaction to Miss Grutoff's decision to 'convert the Chinese gods into Christians' (Tan, 2001: 231) by baptizing them with paint. LuLing reasons, 'the Chinese gods understood that we were living in a Western household run by Americans. If the gods could speak, they, too, would insist that the Christian deities have the better position' (2001: 231). She ends with the dig, 'Chinese people, unlike foreigners, did not try to push their ideas on others' (2001: 231), as she goes about painting the Buddhist and Taoist statues into semblances of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. In this case, LuLing's obedience and assent do not mean passivity and acceptance, but the cooperation and respect accorded by a host to his guest. LuLing empowers herself through this understanding of the relationship. In doing so, she also

subverts the historical discourse of the powerful Chinese missionary and thankful Chinese recipient. This discourse is most aptly articulated in the skits that the Chinese girls at the missionary orphanage are trained to perform whenever they have 'foreign' visitors.

Whenever special visitors came by the school, Miss Grutoff had us perform a skit and Miss Towler played piano music, very dramatic to hear, like the kind in silent movies. One group of girls held up signs that were connected to Old Fate: opium, slaves, the buying of charms. They stumbled around on bound feet and fell down helpless. Then the New Destiny girls arrived as doctors. They cured the opium smokers. They unbound the feet of the fated ones and picked up brooms to sweep away the useless charms. In the end, they thanked God and bowed to the special guests, the foreign visitors to China, thanking them as well for helping so many girls overcome bad fate and move forward with their New Destiny. In this way, we raised a lot of money, especially if we could make the guests cry (Tan, 2001: 222).

The special skit performed encapsulates the relationship of power that formed the usual discourse between the Christian missionaries and the Chinese, a relationship that Chin both acknowledges and fiercely opposes. Chin, who has initiated the strongest articulations of this discourse, has failed to observe in his critiques that Tan's work continuously subverts this discourse. Perhaps this is because his own work, which has aimed at unsettling this discourse, has been primarily adversarial and confrontational in approach. He has aimed to unsettle by articulating the problem, thus his distillation of the discourse down to the trope of

Christian/American and non-Christian/Chinese, and has strongly advocated this method for other Chinese American writers. However, Tan's refusal to adhere to this treatment of the trope is not a sign of complicity with the 'Christian Orientalist agenda', but of subversion. Such a misreading shows how critical it is not to remain confined to the existing critical paradigms, and to continuously search for new and alternative approaches. For example, despite the opportunities and advantages that the Christian missionaries offer LuLing and GaoLing, also outlined in the skit above (escape from slavery, opium smokers, and the social stigma that comes from LuLing's lineage) their primary response is not one of gratitude, but of opportunism. Additionally, they refuse to comply with the perception the missionaries have of the debt of gratitude that they owe – LuLing and GaoLing see themselves as tolerating these foreign interlopers, rather than welcoming them. LuLing's silent cooperation is a position that has echoes in Tan's other works. In *The Joy Luck Club*, when Clifford St. Clair begins courting Ying-ying, he buys her 'cheap gifts: a glass figurine, a prickly brooch of cut glass, a silver-colored cigarette lighter' (Tan, 1989: 250). Like the missionaries, St. Clair expects Ying-ying to be overcome with gratitude, 'as if he were a rich man treating a poor country girl to things we had never seen in China' (1989: 250). He mistakes her silence for awe, not knowing 'that such things were nothing to me, that I was raised with riches he could not even imagine' (1989: 250); her silence is that of courtesy. Ying-ying's disdainful tone is clear in her heavily ironic use of cliché – the 'rich man' and the 'poor country girl'. Her mastery of this cliché indicates her internal resistance to St. Clair's attempts to make her occupy his narrative. Yet this resistance manifests itself in the nothingness of a silence that St. Clair cannot penetrate. Her emphasis on the cheapness of St. Clair's gifts also

dwells on her own ability to see more deeply than St. Clair – the ‘glass’ nature of the gifts is repeated twice, as if to emphasise how clearly she understands St. Clair and his narratives, whereas he understands her not at all. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan as Nunumu allows Pastor Amen to believe that he has converted her. ‘I didn’t tell Miss Banner to correct him. Then he would have been more ashamed that his hundred converts was not even one’ (Tan, 1995: 55). Kwan is able to predict Pastor Amen’s feelings of shame if he were to know the truth. His feelings are an open book to her, whereas hers are an enigma to him. Also there is a repeated motif of replacing the gratitude that the Chinese are supposed to feel towards the missionaries with pity. The subversions of these emotional expectations are used to correct the imbalance of power that has traditionally powered deployments of the religious trope.

The repeated motif of Rice Christianity contributes to this subversion. It is significant that none of Tan’s main protagonists genuinely convert to Christianity. Instead, they become adept at projecting a façade of conversion in order to opportunistically benefit from it. Lindo Jong, in *The Joy Luck Club*, for example, learns how to manipulate the customs and immigration paperwork by calling herself a student of theology – ‘Americans all have different ideas about religion, so there are no right or wrong answers. Say to them I’m going for God’s sake, and they will respect you’ (Tan, 1989: 258). In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia reflects that ‘praying meant saying the nice things that other people wanted to hear’, (Tan, 1995: 8) so she prays publicly ‘to God and Jesus to help me be good’ (1995: 8) which has the desired effect on her mother. Pastor Amen and his missionaries are pleased to welcome ‘beggars, a few Hakka God Worshippers,

also an old woman who pressed her hands together and bowed three times to the altar, even though she was told over and over again not to do that anymore' (1995: 52), failing to realise that they are there not for spiritual fare but for the free bowl of rice that is offered after the sermon. Conversion is depicted as a commodity that can be bartered for material gain such as visa entry into America, a new family, or a bowl of rice. This commodification inverts the commodification of Asian and Asian American culture, as a Western religion is being commodified for a Chinese market. This is in contrast to the American characters who usually populate the fringes of Tan's work, and who have commodified aspects of Eastern religion, such as yoga and meditation, in order to increase their social status.

None of Tan's main protagonists convert genuinely; in this way they become like the Buddhist and Taoist statues that LuLing and her fellow students are forced to paint over. Like the statues, the conversions are cosmetic; a thin layer of paint that hardly disguises the constant nature of the god or girl beneath. LuLing points out the incredible and absolute change that the missionaries are asking: from a gruesome Taoist diorama of the Underworld to a peaceful nativity scene. 'No matter what Miss Grutoff said, most of the girls did not think the nativity statues were singing "Joy to the World"' (Tan, 2001: 232), due to their still-screaming mouths. Such a change cannot be effected in the all-encompassing way that the missionaries hope. *The Kitchen God's Wife's* Old Aunt articulates the problem when railing against the Western missionary education received by Winnie's nameless mother. 'The foreign teachers want to overturn all order in the world! Confucius is bad, Jesus is good! Girls can be teachers, girls do not have to marry. For what purpose do they teach this? Upside-down thinking! – that's what got her

into trouble' (Tan, 1991: 103). The consequence of this is that Winnie's mother – although she does not convert - becomes dissatisfied, joins the revolutionaries and runs away. However it is the family's reaction to her actions that is dwelt on, rather than the fate of Winnie's mother. This emphasis shifts the sympathy from the converted to the story that is often neglected and untold in stories of conversions – that of the family who is left behind. Although Winnie cannot sympathize with the patriarchal system that exiles her mother, she is also able to recognise that her family feels confused, bewildered and betrayed. This is a point of view that many critics, in their rush to brand and condemn the patriarchal and canonize the individualistic, Americanized refugee (see Jade Snow Wong and Adeline Yen-Mah), have forgotten – that the emergence of the individual often came at the expense of a community and traditions that had been in place for centuries. This tendency has been condemned by Chin as 'perpetuating and advancing the stereotype of a Chinese culture so foul, so cruel to women, so perverse, that good Chinese are driven by the moral imperative to kill it' (Chin, 1991: 11). Certainly, although there are frank depictions, in Tan's work, of the cruelties and limitations that the (patriarchal) families imposed on their daughters, they are balanced out with a look at individual instances of goodness from within the structure, placing the structure of power at fault rather than an essentialist notion of race and goodness.

The power of cultural context is examined further in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. LuLing dwells at some length on the difference between the American-raised Chinese and the native Chinese: 'The girls who had grown up in the orphanage since they were babies thought this would be a lot of fun. But some of the students

who had come later did not want to deface the gods and tempt their wrath. They were so scared that when they were dragged to the statues they screamed and foamed at the mouth, then fell to the ground as if possessed' (Tan, 2001: 231). It is only those who have been brought up in an American orphanage who are able to comfortably inhabit the Christian sphere – those who have come from a traditionally religious Chinese background, even those who have been victimized by those Chinese traditions and gods, are unable to let go. This state of affairs is symbolic of the greater discourses that are at stake in Chinese American literature, including the lines that are continually being redrawn and redefined between American-born Chinese, Chinese-born Americans, second and third generation Chinese Americans, and Americans.

The articulation of this cultural context is at odds with the stark cultural dichotomy of Christianized/American and non-Christianized/Chinese which has been propagated by Chinese American treatments of religion in literature. *The Bonesetter's Daughter's* Sister Yu is a deconstruction of this binary structure, and a unique contribution to the treatment of the religious in Chinese American literature. Sister Yu is the most overt challenge to the Christianized American/non-Christianized Chinese trope. Despite the significant presence of Christianity and missions in Tan's novels, there are very few Chinese characters in her body of work that stand out as devout Christians. When they do appear, they tend to be marginal, and, prior to *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, male. Jimmy Louie in *The Kitchen God's Wife* is perhaps the most visible, and even he is not much more than a footnote in Winnie's story. He is also a fully Americanized Chinese – a GI, no less - playing into Chin's accusations that it is impossible to be

both Christian and Chinese. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, however, the converted Chinese Sister Yu, who came to the orphanage at seven, resists this trope. Sister Yu's reason for conversion is never explicitly elaborated upon, but when speaking to new arrivals, she often reminds them of her own 'old fate' (Tan, 2001: 222), when she had been forced to beg, then starved and thrown away by her sister's husband. 'In this school, Sister Yu said, we could eat as much as we wanted. We never had to worry that someone would kick us out. We could choose what to believe' (2001: 222). Although implicit in this statement is the fact that material gain is as attractive as the spiritual, Sister Yu's conversion to Christianity is proven to be undoubtedly genuine. More importantly, she is also the only character who is able to appropriate and repackage Christianity in a way that is both totally Chinese and still unmistakably Christian. Her way of explaining Christianity to new arrivals, for example, is contextual and comprehensive: 'However, she added, any student who did not choose to believe in Jesus was a corpse-eating maggot, and when this unbeliever died, she would tumble into the underworld, where her body would be pierced by a bayonet, roasted like a duck, and forced to suffer all kinds of tortures that were worse than what was happening in Manchuria' (2001: 222). Not for Sister Yu the attempt to rewrite Chinese religion, in the way that Miss Towler and Miss Grutoff try: 'Buddha became fat Jesus, the Goddess of Mercy was Mary of the Manger, the Three Pure Ones, boss gods of the Taoists, turned into Three Wise Men, and the Eighteen Lohan of Buddha were converted to the Twelve Apostles with six sons. Any small figures in hell were promoted to angels' (2001: 231). Sister Yu makes Christianity her own, and makes it work *with* and *alongside* her Chinese identity. The fact that she does not yearn, like the other characters, for an American future – when Miss

Gruttoff offers her a visa to America, she firmly declines, saying, ‘to be frank, while I have Christian love for Miss Gruttoff and our foreign friends, I don’t care to be around other Americans. Civil war or not, I’d rather stay in China’ (2001: 268) – makes a strong point. Despite having been at the monastery since early childhood, Sister Yu remains attached to Chinese culture, while also recognising its ills. It is interesting to note that Sister Yu has a predecessor in Jade Snow Wong’s Christian/Confucian father, Mr. Wong – Sister Yu remains unique, however, in that she is antagonistic towards the patriarchal family structure which Wong’s father champions, and, unlike Mr Wong, Sister Yu sees no conflict between her Chineseness and her Christianity, whereas Mr Wong struggles to reconcile the two. Sister Yu is also a much more sympathetic character than Wong’s father – despite her strictness, she is kind and generous. Sister Yu’s uncompromising loyalty to China and complete Christianity are a challenge to the dichotomous trope of the Americanized Christian/non-Christianized Chinese. Yu’s presence as a well-balanced and reasonable answer to Chin’s argument that there can be no reconciliation between Chineseness and Christianity is significant, especially in contrast to the way that Tan’s main protagonists approach Christianity. The challenge to this trope does not stop with Sister Yu. There is a continual emphasis in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* on the importance of cultural context. I would argue that this emphasis represents a new and fresh approach to the religious trope in which the cultural dichotomy of the past morphs into a much more complex and engaged understanding of the boundaries of race, culture and religion.

For example, LuLing, like the heroines who come before her, chooses a different approach to Christianity. Like her predecessors, she is shrewd, calculating and yet compassionate (mostly due to her own unfortunate experiences). Her approach is articulated through her reaction to the painting over of the Buddhist and Taoist statues. Instead of cheerful enthusiasm or horrified rejection, LuLing reasons that ‘I was not afraid. I believed that if I was respectful to both the Chinese gods and the Christian one, neither would harm me’ (2001: 231). In this way, LuLing plays on the relativity of truth, craftily hedging her bets and paying solemn and equal allegiance to both Chinese tradition and American religion. Although theologically dubious, it also becomes the only way for LuLing to wrest some semblance of control back from a situation in which she is caught between the hopelessness of her life in China, and the cultural and religious imperialism that is all a life in America can offer. Her loyalties, in fact, are not located within the divine, but at the altar of the Self. To LuLing, ‘Christian heaven was like America, a land that was far away, filled with foreigners, and ruled by their laws’ (Tan, 2001: 256). During times of trouble, she prays to ‘Jesus and Buddha, whoever was listening’ (2001: 261) and when a miracle occurs, ‘whether this came from the Western God or the Chinese ones, I don’t know’ (2001: 261). Nor does she care. The fact is, her position as doubly marginalized – female and Chinese to the Americans, and female and of dubious origin to the Chinese – is one of powerlessness. Her refusal to permanently align herself with a side is testament to her understanding that the dynamics of power are continuously in flux – it is the mentality, in fact, of someone who is *taonan* (Tan, 1991: 215), a state of shock and fear that goes so deep, that it resists the very concept of stability. LuLing’s inability to accept Christianity and forsake her Chinese gods stems from this

position of being doubly marginalized and helpless. Winnie articulates this in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, when reflecting on how difficult it is for her to be free of that feeling of *taonan*.

When Jesus was born he was already the son of God. I was the daughter of someone who ran away, a big disgrace. And when Jesus suffered, everybody worshipped him. Nobody worshipped me for living with Wen Fu. I was like that wife of Kitchen God. Nobody worshipped her either. He got all the excuses. He got all the credit. She was forgotten (Tan, 1991: 255).

For Winnie, the discrepancy between what she has learnt of Christianity from Jimmy, and the reality of what she has suffered, re-emphasizes to her that the status quo is constantly changing, and that as an immigrant and a female, they will never be in her favour.

All the mothers in Tan's works, in fact, inhabit that same position of being marginalized both in China and in America, and thus also possess the same inability to let go of one religion for another, instead holding on to both simultaneously. In this way, they are deliberately distinct from their daughters. Sheng-mei Ma has suggested that the religions of the East and West are transformed into commodities for Tan's yuppie protagonists, but this is only partly true. Although LuLing and the mothers do see Christianity and the other religions as commodities to be acquired, much as they acquire jade, gold and money, the value that they place on these commodities differs greatly from the value that their daughters place on them. In the same way, for example, that the

Americanized daughters cannot understand why their immigrant mothers pinch pennies and hoard vouchers despite no longer being in a state of destitution, it is beyond the daughters' abilities to understand how LuLing and the mothers are able to inhabit different and sometimes contradictory religions simultaneously. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Jing-Mei thinks of her mother's religion as 'just more of her Chinese superstitions, beliefs that conveniently fit the circumstances' (Tan, 1989: 31). In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan, at the last, prays to both Pastor Amen's god and her own. It is in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, however, that LuLing's polytheistic perspective is fully developed. Pearl comes close to understanding when she observes Grand Auntie's funeral.

I guess this means Grand Auntie's funeral will be Buddhist. Although she attended the First Chinese Baptist Church for a number of years, both she and my mother stopped going right after my father died. In any case, I don't think Grand Auntie ever gave up her other beliefs, which weren't exactly Buddhist, just all the superstitious rituals concerning attracting good luck and avoiding bad. On those occasions when I did go up to her apartment, I used to play with her altar, a miniature red temple containing a framed picture of a Chinese god. In front of that was an imitation-brass urn filled with burnt incense sticks, and on the side were offerings of oranges, Lucky Strike cigarettes, and an airline mini-bottle of Johnnie Walker Red whiskey. It was like a Chinese version of a Christmas crèche (Tan, 1991: 19).

Pearl shrewdly recognises that even in Christianity, Grand Auntie does not give up her other beliefs, but fails to realise that for Grand Auntie and Winnie, it is not

a matter of meshing the different religions together. She misses the mark when she comments of Winnie that ‘to this day it drives me crazy, listening to her various hypotheses, the way religion, medicine, and superstition all merge with her own beliefs’ (1991: 29), but when she teases Winnie, saying, ‘I didn’t know you believed in that stuff’, Winnie gives her the true explanation: “‘What’s to believe,” my mother said testily. “This is respect”” (2001: 24).

For LuLing and the mothers, respect is more useful and more relevant than belief. Assimilating Christianity alongside Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship and various forms of polytheistic belief is not a matter solely of spiritual belief, but of respect. Unlike their daughters, who will in a sense control the market in which religion is a commodity, LuLing and the mothers are at the mercy of the market and its shifting values, just as immigrants attempting to enter the United States are at the mercy of the immigration officers and their tests of truth. Like those immigrants, stockpiling their falsified stories of paper sons and family waiting in America, LuLing and the mothers stockpile religions for times of hardship. They will not, unlike their daughters, dare to make demands of the market. Their economic mentality is that of hoarders, not spenders. However, what I wish to emphasize is that the very fact that they are able to acquire and master these commodities is a sign of empowerment rather than enslavement.

That this is a sign of empowerment becomes clear as LuLing and the mothers, in mastering their religions, begin to understand how to manipulate them. Lindo Jong, in *The Joy Luck Club*, is the ultimate example of this. By understanding the religion she is born into, she is able to take destiny into her own hands by

manipulating curses and dreams to escape her first marriage in China. She also moves into her second marriage in America by means of a carefully selected and vetted fortune cookie. These actions exemplify how absolutely Tan's Chinese protagonists have been able to convert religion into self-serving commodity. It is for this reason that the other mothers in the Joy Luck Club are anxious to master the religions that they come across – thus their reasoning that if they can memorise the twenty-six malignant gates which they are constantly fearful of (Tan, 1989: 88), they will be able to prevent them. These permutations of belief and reality are foreshadowed in Kingston's treatment of the religious, but where Kingston emphasizes the necessity of leaving one religion before one can master and commodify the next, Tan's protagonists refuse to relinquish any of their power.

This struggle to master the dominant religions finds its triumphant culmination in Winnie's creation of her own goddess, Lady Sorrowfree, at the close of *The Kitchen God's Wife*. This goddess, female, divorced, is as marginalized as the women she represents, and her emergence as a divinity symbolizes the mothers' own emergence as empowered in their abilities to influence and mould the worlds around them.

Chin's argument that 'Christian conversion is cultural extinction and behavior modification' (Chin, 1991: 18) is what lies at the root of the Americanized Christian/non-Christianized Chinese trope, and has motivated his labelling of Tan's work as having a Christian, Orientalist agenda. Chin sees Christianity as a tool for the Western agenda of Chinese cultural annihilation. It should be clear by

now that Tan's portrayal of the Christian missionary movement, like Sin Far's, while positive, has by no means been uncritical. Additionally, Tan has consistently resisted and subverted this trope by positioning and allowing her protagonists to use Christianity as a commodity, existing side-by-side with the maintenance of their previous religions, so that they are the wielders rather than the victims of Christianity. By placing this tendency primarily in the mothers, who remain tied to their Chinese cultural heritage much more than their daughters, Tan also ruthlessly resists the conflation of religion with culture and race, effectively de-stabilizing and deconstructing the trope. Having thus dealt with this major trope in Chinese American literature, it is now time to consider the other ways in which Tan has dealt with the theme of religious belief in her work.

San Francisco Yuppies - Commodities of the East and West

The accusations that Tan's treatment of Chinese Americans and China has exploited the exotic in order to reinforce stereotype have already been touched upon in chapter two. Ma's essay, 'Chinese and Dogs', however, has been instrumental in narrowing the focus of these critiques to Tan's specific treatment of the religious. The two main prongs of Ma's critique are the function of Tan's daughters as yuppies, and the contention that Tan has deliberately ethnicized the primitive and spiritual in order to achieve a stronger contrast with the rational humanism of the West.

Ma contends that Tan's daughters, who are often interracial, and almost invariably professionals who inhabit upwardly mobile lifestyles, are a sign of Tan's 'obsessive whitening' (Ma, 2001: 31) and 'assimilationism' (2001: 31). She

argues that the reason for the daughters' very specific placement is as an entry point through which the mainstream reader can peer voyeuristically at the exotic and fulfil old Orientalist fantasies. The interracial daughters, who Ma argues are little more than ciphers, function as vessels through which the readership can experience Asian and Asian American culture. The similarity of the interracial daughters to mainstream readership would facilitate this occupation even more effectively. This would enable the readership to fulfil the ultimate aspiration of the search for 'authenticity', a dual goal of commodification and surveillance (Huggan, 2001: 155) that Huggan, in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* correctly remarks is an anxiety-ridden conceit of the privileged. One of the reasons for Tan's popularity, as discussed in chapter two, remains its ability to give an increasingly sophisticated readership a congratulatory pat on the back for sidestepping the traditional Orientalist pitfalls.

Although Ma's contention is both compelling and plausible, I would like to offer an alternative reading, one which takes into account the progression of the religious trope over previous works of Chinese American literature in its entirety, and with closer attention to Tan's treatment of religion over her entire body of work.

The overall structure of Tan's first four novels is strikingly similar. The protagonist through whose eyes the stories of the mothers are narrated is the Chinese daughter approaching her mid-thirties. This daughter has an established lifestyle that includes a professional but unfulfilling career of modest success in a creative industry - copywriter, photographer, ghostwriter. In her personal life, her

partner is of a different race to herself and resistant to Chinese culture. She is not religious, and considers her mother's beliefs outdated and superstitious. Where there is spiritual awareness, it orients around the commodified and the trendy – Olivia in *Senses*, for example, treats the concept of karma with a 'casual attitude verging on unwitting mockery that New Agers take toward other traditions' (Ma, 2001: 33), and Ruth in *Daughter* is dedicated to yoga. Ma's identification of the daughters as prototypes of 'San Francisco yuppies' (2001: 30) is fairly accurate, but the conclusion that Ma draws from the presence of this prototype is incomplete.

The triggers for the daughters' exploration of spirituality and the subsequent unravelling of the mothers' narrative are death and loss – death of the mother in *The Joy Luck Club*, of the self in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, divorce in *Senses* and Alzheimer's in *Daughter*. It is essentially the threat of the loss of the cultural translator (the mother), which galvanizes the daughters' search for spiritual meaning. Prior to this search, however, the fact that the daughters live privileged metropolitan lifestyles is significant in as much as they have, in doing so, fulfilled their mothers' hopes for them. Rather than viewing this position as a liability that threatens the culture and exposes it to commodification, the reality is that they have fulfilled the possibilities that immigrants envision for their second-generation. This was most particularly true of Chinese immigrants. The restrictions that were placed on Chinese entry into the United States even after the lifting of the Exclusion Act meant that a disproportionate amount of Chinese professionals were allowed entry, only to realise upon arrival that the only occupations they were able to procure were menial and underpaid positions. By

having her protagonists in a position of yuppie privilege from the outset, it can be argued that their interracial status actually empowers them, as both the East and West are open to their consumption. From this position, the daughters are able to make informed decisions about their religious choices via the translations of their mothers, as well as their own experiences. The fact that they are, unlike their mothers, free to choose the religion they want, is a victory. The daughters reap the rewards of their mothers' struggles, and this has nothing to do with access to an Orientalist fantasy, but with freedom of choice.

Keeping this in mind, I believe that it is in *Saving Fish from Drowning* that Tan evinces the most direct response to the critiques of her treatment of the religious. A closer examination of this text, then, is necessary in order to round up Tan's contribution and response to the uses/abuses of the religious trope.

Saving Fish from Drowning: A critical reading

I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter that *Saving Fish from Drowning*, which has often been viewed as an unwelcome departure from Tan's usual oeuvre, could actually be seen as an inversion of her earlier works. As such, it represents not a departure, but a new perspective through which to view the themes and issues that Tan addresses in her earlier novels. It is an almost exact inversion: while Tan's protagonists traditionally view America as the destination and China as the point of origin and ultimately, return, in *Saving Fish from Drowning*, it is America which functions as the point of origin and return and Burma (the stand-in for Asia in this novel) as the destination.

Saving Fish from Drowning, it should also be observed, subtly mimics the popular *Falling Leaves* and *Bound Feet and Western Dress*, as well as the seminal *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, all examples of the traditional “Christian Orientalist” text. Bibi, like Yen Mah, Pang and Snow Wong, is the victim of an unsympathetic patriarchal family structure. Like her predecessors, she reinvents herself. Here, however, is the point of departure. Instead of removing herself from the sphere of the Chinese into the Christian, Bibi throws herself further into it, immersing herself in a career specializing in Eastern religious art and delighting in making an exhibition of herself – she capitalizes on what she considers to be her physical shortcomings, declaring that ‘it was better to be unforgettable than bland’ (2005: 12). This deliberate reversal of the expected narrative – the heroines of Yen Mah, Pang and Snow Wong orient themselves towards the ultimate goal of quiet, nondescript assimilation - acts as a cue for the rest of the novel, for although Bibi’s outrageousness serves as the platform to attract potential clients, her in-depth understanding of the cultural roots of the art she sells is what enables her to commodify and manipulate the Oriental effect to best effect. In this way, Bibi serves as a stand-in for Tan herself, and her position as it has been painted in Chinese American literature and literary study. Tan’s position in Chinese American literature is present in Bibi – in the commercial and mainstream success that her name has become synonymous with, as well Bibi’s unapologetic possession of the very attributes that, in Tan, Chin and Ma have deplored and reviewers praised – her proffering of fictionality and authenticity merged for greatest artistic effect.

In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, the religious trope is repackaged and used to stand not for the divide between American and Chinese, Christian and non-Christian, but to address the issues that have polarized Chinese American literary discourses. Tan's frustration with the misreadings of her work, by readers and critics, is articulated in the treatment that Bibi's painstakingly prepared guide notes for the tourists, receives. Nuances are missed: "And now look," Bibi laments, "they had no idea that the "commentary" I had planted in the itinerary was often meant to be humorous asides" (Tan, 2005: 43). The factual and historical are disregarded for the imagination's rendering of the exotic – Bibi's elucidation on The Grotto of Female Genitalia's socio-cultural context is abandoned in favour of the delights of the tourists' 'fertile' (2005: 76) imaginations, including visions of 'a primordial cave emanating warmth, mystery, comfort, safety, and innate beauty' (2005: 76) and the comically Freudian 'cleft in the mountain with overgrown bushes behind which was a tiny entrance that led into a moist cave' (2005: 76). It is useful to note that the group's collective imaginations express themselves in generalized descriptions of 'mystery, comfort, and safety' rather than any specific details. Such is their relationship with the 'exotic' – predicated on generalized expectations of difference that have been culled from stereotype and clichés. Biggest mistake of all: despite following Bibi's carefully arranged itinerary, 'most of my friends did not bother to read' (2005: 57) the accompanying notes which would have meaningfully and accurately contextualised the new world which they are travelling through. Instead, they enter into it with no tools except the 'clichés used to lure tourists to any site' (2005: 43) to decipher their surroundings. They come armed with preconceived notions of the 'rare, remote, primitive, and strange' (2005:43).

It is using this discrepancy between expectation and reality that *Saving Fish from Drowning* emphasises the importance of cultural translation and reader responsibility when approaching Chinese American texts. It is an issue that has often been raised by Tan in the arena of Chinese American literary studies; she has railed against the notion that the writer, rather than the reader, bears the brunt of responsibility for preventing misunderstanding and misreadings, of using literature ‘as the cart and the horse that hauls away human ills’ (Tan, 2003: 309).

The assumption is that the writer—any writer—by virtue of being published, has a responsibility to the reader. According to this ethic, the writer’s musing, his or her imagination and delight in the world of make-believe, must be tamed and shaped by a higher consciousness of how the work will be interpreted—or rather, *mis*interpreted—by its readers. God forbid that a reader in some remote Texas hamlet believe that all Chinese men today have concubines, or that all Chinese mothers speak in broken English, or that all Chinese kids are chess grand masters (2003: 314).

To those who hold these assumptions, Tan adds, her response is ‘I think you have the responsibility as a reader to think for yourself’ (2003: 315).

This point of view is emphasized throughout *Saving Fish from Drowning*. By depending solely on their tour guides, the group of tourists find themselves in increasingly greater trouble. It begins with the misreading of nuance – Marlyna and Esme mistake a dramatic film re-enactment at the Grotto for a ghostly reality.

At the same time, Harry mistakes the sacred female shrine for a urinal. These two mishaps result in the group being banned from China entirely, although they do manage to buy their way out of any further trouble. However, when they make the same mistake again, it leads to more dire consequences – the group end up trapped in the jungles of Burma, at the mercy of a Karen tribe, their lives threatened by disease and inadequate medication. This time, their attempt to buy their way out of the situation proves disastrous, as the Burmese military junta decides that the gesture confirms their sympathies with the rebel tribe. Ultimately, the group, by virtue of their American citizenship are able to escape the situation relatively unscathed. However, their association with the rebel tribe, the Lord's Army, means that it is the tribe who suffers the consequences. The Lord's Army is quietly obliterated by the junta shortly after the Americans leave Burma. The entire incident is testimony to the fact that misreadings have consequences brought about by those who, by virtue of their position within the dominant group, possess 'unrestricted movement and free will' (Huggan, 2001: 10). Despite the argument for reader responsibility then, *Saving Fish from Drowning* is brutally honest about that it is the minority group (in this case the Chinese American community) who ultimately have to bear the brunt of misreadings.

The group also bring trouble on themselves when they search for authenticity. Their understanding of authenticity depends on 'a perception of cultural distinctiveness' (2001: 158) that is virtually meaningless when it is remembered that they have no knowledge of the culture in which they find themselves. In other words, the 'authentic' becomes another branch of the 'exotic'. In order to be marketably and recognisably 'authentic' the commodity must be seen to

emphasize cultural difference. In order to achieve that emphasis, it is always difference that is exaggerated.

This search for authenticity is part of the group's bid to distinguish themselves from run-of-the-mill tourists, designating themselves instead as *travellers*. Their delight over 'the native cuisine they had eaten that morning, how they sat among the locals, and it was completely spontaneous, not a tourist activity, but a real experience' (Tan, 2005: 67) is emblematic of reader resistance to bringing anything prepared to a text. The expectation of a reader to treat Chinese American literature as sociology and history, allowing it none of the lapses and deliberations of fiction is akin to the 'self-destructive antics of the anti-tourist tourist' (Huggan, 2001: 180). In *Saving Fish*, this self-destructiveness becomes literal – the group's search for authentic Chinese fare leads to them stopping at a roadside restaurant. Unfortunately, since they do not have the tools with which to judge authenticity, they mistake a hovel 'which even the locals eschewed with authentic disdain' (Tan, 2005: 69) with authentic rusticity, and end up getting dysentery. In contrast, Bibi's carefully researched and prepared restaurant meal of Winter Delicacies, which the group initially disdains for being too 'planned' to be 'authentic' turns out to be their favourite meal, culled from the best of the area's culinary expertise.

This discrepancy between the fantasy of authenticity and reality is more seriously addressed through the difference between the group's understanding of Buddhism, and the Buddhism that they encounter on the way from China to Burma. The episode of the buffalo is dwelt on at length.

Miss Rong had heard that many Americans, especially those who travel to China, love Buddhism. She did not realize that the Buddhism that the Americans before her loved was Zen-like, a form of not-thinking, not-moving, and not-eating anything living, like buffaloes. This blank-minded Buddhism was practiced by well-to-do people in San Francisco and Marin County, who bought organic-buckwheat pillows for sitting on the floor, who paid experts to teach them to empty their minds of the noise of life. This was quite different from the buffalo-torture and bad-karma Buddhism found in China (Tan, 2005: 77).

The Buddhism of the Americans, who are appalled and repulsed by the situation of the buffalo, is Buddhism for the consumer; a way to come to terms with luxury instead of necessity. The group's reaction to 'authentic' Buddhism is symptomatic of the 'self-deceiving fantasies of the Western spiritual tourist' (Huggan, 2001: 180). In both the cases of the buffalo and the restaurant, the Americans prefer the inauthentic to the authentic, and yet they doggedly carry on in their desire to experience the authentic. Their inability to distinguish between the two comes to a head when they are held in the forest by the Lord's Army. The group, until the last, fail to discover why exactly they are being held, not even recognizing the tribe's name for what it is – instead of Lord's Army, they hear Lajame. This continuing misunderstanding is emblematic of their insistence on exoticizing even the familiar in order to achieve authenticity. This position is fully encapsulated in the short exchange that Bennie has with Walter over Heinrich the hotelier's use of the phrase 'Ta-ta'.

“It’s annoying that he uses that British affectation so much,” Bernie said. “Ta-ta! Ta-ta! It’s such a colonial throwback.”

“It’s actually a Burmese expression,” Walter said. “The British conscripted it along with other things.”

“Really?” Bennie thought about this. Ta-ta. The sound of it now seemed more genteel, less arrogant. He sounded it out, feeling the tip of his tongue dance behind his upper teeth. Ta-ta. It was lovely, as a matter of fact (Tan, 2005: 215).

This interchange perfectly encapsulates the fear and the subsequent downfall of the modern day traveller, who has a healthy revulsion to not being recognised as culturally savvy, and who, in consequence, fetishizes cultural difference. This exchange is perhaps also a response to Chin and Ma’s critiques that Tan’s appeal lies in her ability to soothingly allow the reader to feel that they are above being attracted to the Orientalist fantasy (Bennie’s recognition of the postcolonial), while simultaneously reviving the fantasy (his attraction to the phrase when Walter places it as being originally Burmese).

This treatment of the religious trope, also addresses one of the most contentious issues over Tan’s writing – her deployment of myths. These issues come to light in Bibi’s deliberations over the overlap in cultures and religions that exist between China and Burma. The deployment of revised mythologies and narratives is historicized.

Start with a bit of Tibetan Buddhism, add a smidgen of Indian Buddhism, a dab of Han Buddhism, plus a dash each of animism and Taoism. A hodgepodge, you say? No, what is in those temples is an amalgam that is *pure* Chinese, a lovely shabby elegance, a glorious messy motley that makes China infinitely intriguing. Nothing is ever completely thrown away and replaced. If one period of influence falls out of favor, it is patched over. The old views still exist, one chipped layer beneath, ready to pop through with the slightest abrasion (Tan, 2005: 99).

This kind of rewriting is historicized repeatedly in *Saving Fish from Drowning*. It emerges again with The Lord's Army's amalgamation of animism and Christianity. In this way, a case is made to justify Tan's revision of traditional Chinese mythology as a natural consequence of displacement to America. New communities need new myths; the Chinese American community needs a Lady Sorrowfree. Paint obscures but is only superficial, as in the case of *The Bonesetter's Daughter's* painted-over statues. Finally, it is present in the conceit that allows the deceased Bibi to be the narrator of the story, a conceit that is never given resolution. It is not Buddhism, nor Christianity, but something new, 'a mystery, one that never ends' (Tan, 2005: 472), Bibi says.

In using the religious trope as a medium through which to explore and open dialogue on the issues that are still active in Chinese American critical study in *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Tan is using the very theme that has been accused of inviting Orientalist fantasy, to mediate the deconstruction of the fantasy. Tan and Kingston's fictions of Eastern religion have been accused of deliberate

exoticization; prior to that, the stereotype of the inscrutable, spiritually mystic Chinaman has always been a popular Orientalist trope. By using the religious trope to articulate and then subvert this exoticization, Tan deconstructs the trope itself and leaves it open to scrutiny. It also opens up the trope for use beyond its usage as a symbol for American/Asian fissures and uses it to explore the tricky relationship between race, religion, culture and fantasy.

This chapter has taken the first steps in examining the religious theme in Amy Tan's body of work. It has looked carefully at Tan's treatment of Christianity and the ways in which this treatment has destabilized the religious trope as it had been established in previous works of Chinese American literature. This destabilization works toward resisting the conflation of race, culture and religion and allows for a reading of Tan's works in which these separate aspects of identity can be recognized in their complexities and flux. This chapter has also examined *Saving Fish from Drowning* as a critique of the limiting perspectives of the exotic, and the authentic, and its argument for reader responsibility. This reading of *Saving Fish from Drowning* works towards deconstructing the religious trope, and opening it up for usage that will continue to reflect the nuances and complexities of Chinese American literary identity.

Conclusion

It is true, as Susan Koshy notes, that Asian American literary theories and critical methodologies are lagging behind the demographic transformation of Asian Americans and the rapid expansion of Asian American literary productions. Koshy contends that ‘if the expansion of the field proceeds at this pace, without a more substantial theoretical investigation of the premises and assumptions underlying our constructions of commonality and difference, we run the risk of unwittingly annexing the newer literary productions within older paradigms’ (ed. Najmi, 2005: 317). It is for this reason that the exploration into how the religious trope has been developed in the Chinese American literature is so crucial, as it can function as the starting point for a fresh and relevant re-reading of Chinese American literature, unplagued by, or at least cognizant of the pitfalls and presumptions which have resulted in the lag.

In order to facilitate this exploration, this thesis first delved into the reasons why the religious trope has been so neglected over the course of Chinese American literary study. These reasons – the dominance of the gender and ethnic nationalist debates, and the fear of cultural insensitivity that has led to a lack of self-reflexive readers and critics – are significant because their recurrence showcases the extent to which Chinese American critical study has, until recently, limited itself to these themes. As a result, all critical study has been narrowly focused on Chinese American literature’s relationship with socio-political reality to the exclusion of literary form, aesthetic value and its place within the greater context of Western literature.

The thesis established how this critical one-sidedness has resulted in the neglect of one of the most significant themes within Chinese American literature. By mapping representations of the religious from the earliest Chinese American novelist, Sui Sin Far, through to Jade Snow Wong, Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, it has been possible to show the changing scope and focus of Chinese American literature, and how the religious theme has been used as a cipher for the continuously evolving place of the Chinese American in American history.

Before proceeding to look at Tan's treatment of the trope, it became necessary to examine her position within Chinese American literature, as Tan's appearance on the scene marked a formative turning point in the field. Tan's remarkable popular success became a subject of heated contention within the Chinese American literary community, and the role of spokesperson was thrust upon her. When discussing this popularity, I mentioned that Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* heralded the arrival of Chinese American literature back into mainstream consciousness, and that *The Joy Luck Club* was swiftly followed by the publication of several Chinese American works that also achieved popular success. The thesis explored the three main factors of timing, accessibility and familiarity as being pivotal to Tan's success, but also as contributing towards the limitations of Chinese American literary and critical study. By establishing that Tan's popularity significantly influenced and brought to light the ways in which critics and readers were pigeonholing Chinese American literature, it became clear that critical re-readings of Tan were necessary in order to break Chinese American literary study free of its frustrated and outdated critical paradigms.

The third chapter of this thesis was an attempt to launch this process by performing an examination of the religious trope as it is explored in Tan's work, without falling prey to the misconceptions of previous critical approaches. The chapter focused on Tan's treatment of Christianity, the religion that has formed the focus of the religious trope in the field. *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the natural culmination of Tan's earlier novels, was used to examine Tan's treatment of Christianity, which has been accused of pandering to a Christian Orientalist agenda. A closer reading of *The Bonesetter's Daughter* not only debunked this theory, but also showed Tan subverting and expanding the religious theme as it has been used by the giants of Chinese American literature thus far. By doing this, the religious theme is opened up to alternative explorations that are not limited to rigid cultural dichotomies. In the same vein, Tan uses a subversion of the religious trope in *Saving Fish from Drowning* as a platform from which to critique the limiting prescriptions of the exotic and the authentic, making a strong argument for responsible readers who have a role in the interpretation of 'exotic' texts. The religious trope, has been subject to many accusations of mistreatment at the hands of Orientalist discourse. Other Chinese American writers have also used the trope to reinforce essentialist cultural dichotomies. By using the religious trope to mediate the deconstruction and examination of the exotic, Tan resists this usage and opens the trope up to new approaches. In doing this, Tan is inviting readers, critics and writers to likewise take that step beyond Chinese American literature as a cultural mediator into its next incarnation as a complex and evolving literature.

There have been many limitations to this study. Due to the constraints of space, it has only been possible in the final chapter to use *The Bonesetter's Daughter* as a representative for Tan's earlier texts and to examine *Saving Fish from Drowning* in any depth. However I do think that further in-depth study of the religious trope as it occurs in each of Tan's novels would yield a much greater understanding of the development of Chinese American literature. Furthermore, in a post 9/11 world, in which it becomes increasingly crucial to distinguish between the lines of religion, race and culture, Tan's resistance to their conflation in her texts provides a model worthy of further exploration. The continuing development of the religious theme in Chinese American literature – for example, Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* and *A Typical American* are a natural successor to Tan's works – is also a trend which should be examined more closely if critical study is to be revived and rejuvenated. This will only be possible by examining Tan's influence on the trope, in order to avoid the misreadings that have occurred in the past. I would also suggest that the definition of 'Chinese American literature' will have to be continuously revised, redefined and questioned in order to reflect its evolution as a literature. It may be the case that this redefinition will continue to yield fresh interpretations and considerations that will shed light on the religious theme. In this vein, I believe that a more in-depth study could perhaps take into serious consideration other textual influences on the religious theme as it is developed in Chinese American literature. I have examined the religious trope in this thesis primarily as a way of showcasing the limitations and stagnant nature of Chinese American critical study, but it is certainly worthy of deeper attention than I have been able to give it in the previous chapter.

It is my hope that this study will prove to be a starting point from which to consider the ways in which Chinese American literature has been misrepresented and misconceived, without confining it to the paradigms of understanding which have pigeonholed it in the past. The balance of Chinese American literature between its dual responsibilities to representations of a socio-political reality and emotional and artistic truth will continue to be a hard one to strike. However, it is a balance that its key figures have already shown to be deeply and seriously engaged with and invested in. This can only prove to be a positive battle, and a testament to the continuing importance of amplifying marginalized voices in literature. It is to be hoped that this thesis will contribute in some small way towards opening Chinese American literature up to new and alternative readings, ensuring the continuation of a dialogue that will help in finding this balance.

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