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Cannibals and Survivors: Narrative Strategies in Third Culture Literature

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Abstract

In this thesis I look at the narrative strategies at work in my own fiction, *The Glass House*, and also those at work in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, and examine both in light of the context of third culture literature. Sociologically, the term "third culture" describes those people who are raised outside their passport nations as children, in multiple countries, as expats rather than immigrants. Antje M. Rauwerda takes this term from a sociological context and applies it to a literary one and, in doing so, identifies several key concerns which unite third culture fictions. While Rauwerda focuses specifically on these concerns as representing distinct characteristics in third culture literature that set it apart from other international literatures, my project is focused on *how* these characteristics manifest themselves through particular narrative strategies in both my own work and that of Martel's.

To conduct my research I look at the construction of third culture narratives from the perspective of both writer and reader. By writing Part 1 of *The Glass House*, I am able to examine narrative strategies through the writing process itself. Through a critical reading of Martel's *Life of Pi*, I am able to unpick the results and effects of these strategies as a reader. In "Cannibals and Survivors," I argue that by critically examining these strategies, it is possible to see that the freedom to pick and choose the narratives we consume (and how) comes with specific implications for those who have their feet in multiple worlds.

KEYWORDS :

Transnational, Third Culture, Consumerism, Hybridity

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Finding a Place in the Universe

Otherwise Entitled: “The Connective Tissue between my Creative and Critical Projects”

The first time I read Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, I felt like someone had condensed all the itinerancy, the confusion, the lostness, and the guilt of my experience growing up as the child of New Zealand missionaries in Indonesia, as a person between worlds, and presented it in a format I understood and loved: the novel. Later, I read Ruth van Reken’s and David Pollock’s *Third Culture Kids* and again I felt like someone had drawn the dots between my experiences of homelessness and grief and slotted them together so that they began to make sense. But, at the time of my reading, I did not yet see the connection between my experiences with both books. I did not yet envision the context that could link them together, and, in doing so, link my childhood experiences with my own writing and that of a community of other writers and their works.

Sociologically, the term “third culture” has been defined and used for decades by those such as Ruth Hill Useem and Ruth van Reken to describe those people who are raised outside their passport nations as children, in multiple countries, as expats rather than immigrants. Third culture “kids,” as they are often known, are most likely to be the children of diplomats, military families, missionaries, and international business people (Pollock and van Reken 15). It took the work of Antje M. Rauwerda, first in her essay “Not Your Typical ‘Diaspora’ or ‘Third World Cosmopolitan’,” and later in *The Writer and the Overseas Childhood*, to link this sociological context to a literary one, in her “search for appropriate terminology for international authors writing in English who are not really ‘from’ the former colonies and are also neither immigrants nor exiles” (*The Writer* 1). In doing so, she defines third culture authors as those authors who are “raised

outside their passport culture (one culture), in a series of host countries (second cultures), as an expatriate (third culture)” (7). This, she argues, is a definition that is necessarily distinct from labels such as postcolonial, postmodern, cosmopolitan, and diasporic: “literature emerging from this specific cultural context shares preoccupations with [these literatures] but is *significantly different* from these because of the privileged expatriate perspective of its authors” (8). Authors that fall within this group include such names as the aforementioned Barbara Kingsolver, as well as Ian McEwan, William Paul Young, Alice Greenway, and Ted Dekker.

Rauwerda’s definition gives us a much needed context from which to view these stories: one which helps us understand, and perhaps challenge, the perspectives contained within the stories. More and more people are being “raised expat,” a side effect of globalisation (*The Writer* 1). But, as Rauwerda observes, “the only ways [academia] currently recognises international writers writing in English are: In terms of their marginality and (somatic) alterity; or in terms of their status as immigrants” (4). These two ways of looking at the work of international writers do not take into account the specific circumstances from which third culture writings originate, or the distinct concerns that arise from their narratives. Rauwerda establishes a number of these concerns shared by third culture fictions as: interstitially, an awareness of perpetual newness and foreign status, awareness of privilege, and the idea that “‘home’ is an inaccessible notion for third culture individuals” (9). While third culture stories might all contain different subject matter, origins, and locales, they share specific concerns and thus belong to a distinct community of writings that mirrors that interstitial community of the third culture people who create them.

A key concern that Rauwerda identifies in third culture literature, and one which often lies at the intersection of the characteristics discussed above, is “what if there is no

home? What if one is always an outsider?” (*The Writer* 12). She points out specific features of third culture literature that attempt to deal with this concern: guilt, awareness of privilege, underage sexual precocity, a preoccupation with illness, lack of moral convictions, etc. In my research I have taken the questions Rauwerda asks, and added, “How does one shape the world and our identity in it when it is always dropping away from under our feet?” and “What might this mean in terms of narrative?”

The critical and creative portions of my thesis arise from a third culture context and deal with these questions regarding the construction of narrative from the perspective of both author and reader. In the critical portion of my thesis I examine Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* through the lens of third culture literature. Martel qualifies as a third culture author as he is a Canadian passport holder born in Spain to a Canadian diplomat, and was raised in Costa Rica, France, Mexico, and Alaska. His novel involves an Indian boy, Pi, adrift at sea with a Bengal tiger when the ship bearing him and his family to Canada sinks. As Rauwerda points out, “Pi may not explicitly *be* a third culture kid, but his losses, griefs and responses to dislocation are manifestly expressions of third culture experience” (*The Writer* 11).

The creative section of my thesis consists of Part 1 of a novel entitled *The Glass House*. I was born in New Zealand and raised in various parts of Indonesia and Australia as the child of missionaries from the age of two through to eighteen. My novel involves a girl, Ruth Glass, from Nelson, New Zealand, who is taken to West Papua, Indonesia, by her parents so that they can work on aid projects in a village after Ruth’s younger sister Julia dies.

Whereas some could argue that the culture an author may or may not align themselves with does not matter for literature, the concerns that Rauwerda observes in her research regarding being a part of multiple worlds seem to be disproportionately

represented in third culture literature, and therefore must affect the narrative strategies at work. While Rauwerda focuses specifically on these concerns as representing distinct characteristics in third culture literature that set it apart from other international literatures, my project is focused on *how* these characteristics manifest themselves through particular narrative strategies in both my own work and that of Martel's. The chains of dislocation evident in both our stories, the emphasis on hybrid identities and narratives, the distrust of memory, the complex uses of memories, and the way both narratives are shot through with the guilt-ridden mentality of a survivor, all play a part in supporting and expanding on Rauwerda's claims.

The Glass House was not even supposed to be about West Papua, in its early beginnings. I thought I was writing a story about New Zealand, that I *had* to write about New Zealand because that was the country written on my passport. I did not feel as though I had the "right" to tell a story set in West Papua, or which used my childhood experiences from that place, even though I grew up there. But, in the end, it seems that the story itself dictated that it be taken from New Zealand and transported to West Papua. In this sense, the very process that I went through in writing this story, and my gradual acceptance that this is the story I had to tell, is an illustration of the guilt and self-consciousness that lie at the centre of many third culture narratives. In this way, through both the critical and creative portions of my thesis, I endeavour to demonstrate the connections between the third culture individual's identity and the stories they tell, and show the crucial role of narrative, whether "big" or "small" in shaping their world(s). As Pi says of faith (what might be called a "big" narrative): "With its notions in mind, I see my place in the universe" (49).

Life of a Continual Castaway: Yann Martel's *Pi*

In 2001 Spanish-born Canadian author Yann Martel's third and most successful novel (to date) was published amid a flurry of effusive praise from reviewers and critics. Hailed as a "story that will make you believe in God," *Life of Pi* caught the imaginations of the public and quickly became popular in both scholarly and mainstream circles. In a 2002 PBS interview Martel states that when he began to write *Life of Pi* he was "sort of looking for a story, not only with a small 's' but sort of with a capital 'S'—something that would direct my life." The favourite of book clubs, the novel certainly seems to pose the big questions that such a "capital 'S'" Story might be expected to ask. But not everyone is convinced. Reviewers such as James Wood call *Pi* a "slight book," by virtue of the thinness of the protagonist's (Pi's) character and its "theological impoverishment" (despite its grand gestures to the apparent opposite). These are hardly ringing endorsements of a book that seeks "capital 'S'" status.

However, it is precisely these "slight" features that I would argue Martel is seeking to highlight in his Story. In her essay "Not Your Typical 'Diaspora' or 'Third World Cosmopolitan,'" Antje M. Rauwerda uses the example of *Life of Pi* to ask "what is one to do with international fictions informed by an identity culture that involves extreme global mobility but does not involve third world roots?" (16). She comes to the conclusion that these fictions can be called "third culture literature" in an effort to describe "the internationalized, interstitial, and ungrounded identities of a writer like Martel or his fictional characters" (16,17). Books like *Life of Pi*, Obrecht's *The Tiger's Wife*, and Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, don't quite fit under the traditional "postcolonial" or "post-secular" labels, and "postmodern" is too much of an umbrella term to fully articulate the features unique to these novels. These labels are useful and

apply to aspects of these fictions, but it is Rauwerda's "third culture literature," which has its roots in Ruth van Reken's definition of "third culture kids," that seems to encompass this group the best, characterised by ongoing rootlessness and "the privilege of mobility" (Rauwerda, *The Writer* 9). As the world becomes more globalised and multicultural, as third culture "kids" grow up and become more the norm than the exception, and as the boundaries between nations and cultures become more fluid, so the features and the implications of these features in third culture literature become more visible.

Pi is a quintessential narrative of the in between, or, in other words, of the third culture. The ship *Pi* is on which he finds himself with his family on their journey between India and Canada, the *Tsimtsum*, sinks almost exactly midway between its origin and where *Pi* eventually reaches land. It is the plight of the "in-betweeners," the text's much maligned agnostics and its portrayal of those who float between nations, religions, roles, and selves, that lies at the centre of the novel's negative criticism, and that also lies at the centre of the novel's Story as a whole. Rather than being overlooked as some readers have complained, this group is Martel's predominant focus, embodied in the survival tale of *Pi*. As a "capital 'S'" story, it is presented as a manual or framework (and, therefore, deliberately "slight" and missing theological flesh) for what surviving in third culture waters looks like.

In the context of Rauwerda's definition of third culture literature and the novel's reception by readers, *Life of Pi* suggests that third culture people are continual castaways. The novel is occupied with two main areas in which the effects of this dislocation on *Pi*'s identity and narrative are enacted: that of consumption and that of hybridisation. Through *Pi*'s journey, the text conflates *Pi*'s physical and mental experiences with the literary experience in order to illustrate the effects of on-going

dislocation arising out of these areas. Finally, hybridity in this text is taken to another level through Pi's "better story." In this way, we see that even though Pi may reach land in a physical sense, there is still no rescue, spiritually or emotionally, for him. And, in parallel, there is no "coming home" for the third culture individual, or any non-problematic way for them to tell their stories.

Pi, “that elusive, irrational number”

The hybrid construction of Pi’s identity in the novel demonstrates how those dwelling between worlds must negotiate their identities in terms of this hybridity and serves as a site where the implications of this negotiation are most evident. The number pi (also the protagonist’s nickname) is the novel’s controlling metaphor. Pi’s full name, Piscine Molitor Patel, represents a blend of cultures, French and Indian. Piscine Molitor, explains Pi, is a swimming pool, “the crowning aquatic glory of Paris” (11). This pool, on a small scale, already hints at how water in *Pi* is used as a symbol of an in between no-man’s land. When Pi used his full name he was misunderstood (“some thought it was P. Singh and that I was a Sikh”) and teased (“*Pissing* Patel!”) (20). Thus, one day he chooses his own nickname for himself: Pi, a name which no longer betrays any cultural origins or parental preferences. “And so,” Pi says, “in that Greek letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated tin roof, in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge” (24). The name may certainly seem like a refuge at first, allowing him to avoid revealing any overt allegiance to one culture or another, and, indeed, throughout the novel, pi/Pi is an example of how the character and the story itself attempt to understand the universe through hybridisation. Pi is both a number and a character in the novel. It simultaneously represents both the rational (mathematics and science) and the irrational (mystery and transcendence), and therefore it transforms into a symbol of the novel’s effort to amalgamate principles commonly perceived to be diametrically opposed: religion and science, Islam and Christianity and Hinduism, human and animal, madness and reason.

Perhaps the most obvious example of Pi's tendency towards hybridisation (and its effects on his identity) is his determination to belong to, or consume, more than one religion at once. "We are all born Catholics, aren't we," says Pi, "in limbo, without religion, until some figure introduces us to God? After that meeting the matter ends for most of us. If there is a change, it is usually for the lesser rather than the greater, many people seem to lose God along life's way. This was not my case" (47). In fact, Pi chooses three religions to adhere to: "I offered prayers to Christ, who is alive. Then I raced down the hill on the left and raced up the hill on the right— to offer thanks to Lord Krishna for having put Jesus of Nazareth, whose humanity I found so compelling, in my way...Islam followed right behind, hardly a year later" (58). As he consumes narratives to construct his own survivor account, Pi also consumes religions to construct his own worldview.

As long as Pi is able to keep his three religions separated from each other, on their "three hills," each in a "Godhouse," all is harmonious (51). However, when the three encounter one another (as represented by a chance meeting of Pi's priest, pandit, and imam), bickering ensues, and Pi is told that he "must choose" until a fragile truce is made when Pi's father intervenes and reminds them that they're all trying to "love God" (66, 69). Here, it is tempting to applaud Pi's attempts to harmonise these apparently opposing belief systems: "Hindus, in their capacity for love, are indeed hairless Christians, just as Muslims, in the way that they see God in everything, are bearded Hindus, and Christians, in their devotion to God are hat-wearing Muslims" (50). Just as Pi nullifies the cultural identifiers in his name by shrinking to a nickname, here he attempts to collapse the differences in these three religions in one sentence. As ideal as this may seem, however, Pi's methods are not without their problems.

Throughout the novel, the voice of Pi is broken up with short passages that are told in the voice of the fictional Martel who interviews Pi in his new home in Toronto. These passages give us a privileged fore-knowledge of events and so we are able to read events as they happened, and their long-term effects, almost side by side. Rebecca Duncan states that Pi's eager conversion to Christianity as a teenager demonstrates a "typically adolescent demand for immortal heroes" (175). Pi's house in Toronto demonstrates that Pi does not lose this demand upon reaching adulthood: "His house is a temple," notes the narrator Martel (45). It is crammed from wall to wall with various religious paraphernalia: a picture of Ganesh, a cross, a photo of the holy Islamic Kaaba, a Koran, a Bible, etc. (45). It is so overflowing with these icons that Martel only notices these identity markers at first, and it isn't until later that he starts noticing other clues, such as "small signs of conjugal existence" (80). The overwhelming quantity and variety of these objects, in parallel with Pi's burgeoning food cupboards, is evidence of the emphasis on the consumerist nature of Pi's hybridisation. His demand for religion is shown to be a type of commodity lust and Martel's novel shows how the modern world meets this demand and satiates it with the practically seamless access Pi (and others) have to other theologies, or at least to aspects of those theologies, rendering Pi, as Duncan asserts, "over determined in religious faith and voluntarily decentred from any cultural or philosophical logos" (171). This paradox (of having almost unlimited access to different religions without finding any one of them satisfying) is reinforced by the fact that, while adrift at sea, Pi doesn't mention God nearly as much as he does on land— an example of how consuming multiple ideologies may result in greater disconnection rather than connection.

The novel's critique of agnostics, rather than pushing them to the margins, is used to suggest that Pi's plight (choosing many religions) is as problematic as he says

the plight of the agnostics is (choosing none). Here, the language of religion is mixed with that of science in another method of hybridisation. “My majors were religious studies and zoology,” Pi states when recounting his university experience, and “sometimes I got my majors mixed up. A number of my fellow religious-studies students— muddled agnostics who didn’t know which way was up, who were in the thrall of reason, that fool’s gold for the bright— reminded me of the three-toed sloth; and the three-toed sloth, such a beautiful example of the miracle of life, reminded me of God” (3, 5). Another example of Pi’s blending of science and religion is the Mr Kumars. Pi has two Mr Kumars in his life, both apparent polar opposites (a literal-minded math teacher and a Muslim mystic): “Mr and Mr Kumar taught me biology and Islam. Mr and Mr Kumar led me to study zoology and religious studies at the University of Toronto. Mr and Mr Kumar were the prophets of my Indian youth” (61). For Pi, science and God are not diametrically opposed (embodied in the Mr Kumars), but are essentially two ways of achieving the same thing, that is, making sense of the world and everything in it, and face the same obstacles in a rapidly changing world. Pi highlights this by discussing science with language most often used by the religious, and vice versa. For example, Mr Kumar (the teacher) notes that the zoo is his “temple” and that “reason is my prophet” (26, 28). As Pi discusses God and reason with this Mr Kumar he comes to the conclusion that:

Atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith, and every word they speak speaks of faith. Like me, they go as far as the legs of reason will carry them— and then they leap. I’ll be honest about it. It isn’t atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while...But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation. (28)

However, even as he makes this conclusion we begin to see that the limits in his philosophies are more akin to those of the agnostics rather than the atheists or those who subscribe to one religion. “When Mr Kumar visited the zoo,” says Pi, “it was to take the pulse of the universe, and his stethoscopic mind also confirmed to him that everything was in order, that everything *was* order” (26). Pi clearly recognises here that, like it or not, each person must choose a story to make sense of their world. He, as a person whose identity is characterised by the “in-between”, by his “postmodern journey between nations and faiths,” chooses multiple stories (Stephens 42). He is free to make sense of his world in this way, but as Christians, Muslims, atheists, etc. must deal with the limits and problems of each of their Stories, so must Pi deal with the unique limits and problems that burden his own Story.

Anthropomorphism, closely intertwined with the treatment of madness and reason in the text, is used by Pi to blur the line between humanity and animality, in another strategy of hybridisation. Richard Parker, the Bengal tiger and Pi’s lifeboat companion, is the most overt example of anthropomorphism in *Pi*, from his human name to the suspicions raised in the second version of Pi’s stories that Richard Parker might be Pi himself, or at least the embodiment of an aspect of Pi. If we suppose that Richard Parker does indeed represent an aspect of Pi’s identity, that of his instinct to survive, then we must confront questions about the depictions of madness and reason in the novel. Stephens raises the point that in *Pi*, “what is madness on land may turn out to be sane on the sea as a castaway” (46). This suggests that third culture castaways must re-evaluate the concepts of madness and reason as well. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines anthropomorphism as “attribution of human form or character...to the Deity or anything impersonal or irrational.” It is the “irrational” here that applies most to Pi’s strategies of anthropomorphism. It is not only in the second version of the story that we

may suspect that Pi uses Richard Parker to describe an aspect of himself: Pi shows Martel a photo of his family and points to a school child saying “that’s Richard Parker” (87). It is also Richard Parker’s role in Pi’s survival that most demonstrates Pi’s own animality and its necessity for his survival.

“All living things,” says Pi, “contain a measure of madness that moves them in strange, sometimes inexplicable ways. This madness can be saving; it is part and parcel of the ability to adapt. Without it, no species would survive” (41). In the first version of the story, Pi describes watching in awe as the orangutan (Pi’s mother in the second version) fights the hyena (the cook): “I thought I knew her so well that I could predict her every move. I thought I knew not only her habits but also her limits. This display of ferocity, of savage courage, made me realise that I was wrong. All my life I had known only a part of her” (130). The emphasis on unknowable parts of the identity is carried throughout the novel, and Pi soon realises there are parts of his own identity that were once unknowable to him—parts which are essential to his survival. As he kills whatever he can find in the sea to eat, he descends “to a level of savagery I never imagined possible” (97). This savagery is almost universally associated with animal behaviour: “I noticed... that I ate like an animal, that this noisy, frantic, unchewing wolfing-down of mine was exactly the way Richard Parker ate” (225).

While Pi at first talks of Richard Parker as distinctly different from him, as his time at sea draws out, he increasingly identifies himself (and his survival) with the tiger. “It’s the plain truth,” Pi claims: “without Richard Parker, I wouldn’t be alive today to tell you this story” (164). And: “It was not a question of him or me, but of him *and* me” (164). James Mensch describes claims like these as Pi’s “concealed acceptance of his own animality” (139). Rather than fight his association with the tiger, Pi grows closer to him and acknowledges Richard Parker’s role in his survival. Richard Parker is the

“companion of my torment, awful, fierce thing that kept me alive” (285). A carnivore like him may seem like the opposite of vegetarian Pi, but here they are revealed as necessary halves of the same coin. Pi is haunted by Richard Parker as well, admitting that “Richard Parker has stayed with me,” because, if he must accept the saving aspect of the tiger, he must also acknowledge the savage aspect of himself (6). We can see this emphasis on dualities clearly if we return to the hallucinatory episode where Pi converses with the French cook/ Richard Parker. “Any regrets?” asks Pi of Richard Parker, on learning that he killed two people (247). This exchange follows:

“It was the doing of the moment. It was circumstance.”

“Instinct, it’s called instinct. Still, answer the question, any regrets now?”

“I don’t think about it.”

“The very definition of an animal. That’s all you are.” (247)

Here, by accusing Richard Parker, Pi implicates himself. In neither version of the story do we read of his regrets, but we read plenty of circumstance and instinct.

In regards to anthropomorphism, we must also acknowledge the numerous warnings against it raised earlier in the text, and ask why, in light of these warnings, Pi might still succumb to his anthropomorphist tendencies. Pi’s father sets up a sign in the zoo that reads “DO YOU KNOW WHAT IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small curtain...Behind it was a mirror” (31).

However, Pi eventually learns that: “Father believed there was another animal even more dangerous than us...: The redoubtable species *Animalus anthropomorphicus*, the animal as seen through human eyes... we look at the animal and see a mirror. The obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything is the bane not only of theologians but also of zoologists” (31). This warning against anthropomorphism

demonstrates how, for humans, animals represent the unknown, and how humans ascribe human traits to the unknown in order to create a story that we can make sense of. In other words, as Stewart Cole puts it, “in the face of the unknowable...we will see humanity wherever possible” (28). In doing so, however, Pi acknowledges that there is the danger of losing sight of the “real nature” of the animal. He claims he does not succumb to this danger: “I would like to say in my own defence that though I may have anthropomorphized the animals...the fancy was always conscious...But I never deluded myself as to the real nature of my playmates” (34). But can we trust this statement?

In the second version of his story, Pi does a kind of reverse anthropomorphism, where savage human is reimagined as natural animal. By transferring these acts of human brutality to normal animal behaviour, Pi locates the human survival instinct in an entity outside of himself, removing himself (in the first version of the story) from responsibility. His explanation of zoomorphism, “where an animal takes a human being, or another animal, to be one of its kind,” helps explain this anthropomorphism too: “I believe the answer lies in something I mentioned earlier, that measure of madness that moves life in strange but saving ways...The circus lions don’t care to know that their leader is a weakling human; the fiction guarantees their social well-being and staves off violent anarchy” (84, 86). By imagining animals with human traits and vice versa, Pi does stave off anarchy. But he doesn’t get away completely unscathed. To return to pi, the governing metaphor of this narrative, Mensch notes that: “[pi] expresses the inability to find a common measure— an exact ratio— between the circumference and the diameter or a circle. It is a number that goes on forever. This suggests that there is the same irrationality in men: there is no common measure— no ratio— linking him either to his animality or his divinity” (146).

By exploring (ir)rationality through anthropomorphism, Pi locates both madness and reason in his own identity, and explores the implications for rethinking these dualities. He is compelled to anthropomorphise, to put himself at the centre, because “to be a castaway is to be a point perpetually at the centre of the circle. However much things may appear to change...the geometry never changes” (215). He must orientate himself this way, “otherwise, to be a castaway is to be caught up in grim and exhausting opposites” (216). He chooses the most preferable option, knowing that it is less than ideal, knowing that “this was the terrible cost of Richard Parker. He gave me a life, my own, but at the expense of taking one...Something in me died that has never come back to life” (255).

Cannibals and Plagiarists

As a survivor's tale, *Life of Pi* includes and is dependent on certain features that are prevalent in other survivor narratives, both historical and fictional— the most obvious feature being that of cannibalism. In conflating physical and literary experiences in the novel with the motif of cannibalism, Martel demonstrates how third culture narratives, forever dependent on narratives that have come before, come to terms with “surviving.” By “surviving” I mean attempts at shaping a cohesive self-narrative as part of the process of identity formation, making sense of their experiences and sharing them with others.

It is hunger, and the satiation of it, which dominates the text, intertwining consumption of narrative with the consumption needed to survive. “This book was born as I was hungry,” reads the first sentence of the ‘Author’s Note’ (vii). The hybridised narrative style used to construct Pi’s story, consisting of multiple and layered voices, narrative traditions, registers and documents, correlates to the emphasis on consumerism and commodity lust in the novel. “The story reverberates with echoes,” as reviewer Gary Krist notes, including, and not limited to, echoes of narratives as diverse as the shipwreck of the apostle Paul, Homer’s *Odyssey*, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,’ Blake’s ‘Tyger,’ Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the book of Job, Aesop’s fables, and Hemmingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. In fact, the “echoes” are so obvious that, in the case of Moacyr Scliar’s *Max and the Cats*, Martel was accused of plagiarism. Rather than hide these influences in his work, Martel deliberately emphasises them, and, read in combination with the text’s emphasis on food and eating, their whispers of plagiarism soon become associated with that of cannibalism.

One of the effects of this overconsumption of and lust for narrative archetypes is, paradoxically, the lack of a dominating archetype or framework with which to shape Pi's story. Duncan notes that, "approaches to reading survivor narratives have until recently privileged the notion of a single, stable identity the survivor seeks to recover by telling—and hence reliving—the traumatic experience" (168). In *Pi* this unified approach is circumvented firstly by the multiple narrative echoes that permeate the story. This is a direct departure from other survivor narratives that might fall into what could be called the *Crusoe* tradition, where there is one authoritative "I" and no contradictions or challenges to the survivor's account. Carl Jung asserts that, "The creative process consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life" (qtd. in Gould 15). The use of archetypes in *Pi* does at first seem to give the narrative a meaningful shape, as here too we have an "I" who (at first) seems to be telling a straight-forward tale of how he got from a sinking ship to land and everything in between. However, when we look at the sheer amount and diverse origins of the archetypes from which *Pi* borrows, we start to see that the text instead employs this proliferation of narrative backgrounds to reject the idea that those dwelling in between might be able to find their "way back to the deepest springs of life."

The way that the concepts of fact and fiction are treated in the novel also contributes to the emphasis on the lack of narrative frameworks available for third culture individuals. The "Author's Note" which begins the novel itself suggests a blend of fact and fiction, as it is full of fictional experiences yet claims to be the expression of the "real" author. In it Martel thanks "Mr. Patel" even though Pi is his own character (xii).

Indeed, the entire novel is presented as if Martel is a journalist documenting a factual story. Academic referencing is incorporated into the novel, and many religious and zoological facts are served to us, such as in regards to sloths, zoos and circus animals. “Its only real habit is indolence,” says Pi of the three-toed sloth, and, when discussing the training of circus animals: “Hediger (1950) says, ‘When two creatures meet, the one that is able to intimidate its opponent is recognized as socially superior, so that a social decision does not always depend on a fight’” (3, 44). Duncan likens this use of academic/ encyclopaedic trivia to Ahab’s knowledge of whales in *Moby Dick*, and says “Pi contextualises his early life in the family’s zoo, revealing an encyclopaedic knowledge of animal behaviour...Fed by religious and zoological detail, Pi assigns symbolic significance to his physical and emotional states” (170).

In culmination, these strategies of narratorial hybridisation create a narrative fed by the symbolic weight of numerous mythic, literary, and scientific sources. This is a kind of weblike narrative, one that perhaps draws on a new sort of genealogy for its archetypal heritage, one which is nonlinear, multiple, and layered, rather than linear and monolithic. But all these sources and their associated symbolism also create a narrative that seems at a loss at what to do with all this symbolism. “I am a person who believes in form, in the harmony of order,” says Pi. “Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape. For example— I wonder— could you tell my jumbled story in exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less?” (285). Indeed, the novel is exactly one hundred chapters— a picture of unity at first, but also a story laden with competing symbolic meanings that are far from under the author’s (or the narrator’s) control. In this way, *Pi* demonstrates what it might look like to be two seemingly opposite things simultaneously, one not compromising the other.

Like most survivor narratives or castaway accounts, *Pi* includes a careful documentation of the survivor's eating (consumption) patterns. He is preoccupied with his and Richard Parker's next meal, weeping "heartily" over his first "poor little deceased soul," but soon overcoming his vegetarianism to exuberantly kill and eat any living thing that he manages to capture (183). "A person can get used to anything, even to killing," Pi says (185). This desensitization to killing carries over to his experience of eating as well. He becomes so focused on putting anything into his mouth that one day he even attempts to eat Richard Parker's faeces. He can't eat them, and explains that this is because of his "mouth's conclusion, immediate and obvious: there's nothing to be had here. It was truly waste matter, with no nutrients in it" (214). His focus on consumption has led him to taste so much that he will attempt to eat anything even when he knows it will not satisfy him. And, what's worse, when he returns to civilisation, he finds he must hoard food obsessively to the point of overflowing and over-satiation. "His cupboards are jam-packed," notes Martel's character when he visits Pi in Toronto: "A reserve of food to last the siege of Leningrad" (25). The same can be said of the smorgasbord of narratives and traditions that Pi voraciously consumes to construct his survivor story. Martel demonstrates that overconsumption of narratives contributes to less unity and meaning, and results in this obsessive emphasis on hoarding, with little substance shown for the effort. By association, and in conjunction with the discussion surrounding the novel's ending, this suggests that *Pi* itself contains little of substance, due to its multiple and hybrid construction, and, therefore, that those people who belong to the third culture may have to resign their own narratives to the same fate.

Implicit in the novel's themes of consumption is the notion of privilege in that both Pi and Martel have access to all this narrative history, yet they cannot claim to

legitimately own any one piece of it because of their mixed backgrounds. By “legitimately own,” I mean that they cannot fully claim narrative and cultural heritage through traditional means such as social capital and an authoritative monolithic narrative structure, and that they must look for new ways to interact with the material and cultural world. Therefore, their solution is to compensate by borrowing from many sources, to figuratively gorge on a surplus of cultural offerings which results in fragmentation and dislocation. What sets this third culture effort apart from, say, the Modernist’s return to myth, is that, while the Modernists were driven by nostalgia and an ideal formalism, Pi’s (and Martel’s) effort does not idealise the past or some formal unity. Instead of drawing on just one or two core mythic or literary heritages, as the Modernists did, Martel/Pi draws on multiple heritages, complicating the idea of myths as “the vessels of pristine values” (Fischler qtd. in White 23). Values are certainly more fluid than firm in this novel, and, as we shall see, the privilege to be able to steal and restore narratives/myths in such a way (to appropriate the words of Roland Barthes), comes with its own implications (125).

Naturally, all this emphasis on consumerism and privilege in a survival story leads to allusions of cannibalism. In narratives like *Crusoe*, the threat of cannibalism was confined to foreign “savages,” removed from Crusoe’s own experience. In the first version of Pi’s story this taste of cannibalism is presented in a similar way, as an external threat, when Pi has discussions with what he thinks is a French cook in another boat during a blind hallucination. The two converse extensively about food, describing elaborate dishes like “coconut yam kootu” at first, then moving on to talk lovingly about how “tempting” a “soft and supple” leather boot is to eat (244, 253). As the conversation continues, the French cook makes his way into Pi’s boat and attempts to kill and eat him, until he is killed himself by Richard Parker. This episode is made all

the more sinister later when we start to wonder if the French cook really was there, or if it was Richard Parker (as Pi believed for a time), or, if Richard Parker in fact was a manifestation of Pi's own survival instincts. This then leads us to the conclusion that perhaps all this talk of consumption leads to the human version of extreme consumption: cannibalism.

The implication of this extreme consumption is further demonstrated by the floating island populated by meerkats where Pi and Richard Parker stay for a few days before Pi discovers that the secret to the island's survival is that it consumes its inhabitants. "I preferred to set off and perish in search of my own kind than to live a lonely half-life of physical comfort and spiritual death on this murderous island," says Pi (283). Here, the ultimate cannibal is the one which he almost becomes dependent on, just as, if we lean towards the second version of events, Pi's cannibalism and self-cannibalism would be a product of his drive to survive, sacrificing other aspects of himself. If this is so, then what might this say about Pi's story? The logical literary equivalent of cannibalism is plagiarism. At the end of the 'Author's Note,' Martel thanks "Mr. Scliar," author of the aforementioned *Max and the Cats* "for the spark of life" (xii). This suggests that Martel's novel is dependent on feeding off of the narratives of others, a suggestion which, in combination with the references to cannibalism, are made all the more pertinent. Duncan asserts that "Martel engages with, yet radically reshapes, the survivor narrative, using metafictional and self-reflexive dimensions to suggest that a survivor must not only survive the crisis, but also come to terms with the consequences of having survived" (168). One of these consequences, suggests *Pi*, is that one narrative's survival, like one survivor's survival, may have to come at the expense of others.

The story of how Richard Parker got his name is an apt condensation of this emphasis on the links between narrative hybridity and cannibalism. Pi says that

“Richard Parker was so named because of a clerical error” (132). In an essay on the subject, Martel draws attention to a number of unfortunate historical and literary Richard Parkers, including one from Edgar Allen Poe’s *Pym*: all of whom were cannibalized. “So many victimized Richard Parkers had to mean something,” says Martel. “My tiger found his name. He’s a victim too— or is he?” (‘How Richard Parker Got His Name’). Martel’s Richard Parker is the first one referred to that survives. His existence is drawn from a background of victims and he must bear the symbolic weight with which the name of those victims comes laden, just as *Pi* must bear the weight of all those borrowed narratives. Yet, he is able to negotiate the space between victim and victor. He suffered, yet he survived, so where does that place him in relation to his not so fortunate sufferers? His name is granted power by the reassignment of his species, by both the fear and the love that *Pi* feels for him, and also by the survivor guilt that he represents. By being named Richard Parker, his own identity consumes that of the other Richard Parkers whose identities become in danger of nullification. The tiger is the picture of the ultimate consumer, and both he and *Pi* become dependent on each other during their ordeal, blurring the boundaries between human and animal. As with all aspects of this story, that mutual dependency— their consumer activities, their survival because of it, and Richard Parker’s ability to transcend the boundaries between species— comes at a narratorial cost.

“The Better Story”

The effects of narratorial hybridity and consumerism in *Pi* are brought together through the inclusion of a second, much briefer version of the castaway narrative, and this serves to reinforce the suggestion that Pi, dwelling in an in between world, lacks an adequate framework for his story despite—or, perhaps, because of—having access to so many different narrative histories. In the final section of the novel a competing version of the narrative is offered. Pi notes that both versions are able to explain the events which took place, and then leaves readers to make up their own minds about which is the “truth,” or, in Pi’s words, the “better story” (317). This second version is strikingly empty of the rich detail we have become used to in the primary version of events, and in it the animals from the first version are replaced with people: “Four of us survived. Mother held on to some bananas and made it to the lifeboat. The cook was already aboard, as was the sailor” (303). All these other survivors perish, except Pi: the sailor and Pi’s mother at the hands of the cook, the cook at the hands of Pi. This story is presented when the Japanese officials investigating the shipwreck express disbelief over the first version of the story. They wrestle over which version of events could be the “true” version, but eventually agree that the story with animals is the “better story.”

Here, the burden of “truth” is placed squarely in the hands of readers. Though agency is given to both the narrator and the audience, as the audience is free to choose their own version(s), none can claim to possess knowledge of Pi’s “true” experience either, resulting in a lack of definitive narrative to hang our interpretations on. In this way, Pi, lacking an established framework for his story, forges a makeshift hybridised one which privileges aesthetics, a multiplicity of interpretations, and the breakdown of

binary logic. By being established as a narrative framework, the “better story” is therefore deliberately set up as thin and characterised by “theological impoverishment.”

In explicitly placing the onus of interpretation on its audience, *Pi* once again draws out the role of consumption in literature and narrative histories, specifically through the contradictory responses it seems to elicit in its readers. For religious readers, *Pi* seems to affirm a belief in God, for secularists it affirms the opposite. How does a novel simultaneously affirm multiple worldviews? The answer is entwined in the relationship between the two versions and seems to lie with this idea of a “better story.” Critics, such as Stephens, have also noted that members of these same two categories of readers might also simultaneously reject the purported message(s) of *Pi*: “I position the text at a midway point between two different kinds of reception,” states Stephens, “secular readers for whom the notion of religious belief is at best metaphorical, and religious readers who may resist the novel’s conceit that the true God exists outside the confines of institutional religion” (42). Stephens observes that the big claim made in the beginning of the novel, that it will make one believe in God, is not claimed by Pi or Martel at all. Rather “[the words] are voiced by Mr. Adirubasamy,” another audience member of the narrative filling the story with his own interpretations (41). The seemingly contradictory responses of readers, and the space the “better story” allows for the interpretations of readers, reinforce the idea of *Pi* being purposefully set up as a new kind of framework. As a framework, it is both available to prop up the (multiple) worldviews of its readers, and also left open to be filled with a diverse range of interpretations: a space upon which readers can project their own conceptions of reality.

This “better story” paradox demonstrates how, no matter which story the third culture individual or survivor may tell, the narrative is in danger of falling short in some way. One version successfully blends the narrator’s worlds and identities (almost too

perfectly, with a kind of “lacquered Indianness,” as Wood claims), but falls short of believability for traditional audiences (represented by the Japanese investigators). The other version seems factual and is easier to believe, however it lacks the depth and breadth of detail, that transcendent quality of art and aesthetic pleasure which the former conveys. As Rauwerda notes, “the short version [also] loses the gist of displacement, dislocation and movement” (*The Writer* 13). The lack of classification of a “true” version here allows the Story to be many things for many people but also causes it to lack definitive flesh within which to sink our readerly teeth. Pollock and Van Reken note that, for third culture individuals, “at the heart of issues of rootlessness and restlessness [is their sense of their] lack of full ownership,” which, as Rauwerda adds, “in turn gives rise to a ‘sense of belonging “everywhere and nowhere” at the same time”” (qtd. in Rauwerda *The Writer* 41). In the same way, by not letting a definitive interpretation be pinned down, Martel’s Story risks being thin, flakey, an elusive fluff of a narrative, “a slight book” as Wood says, which doesn’t stand for anything and so risks standing for nothing.

Let us return to the issue of believability for a moment. “Mr Patel, we don’t believe your story,” say the Japanese investigators after hearing the primary version of Pi’s story (292). The investigators here ask the questions that traditional audiences might expect to ask and the investigators’ disbelief is part of the impetus for Pi to tell the other version of his tale. It is tempting, on reaching this final “revelation” to go back through the book, looking for “clues” to confirm the second version of events. We want to say “Aha!” and decipher the fable like a code, reduce the detailed and full story to nothing more than a very complex and extended metaphor. But only a few pages ago we accepted the first version as Pi’s “true” experience, his “real” confession (within the world of the fiction). What changed? In retrospect, Pi does seem to leave clues that

tempt us into making the whole thing “only” a metaphor. When listing items on the lifeboat and describing the environment around him, Pi says, “I did not grasp these details—and many more — right away. They came to my notice with time and as a result of necessity” (139). This comment foreshadows the possible actions of the reader upon coming to the secondary version of his story. Like the Japanese investigators we may pull small details, like the existence of bananas in one version and not in the other, to challenge the validity of the primary version. But we are also warned against doing such things: “A plague upon fundamentalists and literalists!” Pi says earlier in the narrative (49). Furthermore, *Pi* demonstrates, through the exchange with the investigators, that this relentless search for the “truth” is, here at least, a misguided and unfruitful one.

Pi achieves this shift of emphasis in narrative from “truth” to the “better story” by refusing to satisfy the investigators’ (and, perhaps our) desire for factuality or a unified perception of reality. After hearing the investigators’ disbelief over his primary version of his tale, Pi asks:

‘Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?’

‘We’re just being reasonable.’

‘So am I! I applied my reason at every moment. Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing and shelter. Reason is the very best tool kit. Nothing beats reason for keeping tigers away. But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bath water.’

(297-8)

By pressing the investigators in this way, Pi is able to suggest that it might not be in fact “reality” that they insist on, but a certain type of reality. He pushes this further:

‘You want words that reflect reality?’

‘Yes.’

‘Words that do not contradict reality?’

‘Exactly.’

‘But tigers don’t contradict reality.’

‘Oh please, no more tigers.’

‘I know what you want. You want a story that won’t surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won’t make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality.’ (302)

After telling the investigators a version that might fit better within their perceptions of reality, they are still far from satisfied, which drives home the idea that it is not in fact bare reality that they are after. “But what does it mean?” asks the younger of the two investigators (311). There is the implied desire here for the story to be something more than the sum of its parts, to affirm something, to bring a certain clarity and understanding. But Pi won’t allow this:

‘I told you two stories that account for the 227 days in between...Neither explains the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*...Neither makes a factual difference to you... You can’t prove which story is true and which is not. You must take my word for it...In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer...So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can’t prove the question either way, which story do you prefer?’

Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?’ (316-17).

Unanimously, they agree that it is the story with the animals. As Cole states, “this exchange implies a distinction between the unresolvable question of the story’s truth and the more subjective question of its aesthetic value” (23).

It is satisfaction and aesthetics, then, rather than “truth,” that lies at the centre of this quest for the “better story.” This idea is introduced early on in the narrative, when Pi first hears of the story of Jesus: “What a downright weird story,” he says. “What a peculiar psychology. I asked for another story one that I might find more satisfying” (53). The idea that there can be a “better” or “more satisfying” story suggests that a story can be altered or have multiple versions. It suggests that we have reasons, other than telling the “truth,” for telling and listening to narratives. In *Pi*, these reasons, which make up the requirements of a “more satisfying” Story are identified as: that which is more pleasing than the alternative, that which allows new understandings to emerge over time, and that which concludes things properly.

“To be a castaway,” says Pi, “is to be a point perpetually at the centre of a circle. However much things appear to change...the geometry never changes” (215). “Otherwise,” Pi continues, “to be a castaway is to be caught up in grim and exhausting opposites” (216). Here Pi recognises that he must choose which of these castaways to be and he, through telling the primary version of the story, therefore chooses to be the “centre of a circle,” not because it is the best option, but because it is the alternative of the “exhausting opposites.” Like he is compelled to anthropomorphise, he is also compelled to choose a “better story,” for all his (and perhaps our) emphasis on using reason/ rationality to make his life choices. He recognises that he must have some

narrative to orientate himself by, and this is his choice. The alternative to this story would mean even greater horror, disorientation, and lostness.

Linking the idea of better stories to his musings on religion, Pi states earlier in the novel that:

I can well imagine an atheist's last words: 'White, white! L-L-Love! My God!'— and the deathbed leap of faith. Whereas the agnostic, if he stays true to his reasonable self, if he stays beholden to dry, yeastless factuality, might try to explain the warm light bathing him by saying, 'Possible a f-f-failing oxygenation of the b-b-brain;' and, to the very end, lack imagination and miss the better story. (64)

The language here will be echoed later in the exchange with the investigators. Here, the use of reason as a way to deny imagination is used to critique both agnosticism, and, later, a traditional reading of the narrative. In this way, Pi seems to suggest that although the more satisfying story may require a “deathbed leap of faith,” it is preferable to the alternative, and, also, that perhaps we use aesthetics as our measuring rod more than we like to think.

Another requirement of Pi's “better story” is that it allows “new understandings” to surface through multiple readings (and readers) (Duncan 175). Here the necessity of the unknowable, of the mythic, as integral to collective and individual narratives, is central. One night, when Pi observes an electrical storm over the ocean, he notes that “it was something to pull me out of my limited mortal ways and thrust me into a state of exalted wonder... At moments of wonder, it is easy to avoid small thinking, to entertain thoughts that span the universe, that capture both thunder and tinkle, thick and thin, the near and far” (223). In this passage we hear the echo of one of the central themes of this narrative: that of the reconciliation of binary opposites. The inclusion of opposites here

in conjunction with “moments of wonder” works as a comment on the tendency of humans to reject whatever appears to be the opposite of what they believe. That is, the tendency to disregard one of the two stories that account for the same event, to privilege one reading over another. Here Pi lists concepts in pairs that ostensibly oppose each other. Yet all exist, all are accepted as “real.”

David Ketterer notes that “the horrific and the transcendent are often... in *Pi*, different sides of the same coin” (83). In a scene where lightning is all around the small figure of Pi adrift on a vast ocean, this idea of horror and transcendence being one and the same is certainly evident, and is an idea repeated throughout the novel. In reference to Richard Parker, Pi states that “it’s the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness” (162). If, then, good and evil can be brought together, if something can one day be deemed horrific and another day be deemed saving, then *Pi* suggests that it is the role of the “better story” to allow these interpretations to come about or emerge organically. As Pi says himself, “my greatest wish— other than salvation— was to have a book. A long book with a never-ending story. One I could read again and again, with new eyes and a fresh understanding each time” (207).

Finally, this “better story,” for Pi, must bring about conclusion. “It is important in life to conclude things properly,” he says. “Only then can you let go” (285). The end of this novel may be seen by some readers as a “cop-out,” as only provided because of Martel’s sudden need to account for an unbelievable story presented as real, but there is evidence here that Martel is aware of this possible reader response as well and makes this narrative decision deliberately. Pi’s “unbelievable” experiences and that of other castaways, survivors, and, in fact, that of those who grow up between worlds, may seem to be “stranger than fiction”: Their experiences, and Pi’s, don’t fit the narrative

frameworks of where they come from, where they have been, or where they are going. *Pi* demonstrates that, therefore, the survivor must resort to either borrowing from other frameworks extensively in an effort to compensate (as previously discussed), or perhaps the story must be condensed in a way that creates a bland account with little detail, simply because it is easier to convey to others.

So, is this ending, this appeal to “conclude things properly” by introducing a more realistic (though, perhaps not more believable) version of the story a “cop-out”? Perhaps. But a necessary one. It is an ending which shows that the absence/convergence of binary opposites in this story does not necessarily lead to a perfectly hybridised utopia. And it is one which is aware that it, like every other “capital ‘S’” Story, is unable to bring the signifier any closer to the signified. By the end of this narrative we are acutely aware of the Story as an invention: “‘Isn’t telling about something- using words, English or Japanese- already something of an invention? Isn’t just looking upon this world, already something of an invention?...The world isn’t just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn’t that make life a story?’”(302). But we are also aware of the need for these stories, both capital and lowercase, and in the vital role of aesthetics within them. As the character Martel so aptly puts it: “If we, citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the crude altar of reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams” (xii).

Conclusion

The criticisms lodged against Martel's *Life of Pi* by those such as James Wood, and the author's desire for it to be a "capital 'S'" Story may seem at first to be at odds with each other. However, when viewed through the lens of Rauwerda's definition of third culture literature, and in conjunction with the responses of readers, *Pi* can be read as a narrative which uses precisely those features that have been called "slight" to achieve its "capital 'S'" status, and, in doing so, Martel establishes his novel as a new kind of framework for those dwelling between worlds.

Pi's hybridised identity and way of looking at his world, the treatment of consumption in the narrative, and the emphasis on the "better story" are all integral to Martel's "Capital 'S'" Story. The emphasis on hybridisation displays how deconstructing binaries and consuming multiple ideologies does not necessarily lead to an ideal state of being, but, instead, perhaps more disconnection for the third culture narrator. By conflating the motif of cannibalism in the novel with that of plagiarism, Martel also examines the impact that the consumption of multiple narratives can have. And the idea of a "better story" is used to demonstrate the necessity of aesthetics, perhaps over reason, when telling and reading narratives of the in between. By looking at these strategies it is possible to see that the freedom to pick and choose the narratives we consume (and how) comes with specific implications, including pitfalls and limitations, for those who have their feet in multiple worlds, and we can begin to see what this means for third culture identities, faith(s), relationships, and, ultimately, the narratives they tell themselves and others.

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The Glass House

And when they came upon the sea-side brim

The elder did push the younger in.

‘O Sister, O Sister, take me by the gown,

And draw me upon the dry ground.’

—From “The Two Sisters,” a murder ballad

In the Beginning

I remember this: Here Julia and I are, down by the creek below the yellow house, the last summer she is with us. Picking at sand fly bites on our shins, our hair damp and coiled on our necks. Hair cut short like boys because it is easier for our mother, and our father says it will keep the devil and bad men away. I, eight, and knowing all about what can lurk in the smooth depths. She, five, already wanting to see. Both of us shocking ourselves in the cold, knees hunched to our chests, curling against thoughts of dark bodies of eels slipping somewhere down in the darker and darker green. Flat grey rocks in the sun where we lie like chicken thighs bumped together in a pan, burning pink patches on our backs, and then jumping into the water to shock ourselves white again.

Warm skin, cool milk in glass bottles, the bees in the weeds.

In the days while we waited for Julia to die after the accident, and before my father decided that atonement was in order and the mountains of Irian Jaya (as it was called then) were just the place to find it, I sat for hours behind the bathroom block at school poking a stick into a bullet hole in the concrete wall that playground wisdom said could have been caused by *practically anything*. Stray hunting shot, target practice, murder.

“An accident,” they said: The social worker, the police, the doctors who all wore the same brand of brown leather shoes. And of course it was, but when a five year old dies, it is like a plane crash, a hit-and-run. It is easier if there is someone to blame. The children at school blamed the *taniwha* that lived below Mr Ashton’s vineyard. The newspapers blamed Common Household Hazards and Parental Negligence. The pastor

and the fat ladies wrapped in florals at church blamed The Fallen World, and probably The Breakdown of the Nuclear Family. My father blamed Miriam, my mother, because she didn't move fast enough when the flames first caught. My mother blamed him because, in the end, she blamed Isaac for her whole life, and Julia dying was just part of the package.

Julia burned and it took three days for her to die. Like Jesus, I thought at the time, only later I realised I had the story backwards. And, besides, Jesus didn't burn. When her nightgown caught a flame from the fireplace there was a rush of heat and sparks like fireflies. Too-black eyes in a white, white face. The quilt my grandmother gave my mother on her wedding day. The smell of melted plastic, charred wool, and something else, something I didn't know how to name.

But those are just the facts and I want to show you the gaps between those facts, and show you what happened next. Show you the shine of my sister's hair after my mother washes it on a frosted Sunday night. Show you the curve of an orchid petal fallen in the thick syrup water that collects in the hollows of a rotting stump. Paint you the clouds that gather in pillars above a jungle's impossible glaciers, hot air meeting cool. Give you smoke on your tongue, sweat on the backs of knees, the voice of an unseen bird dripping through the forest canopy like water.

Part 1: 1998

Chapter 1

We arrived in Indonesia with hard-shelled suitcases, extra locks, and a crate of cheap eye glasses donated by a non-profit to spread as we saw fit. We arrived with pamphlets on AIDs, dysentery, malaria, tuberculosis: all in a language that neither we nor (it turned out) the people we would live with could speak. We arrived with avocado seedlings wrapped in old rice sacks, and twenty-three live baby rabbits in cardboard boxes that used to package two-minute noodles. I could see a black-spotted ear poking out of one of the holes my father made with his pocket knife so that the rabbits could breathe.

Out we tipped from the plane, lurching forward with the weight of our bags. Out into the glare of sun on the tarmac. We were in a world that trapped us like flies under an upturned glass, trapped waiting for a magnified beam of sunlight to scorch us like grass.

There were vans whose drivers called them taxis, all in a row, waiting in front of the airport. Two children pressed their faces against the car park fence and stared at me. I stared back. One wore a shirt that advertised free condoms and a happy smile. "I don't know where to look," said my mother. I wasn't sure if she was talking about the shirt or something else. We got into one of the vans; pressed our legs into broken vinyl seats.

The air was swollen, bloated with heat. In it everything seemed to float, be suspended on invisible fishing line: The noon call to prayer, the scents of clove cigarettes and petrol, spits of grease as bananas fried in a road-side cart, an old man with his shirt off, selling watermelons and papayas under a tree. Sweat on his nipples. I counted crumpled soft drink cans and plastic bags caught in power lines, in trees. Motorcycles poured from every direction on to the streets, like ants boiling from a nest.

There was one traffic light that flashed pink for stop and blue for go. No one paid it any attention.

This is Sentani, my father told me, named for the wrinkle-free lake that fed the clusters of tin-roofed houses on stilts that cropped up on its shore. Our gateway into the jungle, into the mountains that rose far off in the distance under heavy clouds. I wondered how clean the jungle was in my father's mind, how untouched like the cream that rises to the surface of raw milk. Somehow, I already knew he would be disappointed.

"Look Ruth, a hornbill," said my mother. She let go of the bag she clutched so tight to point for me. There were patterns left on the backs of her arms from the seat. The bird she pointed at wandered along small tin roofed shops that sold potato chips and lollipops. "It must be someone's pet to be all the way out here." A bit of red string trailed from one of its legs. My father smiled and went on trying to talk to the driver in English.

"Have you lived here long?" he asked.

"Here?" said the driver. "Oh no, no, no."

"You're from somewhere else then?"

"Yes, yes, yes. I want to go to America. Bring back lots of money. Why you only have one child? Have older ones, yes?"

"No, just a daughter." One, singular, no "s" tacked on the end that meant a Julia ever existed.

The driver sucked the air between his teeth. "You have a son. Yes. Don't worry." My father gave up. A profusion of fluorescent green hugged the base of the mountain watching over all of this, over all of us.

"Mount Cyclops," said our driver. I looked for the single eye.

“Community development,” was scribbled on our visas. My father could build things, could plant things. Things like a village hospital, things like avocado trees. My mother could mother and hand out whatever she was given. Glasses, rabbits, pamphlets. We would run a breeding programme with the rabbits. They’d multiply and so would the avocados. We would fill village bellies with protein, turn malnutrition into smiles. It was all in the letter that my father was given by the big suited boss of the capital “O” Organisation in a shining Wellington office who seemed to know so much. It was all in the brochures.

Before we left, my father told my mother that it would be good for all of us. Cleanse us. That it wouldn’t be for long but it would heal the parts of us that still held Julia close. Miriam always wanted to believe him.

A road was being built from the town nearest to our assigned village, according to the man who met us at the guesthouse in Sentani with fried snacks for my parents, hard coffee-flavoured lollies for me. A road that would cut through the mountains like they weren’t there, forge rivers, smooth hills. It would meet my father at the hospital in two, maybe three years. “Five years tops,” the man said. He wore a uniform but I couldn’t tell what kind of uniform it was. “Six, if things really turn to custard.” All my father had to do is meet that road with his hospital.

They told me not to smile when we went to get our passport photos taken. Dad collected rows of headshots for all of us, taken against a red velvet drape, in his money pouch. Paperwork sprouted as much as trees in this place. We gave the police our fingerprints. There was no running water at the station to wash the ink off our hands, so we wiped them on Dad’s shorts. “They’ll be my new-old work shorts,” he said. The

policemen liked to watch my mother, held her hand too long when they pressed her fingers into the ink pads and then on to the paper.

Dutch New Guinea, Irian Jaya, West Papua. The name of this province changed (and still changes) to reflect that its history is one of invasions. Everyone hungry for a piece of “Java’s Kitchen.” My father had already taught me about the big invasions (the Dutch, the explorers, the missionaries, the Javanese), but, later, I would learn of the smaller invasions. I would learn about the weaver ants that hitchhiked into the highlands in sugar sacks. From an airport hangar they spread outwards, forever marching downhill. African snails were brought into the swamp regions. Like a wave, they razed everything green. Back in the highlands again, Australian missionaries brought lantana vines with them in the 1970s, and vegetables in abandoned gardens were gently strangled. After small Cessna aeroplanes started servicing the Mamberamo, that region where rivers snake across the landscape like trails of some impossibly large creature, walking catfish appeared and multiplied. And then there were the macaque monkeys that made their homes in colonies near the coast after being brought there by transmigrants from other Indonesian islands. Overseas animal rights activists insisted that they be left alone, rather than shot. Whole transmigrant camps relocated (yet again) as they escaped from the thievery of the monkeys.

Then came rabies, then came AIDs. Men with government badges shipped prostitutes, HIV positive, to Papua. “Look at Java! Free of Aids!” they gloated while health workers in Papua told villagers that only bad people get AIDs so they were safe, they were fine, they could spread their money, spread their legs.

This land was dying when we arrived, but dying in such aggressive death throes that it fooled us into thinking that it was the most living land we had ever seen. That we could come alive again here too.

Chapter 2

There was no time to grab on to Sentani before we were launched in the air again, this time in a six-seater red and white striped plane that finally pushed us through that bank of clouds that surrounded Sentani, looking as if it was painted on the horizon and forever refusing to move with weather or time.

Children stuck their heads in between the slats of the fence surrounding the grass airstrip as we touched down. Waved at me as if they knew me. Grass cuttings drifted in the wind. When the plane's engine cut off all that could be heard at first were the rabbits drumming their heels down in the bowels of the pot-bellied plane. Right beneath our feet.

Our belongings were piled: the avocado saplings, the rabbits, the tools. And then the plane left. We were alone with our pile of things. Alone because no one in New Zealand, other than my mother's parents and that man in the Wellington office, knew where we were, and no one was ever going to come and find us if the grass on the airstrip grew too long and swallowed us whole.

We left sweat in droplets on the front porch of the house that had been empty since the last aid workers left three months before. Their project was selling the peanuts that the villagers grew, drawing business plans, seeing the money roll in. And they were to build the hospital too. Only peanuts rolled out, but no money came back, and stacks of wood for the hospital rotted in the mud while paperwork flew between the coast and the mountains. The men, who no one ever seemed to know the names of, the men with money, money men, never did sign anything.

Dust spun in the sunlight, hung there and glittered as we opened the door which was really just a screen in a frame that was tearing around the edges. Every now and

then there was a deep hum in one of the walls and it wasn't until we saw the soft black body of a bee boring into the wood on the outside of the house that we knew why. The bees were bigger here. As were the geckoes, a gummy pale green, the rats that we heard nesting above the ceiling, the cockroaches that nibbled the edges of a stack of ancient cookbooks by the stove.

"It was built in the 70s," my father said of the house. "And hasn't really been fixed up since." He looked at my mother as if for approval or in apology and she, too quickly, smiled. The house was built on metre high pylons to protect it from termites and floods. Through gaps in the floorboards I saw the eyes of chickens looking back at me. Through gaps in the curtains I saw the eyes of the same villagers who greeted us at the airstrip looking back at me too.

My mother adjusted the glass louvers that lay in ranks over mesh windows that were supposed to keep mosquitoes out, handed me a cloth to wipe the dust from them. "At least the wind can come right through," she said. Her face was damp, but with sweat not tears because those were all cried out in the first of our plane rides here, the one that left New Zealand behind. My father had handed her tissues one by one, offered to buy her anything on the airline menu.

"You'll like it," he said. "Think of the flowers I can get you. They'll be so much brighter than anything we see back home. So much bigger."

"I don't want flowers," said Mum. But she let him buy her a chicken roll, ate it all. "Sometimes you have to realise that everyone is just trying their best," she told me when my father got up to use the bathroom. "Even when they're doing it wrong."

The last people who lived in the house left things behind. Tins of spam and beans in the pantry. Bottles of malaria prophylaxis in the hall cupboards. Rat poison. Old *National Geographic* magazines under the couch. A psychology textbook under the

bed that became mine. My mother counted the things in the pantry like they were provisions in a siege and I stuffed the magazines and the textbook further out of sight so that their presence could be my secret that no one could take away.

An evacuation list was taped to the back of the pantry door. "In case of civil or social unrest," it said. It told us that we were allowed:

One suitcase per family.

Two sets of clothes each.

Essential medicines and personal hygiene items. "For example: heart medication, dental floss."

One journal or diary each.

One Bible.

And (for children) one toy each.

I unpacked my two bears and one doll in my room. I imagined lining them up and interviewing them in order to determine who would win asylum with me. I thought up reasons each one could be left behind. Brown Eyes, you smell weird. Matilda, there's that spot on your dress where some bubble-gum got stuck. Patches, you're falling apart.

Night crept up and surprised us on that first day. My father lit a single gas lamp. The fumes comforted me, a reminder of something from the past, but I wasn't sure what. We dined on muesli bars, the first of the box we brought from our not-now home, and taro chips my mother bought from a Sentani supermarket because they looked partly familiar. Sitting around the lamp made me feel like we should all join hands and sing. How long had it been that we sat this close and ate? Not since Julia.

As we ate, we began to notice the ants. Ants with black-red bodies and long clear wings flying in waves towards our one beacon of light. Somehow they got through the windows, the walls. As soon as we noticed them they were everywhere, crawling down collars, up pants' legs, in the corners of our mouths.

“Time for bed then,” my father said. We washed the dirt off our feet with the bucket shower that my father filled earlier because the rain in the water drums outside hadn't yet been re-diverted to the house. The water was rust-coloured and smelled like old blood.

The ants whose dead bodies we would crunch in the morning before we remembered that they were there, and the sight of mould, black-green, growing up the walls of the shower made me believe that I was drowning. Suffocating. As if a pillow was held to my face and the water torture was my own tears.

Chapter 3

When I told him we were leaving, my grandfather came to the yellow house and gave me a book: *Handbook to the Flora and Fauna of New Guinea*. “Plants and animals don’t understand lines drawn on maps,” he said. “Different name, same island. Maybe this will give you something to write to me about. Tell me what you see.” We looked through the pages together. We practiced saying the scientific names. Thus armed, he could send me anywhere. He had been speaking less and reading more at that time, and the pages seemed to turn slower. I knew as much as an eight year old could know that he wouldn’t be there when or if I ever returned.

My grandmother gave me a dream-catcher from her collection. In our old-new village house, I hung it on the edge of my bed and wondered if the dreams that it caught were the ones already in my head, going out into the world after they were finished, or if they were dreams that were trying to find their way to me. And, if so, what might they have been made of? Might the wool and twine net of the catcher have sagged with the weight of all those dreams?

*

Dawn in the village was neither a silent nor a soft thing. The villagers called their home Gimbis, and government maps split it into two because it sat on the border of two provinces that divided up the land like an uncooperative cheesecake. It was a problem area for the map, but the villagers didn’t seem to notice or care. With our first dawn in the village came roosters crowing under the house, groups of women passing by our fence on the way to their gardens, the coughs of men lingering by the gate, waiting to catch a glimpse of the newcomers. The two-way radio spat empty static by the dining room table as my father switched it on. The day would be long and it would

be short, filled with so many images and doings that they became flashes in a pan, polaroids in my mind that shuffled together, allowed me to only grasp on to one moment at a time, not knowing how I got to it from the last, or where to go next.

My mother sat at the table, trying to figure out how much milk powder to add to the water (boiled, filtered) so that we could eat breakfast. She wore a blue robe that fell open slightly over her chest. I wanted to draw it tighter and cover her. Dad piled the plans for the hospital in front of him on the table, stared at them while drinking instant coffee. He was ready to begin and his leg tapped a rhythm under the table, making the whole thing shake.

“Stop it,” said my mother.

“Magnesium deficiency, apparently,” said my father.

“You’re just worked up.”

I sat at the table with one of the crocheted blankets my grandmother sent with us over my legs, my toes curling against the air that rose from between the floorboards, remembering frost. Outside the fog was lifting from the airstrip as sunlight slid its way into the valley. I couldn’t see the mountains yet but I knew they were there, leaning close.

The milk was watery and had lumps of undissolved powder in it. “Just drink it anyway,” said Mum. “I’ll try to figure it out tomorrow.” She constantly moved between kitchen and dining room, but for what I am not sure. My father didn’t eat breakfast in the end, said he didn’t have time, but none of us seemed to know what stole that time from us. I stayed in my pyjamas until lunchtime and no one noticed.

In New Zealand, my mother would have picked flowers and put them in a vase for new babies, for dead relatives, for illnesses, for a house warming. Here, she said she picked them to “brighten up the house.” She slipped out of the house and quickly cut

them from the bush by the porch as if she was ashamed of something, didn't want to be seen. Then, just as quick, she was back in the house again, slipping off her sandals so fast that the house rocked on its pylons. I dug my fingers into my seat but even this didn't steady me.

Mum put the flowers in an empty jam jar and then spent an hour trying to find all the little black ants burrowed between flower petals, hunting for sweetness. But as soon as she left them the ants bubbled up and multiplied again, poured from the petals on to the table. "There's other stuff that needs doing," said my father. The flowers were tiny, red and orange, and they grew in tight clusters. They didn't smell sweet like I thought they should, but instead smelt like crushed grass and made my eyes itch.

"Shoot," said my mother when she saw my eyelids swelling shut. "I'll get the allergy tablets." This was only the start of the allergies. The dust, the pollen, the mould, everything here began a war with me. After a couple of weeks I got used to my skin vaguely itching always and one day when I left this country the itch disappeared and I wondered what was missing.

That first morning my father was filled with energy. Energy in his leg tapping under the table, in his finger tapping on top of the radio. He ordered new wood to build the hospital, ticked off that task in a big green ledger that would sit on the coffee table all year for him to go over every night. He was warned by people in the city that he might be sold wood that the termites like to eat. This is the trick that the villagers liked to play on the government workers, the outsiders, because in a few years the government buildings would be sawdust and rot while the village huts still stood. So my father wrote out exactly what kind of wood he wanted to buy. He had done his research. He stood on the front porch and gave his instructions. The men hoping to go out and

find the wood and bring it back to him nodded. But we had no way of knowing who understood what and, for all my father's research, he could not tell, when the wood came, whether it was really the wood the termites wouldn't eat or if he was fooled as well.

"There's an element of trust involved in these sorts of things," he told me after the men went. But I didn't know if he was really talking to me or talking to himself.

He slapped sunscreen on his neck and wasn't careful to rub it all the way in. Then he got out the boxes of pamphlets about diseases, the ones that talked about symptoms and how to prevent the diseases in the first place. They were filled with black and white sketches of people who were supposed to look like the people here and the words were written in a language that is a cousin to the language of these villagers, but not the same.

My father took the boxes to the temporary house near the hospital site. I went with him, wearing gumboots because the paths were boggy with the tracks of people and their pigs, and together we handed the pamphlets out. We went through one whole box, mainly pamphlets about dysentery and some on scabies. A girl, who looked close to my age, niece of the airstrip manager, helped us too, acting as translator until my father and I learned through endless repetition all day the words for "this is for you," and "it's to keep away sickness." The girl's name was Susumina. She pointed at me for mine.

"Ruth," I said.

"Ru," she said. The "th" sound didn't exist here. "Ru" I became.

The people (all women) who took the pamphlets were polite. They thanked us as they took them. My father's face sweated in white beads as it mingled with the sunscreen, his chest rose proud under his thin shirt that was meant to keep him cool but

didn't. He thought that the thank-yous meant success. And I thought this too at first. Over the year, though, this glaring, swollen year, I saw the pamphlets used for everything from stopping leaks to starting fires, but I didn't see people reading them. The scabies mites still crawled over children's skin, dysentery still had its foothold, malaria was a thing that could possibly be banished by the sacrifice of a pig. AIDs was a mystery.

I asked Susumina why no one read the pamphlets. "They're crooked books filled with crooked words," she said, holding out her arm, bending it at the elbow to show me. "Our language is straight, we understand it. This language, we can get some of the meaning, but not all of it. It comes out crooked."

Susumina was an orphan. Or half of one, anyway. Her mother killed herself right after she was born on account of her father's new wife. The new wife was too young to feed her. So her grandmother carried her to the mission house that once was here. Her grandmother was the one who got the pastel tins of milk powder and a pamphlet on infant hygiene even though she couldn't read. The tins were still in the grandmother's house. She kept peanuts in them, and salt. Painted ducks scampered up their slippery sides, ducks nothing like the ducks here. Here they were dirty black and white with red beaks that sometimes had sores.

Susumina was named for the tins, or rather what was in the tins. *Susumina*, "susu" meaning milk, borrowed from the Indonesians, and "mina" the village tack-on for girls that turned it into a name. This was how you knew all the orphan girls in Gimbis. They were all Susuminas.

Susumina took me to see Paula's dead baby. Julia was the first person I knew who died but I never saw her after that day at the hospital so she was not the first dead

person I saw. Paula, wife of the head pastor, had a baby and it was a perfect baby except that the cord was twisted around its neck. It lay in its mother's lap. It was a she and wore nothing but a blue beanie.

It could have died before it was even born. I knew that dead things don't move, but I was still not expecting the stillness of that baby, the stillness of something that should be at least breathing. Its skin looked like a thin film of ash from the fire in the middle of the hut had settled over its face and limbs. Its eyes were coal, dense and dark. Another woman reached over and closed them.

"Where've you been?" my mother asked when I got back to the house. She hadn't left the house all day and was pacing, waiting for her first loaf of bread to rise.

"We went to see Paula's baby," I said.

"Oh. Was it nice?"

"It's a girl," I said, and went to wash the dirt off my feet.

We became chicken owners. They were gifts from villagers who arrived to greet my father and ask my mother for Band-Aids and medicines because it was common knowledge that being white meant you had these things. My father attempted at first to keep the chickens in a pen made with wire found under the house and four wooden stakes. But we soon discovered that the chickens here could not be kept in by wire, and we let them roam at will like all the other village chickens did. Every evening they came back to our house and it was my job to throw the dried corn and leftovers out in wide arcs to feed them. At night we heard them gently rustling in a tree outside my window.

"Who knew chickens roosted in trees?" my father said and then we tried to think where chickens might elsewhere roost in the wild and realised trees really were the only logical explanation.

A cat turned up and slept in the roof above the laundry shed. Small and thin like all the cats in this place. But this one limped and the lower half of its front left foot was all bone, stripped of skin. I could see all the individual bones and how they fit together. “She might have been caught in a trap once,” said my mother. I fed the cat leftovers like the chickens and it didn’t fear me but nor did it like me. In bed I listened to the sound of many cats yowling somewhere, their cries unearthly, disembodied as if there were hundreds of phantom cats out there slipping through the night. I hoped that, if she was one of them, then she would return and wait by the outside water tap, licking drops from the spout, again the next morning.

“Her name is Elizabeth,” I told my mother, and, forever afterwards, Elizabeth it was. Despite the foot, she bore the name with dignity.

*

Dear Grandad,

I have counted eight different butterflies and there are lots of flowers too. Most of them have sap that dribbles out and gives you rashes when you pick them. And ants.

I have a cat. She is brown and black. There are lots of people here that come and visit on our porch and talk to Mum and Dad. Mum says that they always want something.

Some of the rabbits are pregnant, Dad says. Their tummies are fat and jiggle if they let you poke them. Most of the avocado trees have died already though. They get a fungus on their leaves that looks like white paint.

I have a friend. She has a green skirt and a yellow shirt and a dad but no mum.

Love,

Ruth

*

Each night my father prayed and we went to bed by the light of the kerosene lamp. We slipped into this routine like we never did anything different. The solar panels were on their way. Dad would install them as soon as they got here. He reminded us of this each night. "It shouldn't be too hard to figure out." My mother stroked his back. Her fear was less thick in the darkness. There was space for optimism and hope. But, at the same time, I knew the smiles that didn't last long, the back stroking, were all just threads that made up the silk screen that kept everything together since Julia died.

"Your father is a stormy weather Christian," Mum said to me once, before Julia died. She had laughed to herself then but I didn't get the joke. "For him all weather is stormy, the world is always falling apart, and he is always desperate to hold things together and save them."

"What type of Christian are you?" I asked.

"A potluck one I guess. One who wants your father to be happy." I knew my father ticked Anglican on the census forms. Miriam told us her parents were Jewish but she wasn't ready to be Jewish yet. Or anything else, for that matter. But my father was the one who filled out the forms.

"What type of Christian am I?" I asked.

"We'll have to see."

Under my bed in the village house, attached to one of the legs, was a spider's nest, a cocoon of grey silk. Soon the baby spiders would hatch. Like those spiders hatching, everything that happened, all our tears and ragged hurts, could be seen under the threads that we wrapped everything up with. They were waiting, beginning to move. About to break through.

Chapter 4

A man came and sat on our front porch, complained to my father about the demon on his back.

“You see it?” he demanded. “You see it?!”

He described it as a creature cut from brown leather, with hands, that, despite their softness, were throttling him.

“Here’s some antibiotics,” said Miriam. “I think you have a throat infection.”

The man went away. Later, I saw him selling the antibiotics at the market. Two tablets for a fresh egg or a pack of gum, he told me.

My father prayed.

A few weeks after we arrived in the village, the government in Jakarta started sending policeman there because there were stories about how these villagers plotted freedom in their huts, how they did things that the government called terrorism. The policeman all carried AK-47s by their sides, and they liked to sit by the airstrip and drink Coca-Cola, smoke their cigarettes that they kept in the pockets of their pants, carefully counted to make sure none were ever missing. Some of them brought glue for the teenage boys to sniff. When the boys got stupid it made them laugh.

They taught soccer to me, Susumina, some of the other kids who lived near the airstrip. Two of them played goalie and the others were coaches. They didn’t lay their guns aside for this so they swung heavy against their hips when they ran. They didn’t run often though. They lined us up and got us to take turns kicking balls into the goal which was two empty paint cans and a piece of green string laid between. There was just one goal and, when we divided into teams, one side got to wear the policemen’s

hats which were usually damp with sweat. My mother said we shouldn't, that we could catch things. Things like nits. But we liked it, the guns, the hats; they made us feel like we were part of something important.

Sometimes the policemen grabbed the top of my leg and it felt bad but I didn't know if anything like this was talked about in the Bible. Just in case, I told my mother I didn't need lunch, that I didn't want it today.

“What do you talk about to those people all day?” she asked.

“Nothing really.”

“Doesn't make sense to me,” she said. “Don't stay out too long.” She went back to her dishes.

The policemen liked to take photos of and with me. They told me that it was for their girlfriends or their little daughters back home. Sometimes they put their sunglasses on me and we posed, they told me to make a peace sign or let me hold one of their guns. Sometimes I liked this part. Sometimes they held their heads next to mine and their hair smelt like corn oil and those cigarettes. Again, I wasn't sure what the Bible says about these kinds of things. It seemed much clearer on things like murder and adultery.

Sometimes I wanted to shout about these things, shout at my mother and ask her. I stole an empty peanut butter jar out of the rubbish bin and hid it behind the laundry shed. I got it out when I wanted to shout and yelled my words into it, holding the opening tight against my face, the whole thing swallowing my mouth and my words sounded like someone shouting underwater. Then I screwed the cap back on and put it behind the shed for the next time I needed to shout.

Sometimes the policemen pinched my cheek for luck when they were done. Sometimes I got bruises.

The first thing the policemen asked my dad every time they saw him, as they sat around smoking and looking at pictures of naked ladies behind their hands, was “You American?” And, straight afterwards: “You CIA?”

My father always said no and they always laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world. Then they would shake his hand and offer him cigarettes. He would say no again and leave.

But one day I saw my father moving our documents (passports, birth certificates, insurance papers, vaccination records) in their locked box from their place in the hall cupboard.

“Where are you going to put it?” I asked.

“It’s better if just I know,” he said.

In the middle of that night he turned on our other radio, the transistor one that you could sometimes hear Australian news on if you held it just right. He listened for hours and I listened too with my head leaned against the wall between my bedroom and the dining room. This was just the first night of many like this. Most often the only things we could hear were sports games in countries I couldn’t locate on a map. Sometimes he found the news in other countries, from somewhere like India, America, Egypt. I found out more about the elections in Ghana and flooding in Vietnam than anything happening between our own mountains. The sound came in a rhythm, fading in and out with more static than words. Sometimes my father made notes on a notepad, and thought he heard words in the broadcast that I couldn’t hear.

“Come to bed,” I heard my mother say through the wall. But the radio static didn’t stop for hours.

After a week of this, I started getting up when I heard the radio switch on. “I’ll make us milos,” I said the first time and got hot water from the kettle on the back of the

wood stove. The wood stove burned all day when my mother made bread, and the coals only lost their heat hours after she stopped adding wood, so the water was still hot.

“Thanks poppet,” he said when I brought his mug. After I finished my drink I went to bed to the sound of warped voices as my father twisted the radio controls and the antenna to try and hear them more clearly. In the morning his mug was still on the table, full. I poured the cold milo into a saucer for Elizabeth on the porch.

When we lived in the yellow house, my father used to watch the news on TV every night at six o’clock. In addition to his late night listenings, he started trying in Gimbis with the radio at six. I wondered if he remembered that six o’clock in Gimbis wasn’t connected with six o’clock in Nelson. That if our clocks didn’t match up, maybe nothing else from there would either.

The villagers were no strangers to paranoia. They had stories for my father of airstrip massacres and huts burned to the ground with their occupants nailed inside. There had been drought in other parts of Papua, which was apparently on its way towards us, and they heard from other villagers, known to be troublemakers, of army helicopters painted with the insignia of the Red Cross. When the villagers, mostly women and children, came out to receive their rice rations that they thought the helicopter carried, the soldiers opened fire. Because they never were the Red Cross. So, I shouldn’t have blamed my father, really. All he was doing is borrowing that paranoia and spreading its seeds as well. Here you could try to guess who was on whose side, but there seemed to be too many sides and no one was ever on yours.

One of the policeman goalies, Petero, always pretended that we hit him in between the legs with the ball. He held himself there, threw back his head, threw back his eyes. *Aduh!* he gasped. *Aduh!* One day we actually did hit him there and this time he

was different, down on his knees and groaning. He got one of the younger boys to hold a cold coke to his crotch. It left a wet patch that spread. At the end of the game, we ran away laughing. We ran like the policemen were nipping at our heels. We were so full of disgust, so full of delight.

We spent the rest of the day hiding from the policemen and shooting at lorikeets with our slingshots. We hit three that fell in streaks of colour. *Aduh!* we screamed. We arranged the birds in a row on their backs, wings neatly folded over breastbones. I was almost sorry. Susumina would make their feathers into necklaces and sell them at the market with her grandmother.

I remembered a machine at a supermarket in my past life that seemed too scrubbed clean now. A machine with an iron hand that you could move up and down with a joystick to try and grab a soft toy inside the plexiglass box. Nowhere to run and hide, the toys just had to lie there and wait to see if they were the chosen one, if they were the one that bad things happened to.

Chapter 5

Susumina did flips on the airstrip and her dress flopped over her face. Susumina wasn't wearing any underpants. Did her grandmother know? I wondered what it felt like to do flips with no underpants on. Susumina's legs kicked in the rain. The clay stained our hemlines, toe nails red.

"I am going to tell you a story about a hornbill," Susumina said when I told her about the one I saw in the city.

"It goes like this: There were two small children, brothers. Their mother said to them 'stay in the pig yard.' So they did, while she went and cooked some sweet potato leaves. After that, a fierce man came into her hut and told her to come with him.

But she said, 'I can't, my children are waiting in the pig yard.'

Well he said 'Come quickly, leave your children.'

And she said, 'My children...'

And he was forceful and said 'no come quickly,' and they left, leaving the children behind, and a small pig with them. They left and crossed many rivers and they went as far as Nanggerago. And that is where they lived.

The two brothers waited in the pig yard for their mother and got covered in dirt. In the evening they got hungry and returned to their mother's hut but their mother was not there. They said 'Oh no, where has our mother gone,' and they searched and searched but could not find her. They said 'the fierce man has taken her and left,' and they cried as they slept.

After they slept and cried, in the morning a hornbill bird came. The hornbill asked 'What is up with you?'

The brothers replied, 'a wild man has taken our mother away.'

When they said that, the hornbill said 'hang on to my wings.' They hung on to his wings and the hornbill carried the two small children far away, until he put them down at the entrance to his home. He alone could raise them, so he did. They grew up, he raised them, and when they became young men with hair on their faces ready to take wives he gave them smoothed spears, axes, and strung bows.

At about this time there was a big event at the place where their mother had been taken. During the event, the hornbill sent his children who had become youths which he had armed, ahead as forerunners. While many people were singing, the hornbill, now in the shape of a man, started walking, leaning on a walking stick because he was old. The brothers went in ahead of him and they saw the man who had taken their mother.

The brothers had spears and fancy decorations on. Using their spears they ran back and forth to meet the people at the event. While they went back and forth they saw their mother.

The mother saw them too and thought 'That's my children!' As she thought that she cried and she stared out to where they were. After they had finished singing and running, the young brothers looked at their mother and the man who took her.

'This is the woman, our mother, that was carried away,' they thought and they found out where the man slept, where his house was. In the evening, in the darkness while the man and his wife slept, they quietly entered to kill them. And they cut up the man and speared him, and their mother, and her small children, her many small children that she had after she was taken. They just came and strangled them. As they killed their mother they said to her, 'You didn't care for us, you were taken away and you didn't think "Oh, my children," and for that we are killing you.'

Well, that's what they did, that's what the hornbill did and the brothers did from start to finish."

“But what does it mean?” I asked Susumina after she told the story.

Susumina looked at me and shrugged. “Why does it matter? That’s how it happened so that’s how I tell it.” We went and sat in front of her grandmother’s hut and chewed sugar cane until our teeth ached.

We played spirits down by the creek, because this world had creeks too, but different from the cooler, clearer ones I used to know. There were pockets of mud near the bank which smelt like a bathroom and was good for painting faces and making dams.

We played good spirits, bad spirits, some spirits who were both. Spirits who changed themselves into birds of paradise when humans came looking. That was Susumina. Spirits who liked to hide by the water and catch dragonflies, touch plastic wings attached to even more plastic-like bodies. That was me. There were all kinds of birds of paradise, Susumina told me with her hands, with the flowers of a hibiscus plant, with leaves. Words grew between us without us even trying. It was like one day the world was only one language, could only be talked of in black and white, and the next all was colour because the extra words made it so. I had been given the gift of extra senses.

In Susumina’s world there were birds of paradise with bodies of ruby red. They stayed close to the ground. There were birds of paradise with yellow-cream tails that arched and bloomed over their backs. There were ones with tails in ribbons, with tails in wires, with tails that had spots pretending to be eyes. There were ones with ruffled collars, with ballerina skirts. Susumina could do their dance on the log bridge that crossed the creek. She could call for a friend and vanish into the trees.

While Susumina danced, I crouched in the water. Baby fish, thin and silver, darted under the roots of a half-submerged tree. There were mosquitoes that bit at the skin not covered by my clothes and I did not care. I was a water spirit. I was in the water. I was powerful and no one could reach through the daylight and touch me.

I said that my world went from monochrome to coloured, but strangely, in this world where colours were so rich that fingers might be dipped in them, the language of this village only had three colour words: dark, light, and red. But there were many more ways here to say certain actions than there were in my own language. So I gave Susumina colours and she gave me hundreds of ways to hit, hundreds of ways to kill, hundreds of ways to betray.

Chapter 6

I used to wake up in the night in the yellow house, an ache in my lower belly, the door open to the long dark hallway that yawned into nothingness. The hallway with embossed wallpaper on its walls that I ran my fingers over to guide myself to the bathroom. I would hear Julia breathe and see the edges of her face blur with the dark.

Night in Gimbis taught me that there are shades of darkness, and that those nights in the yellow house were almost grey compared to nights in the village, because of the leftovers of artificial lights that we barely even noticed. When the generator turned off in Gimbis, and the kerosene lamps were out, I could imagine that I didn't have a body at all, if it weren't for the pinch just below my belly button. I could be just a mind, floating around in the black. At these times, even my father was in bed, abandoning his radio. I lay in bed for as long as possible, trying to tell the frogs that sung outside apart using their different singing voices. But eventually I had to get up and feel my way. No embossed wallpaper, just the uneven surface of the walls which were built using sheets of thick bark (just as good as triplex, said Dad, and it had lasted all these years so why bother replacing it), varnished over. In the daylight, those walls had so many knots and lines from the days that they were trees that I could squint my eyes and imagine faces coming out at me.

The bathroom seemed too large. The flush, too loud. I rushed back to bed, the darkness flooding after me, letting my feet touch the ground as little as possible. This house never seemed to be still, always shuddering, creaking, letting the outside (air, sounds, smells) in. There was a stain on the ceiling of my room which grew when it rained, changed from looking like one creature to another. It was a good thing that it

was raining less and less these days. One bonus of the darkness was that I couldn't see the stain anyway. But I still knew it was there, right over my bed.

I remembered that it rained the night before Julia's first (and last) day of school. The orchards were drenched outside, and somehow I had slept through the familiar belly pain and had woken to soaked sheets inside. Soaked sheets turned into stinging skin as I hosed myself off behind the garden shed, hauled the sheets from laundry to line. The water was so sharp at first that I couldn't tell whether it was cold or hot.

Despite how we hurried along the gravel, despite not stopping to pick the stones out from under the straps of Julia's sandals (her blood stained the new leather), we were late for school. My head felt light and high, a kite that could spin into dizzy free-fall at any second.

There were two classrooms at that school, ages five to eight in one, eight to twelve in another. I hovered on the verge of being put up to the second, but at this time Julia and I still shared.

"You're late girls," said Mrs Jane, our teacher as we walked in, shaking her braids at us. "Names?"

Ruth Glass.

Julia Glass.

Yes, like windows and broken and conservatories and for eyes and drinking.

There was chalk dust and more shaking of the braids. Bored children rocked on the back legs of their chairs, catching the table edge at the last second. Two girls, my age, started whispering behind their fingers to each other. Flies collected in a corner of the window behind our teacher. Here, the beginnings of my guilt were conceived.

The words sprouted out of me like great choking weeds. "It's Julia's fault." And I did believe that in that moment. "She was so nervous about her first day of school that

she wet the bed.” A giggle ignited the front row. The older children in the back rolled their eyes. Julia stood still and stiff beside me.

“No I didn’t,” she said. Just that.

“Sit down and get out your writing books,” said Mrs Jane. I want it to end at that, for my lie to be forgotten but already the whispers, *Julia Wettaaa*, were coiling their way around the room, as sinister as smoke. I tore a page of my writing book and scribbled an apology on it, thinking I might pass it down the row to Julia. But I didn’t. I folded it over and over until the paper was soft with folds.

Just like that, my blame put Julia on one side and all the rest of us on another. All she had to do is say no, I thought. Or get out of our way and avoid the inevitable pinches and hair pulling that comes with being at the bottom of the heap. But she didn’t, and then came the time that we went to the river.

It was late autumn, a Monday, and the ponds in the valley were starting to grow shards of ice around their edges. The weekend had been dark, cold, and angry— to judge by chilblains and the restless rumbling shuffle of school children as lunchtime approached with little chance of sunshine or fresh air. Luckily or unluckily, depending on whether you’re looking forwards or backwards, the sodden clouds in the South held off long enough for us to be set loose for our one hour of freedom.

Perhaps it was the weather that was to blame for where we chose to run that day. Down we went through the back field, down below Mr Ashton’s vineyard, to where the river bent and spread to a wide jade pool. Steep rock rose on the far side, but on our side the sand glittered. No one was supposed to visit here anymore, but, as always is the case with forbidden places, many still did, including us children who knew that a stand of pine trees hid activities from the road.

It was said that a female *taniwha* lived in the depths, down in a cave submerged under the bank where an invisible current pulled swimmers right into her yawning mouth. Two boys from the high school had become caught in this current eleven years before. Their bodies were so pinned by the force of the water to the rock face that they could not be fished out for over a week, by which time the cave had spat them back out again to drift in the smooth shallows.

They must have been like giant pink raisins, Julia and I deduced. Experiments took place in many baths.

Six years after the stories of the deaths had been worn benign by the rub of constant warnings and retellings, children ventured here again to swim. The pool boasted a burgeoning population of eels and it doesn't take much for a certain type of person to take the risk, no matter how little the reward. This time it was a younger boy who died, blonde in some of the stories, red-haired in others. He slipped under silently and his disappearance wasn't noticed for an hour. His mother committed suicide that same year. We weren't supposed to know that, or about how she did it. She was hungry, we said of the *taniwha*, and she was a *she* because it was only boys who had died, and perhaps her hunger for them was fuelled as much by lust as it was by revenge on those who chased her here to this pool with their farms, their industry, their white picket fences.

The pool may have be left for a few more years but for Arthur, a nine year old held back a year, who bragged on a Friday that he had himself swum down to the cave the past summer and survived though he had seen the marks on the rock left by the desperate fingernails of those who had come before. Wreaths of half-moons. We didn't believe him, but that didn't matter. His story was all the excuse we needed.

Sunlight, grey and feeble as it was that day, had weakened what ice there was on the pool to almost mush except for a few large stubborn splinters that spun out from the

shore in a whorl, an inside-out web with a dark centre. I sat on a log, breathing warmth onto my fingers, and watched two other girls write four letter words with twigs in the gravel. *Shit, Fuck, Slut, DYKE, C--t*. The latter with the dashes because even they knew better than to set some words loose. They shaped their letters with elaborate curled ends, perfect slanted penmanship.

Then I noticed that Julia had come with us.

No and Fuck and Stupid. These words I heard echo inside me, ricocheting as if against the walls of a sinking submarine. I imagined hands pressing to find air inside my chest. She crouched by the water's edge, skirt hitched around her knees, fingers purpled, cheeks white. What was she looking at? Mushroom, moss, stone?

It didn't take long for the other children to get bored, and then they spotted Julia. I watched from Mr Ashton's electric fence as first one, then another stood behind her, nudging her forward to the water. Then they fell back, acted like she was free, like the fact of her smallness, age, flitted across their minds. Just for a moment. A certain trust in her eyes teetered.

But then there were three, four, five and more. All in a line. All those blue uniforms. I remember no faces. Were there voices? I can't be sure. My own was especially absent. When Julia was in ankle-deep she went as though to laugh, half-smile. Like— yes, this is funny, now leave me space on the shore again, let me lay out my socks to dry. But then the children were skipping stones and they weren't skipping them out across the wide water. The stones didn't make much sound when they hit her, only when they fell into the pool. The splashes were playful if I shut my eyes.

At the sight of blood half the group became enraged, but the others sobered. It is this latter half that slowed their hail and patter, and, after a few moments, the rest followed, the wave of their fury gone. Voices were heard again.

Julia found her footing on the shore. Some of the girls, who seconds before searched for the perfect stone to hurl, suddenly found handkerchiefs in their pockets and Julia let them dab at her forehead. Little mothers in stained skirts, their transformation was so easy.

*

“How do the seeds get inside the apples?” I asked my grandfather when I was five, standing under an apple tree, he on a ladder handing down one heavy fruit after the next, all splashed white by the blackbirds that fed on the top branches where we couldn’t reach.

“The Tinies sneak them in at midnight, poppet. When we are sleeping in bed.”

“The Tinies?”

“Little people, fairies or things that hide in between leaves, rocks, roots. They don’t live everywhere, mind you. Just where they feel safe, and where there is a hint of a good story in the air.” He tugged on my ponytail, made the ribbon unravel, and we carried the apples back to the house. I knew he didn’t expect me to believe what he said, but I wanted to anyway. His nails were always split and had dirt under them, he smelled like old beer and Arnott’s cream crackers. I didn’t remember that smell until years later when he was gone and a man at the bus stop gave me some change for a ticket and the same smell rose from his clothes.

After the day at the river, I told Julia about the Tinies. They live in between the cracks in the rocks, I told her. And deep within the prickled hearts of the flax bushes. A slow nod, a reach to stroke the clover under our feet. Green hearts between our toes. Somehow this drove the guilt even deeper, made me even more desperate to *please make her believe*.

They live naked, I said. Like I think the angels do, and Adam and Eve before they knew any different. They make their rooms and stairways of their homes in the stems of plants, in the cells, just like the cells we read about in school. Remember the diagrams I drew, I asked her, the orange poppy I found growing in a tuft of grass under the house? Its petals were creased like paper.

These are the words I learned for giving the parts of plants their names, making them exist: stigma, filament, ovary. The way these words could mean something else or a different picture at a different time, attached to a different thing or body, remember that, Julia? How finding out which meaning is right is part of the hunt, the game, the coded story?

I made other acts of penance for not stopping the stones, for not saying a word. Didn't put butter on my potatoes, ate more peas than meat, took the hair clip with the ugly flower that we both hated, didn't let the tap water run hot. It didn't occur to me at the time if Julia knew whether I was doing this for her or not or why, if she did know, she should care. Instead I left dried buttercups on her pillow and imagined whole conversations, in which I was the one wronged and filled with indignation, and in which she thanked me and we were both healed. It was enough to make me cry righteous tears into my pillow at night.

I found a velvet brooch with a silver back under the swing set on the playground. Or I may have stolen it from another child. I forgot which version was the truth. I rubbed the dirt off the embroidery, trimmed its loose threads, and carried it back to the pool where none of us had visited since the day of the stones. The brooch spun high in the air when I threw it and I watched until I couldn't see its colour anymore as it sank over

where I guessed the entrance of the *taniwha*'s cave was. There was a flash of metal. The last signal of a lost tramper.

“You swore in your sleep again,” said Julia, waking me for breakfast. “Maybe I’ll tell Mum.”

“Shut up,” I said.

*

Forgiveness in Susumina’s language wasn’t just one word. Forgiveness for her was divided up and spread around multiple words, because its meaning was too big for just one. “To make all the badness and bad feelings against someone gone,” is how she said forgiveness. Poof. Never existed.

Chapter 7

If you kept on following the creek in Gimbis, followed it around the burial hill, down the side of the airstrip, and then through some of the gardens down to the gorge, then you met the river. Below the plateau that the airstrip and our houses sat on, the river leaped between limestone walls that at some points almost touched. The water here was all foam and white until it ran shallow over gravel in the areas where people liked to fish. They caught the fish with wide-mouthed traps, once made out of palm fronds, now made out of wire and netting. They gutted them with small curved knives and strung them in threes by their gills with a strip of soft, but strong, bark.

When I was down by the river, if there was a cool wind blowing, I could remember when my father roused me early in the yellow house to catch eels on spring mornings. The orchards took on a different sort of quality at that time of day. As we walked down the rows, the branches were dark against a sky just starting to pink; ice on the bark and new buds made the first light sparkle in droplets. I wore one of my father's old coats; there were still wood shavings in its pockets, and my mother's too-big boots rubbed my ankles, scented me rubber.

We filled buckets with the heavy black velvet of eels on those mornings, down in the creek. My father had his tin smoker and he taught me how to smoke the flesh until it was coloured tobacco and flaked just right.

"Taste the first bit," he said, and put a piece in my open mouth.

We crouched in the gravel, placing flakes of eel on our tongue, piling the tiny bones in a tower as we picked them out. The silence between us was the kind of perfect that I knew even then was so delicate, so bubble-like with its thin surface of

contentment that it might break at any moment. I pointed out the rose and pearl bellies of rainbow trout to my father where they hid under an overhang of the riverbank.

No trout, and different eels in Gimbis, though. The people in Gimbis knew what to do with the fish and the rapids. They knew the dangers of the quickening current and how to anchor themselves to the shore, how to predict when a flash flood was near, how to find the hatchlings (clear, so you could see their bones growing) that hid where the current eddied. Over one favourite fishing spot there was a big tree that arched and no one took the bark from that one. It was where the blue butterflies came from. No one knew exactly how or why, but everyone knew that early in the dry season they crawled out from a hole in the trunk and then you could spot the damp silk of a new butterfly's drying wings. These places didn't frighten anyone because at least some of their secrets were known.

Instead, fear threw its nets near the places in the river, further away from the village, where the water spread, slowed, and then bent. The river's elbows, some called these places. When the river ran straight and narrow it was fine but the bends, where the water seemed almost still, were taboo. "Why?" I asked Susumina, but she didn't know the answer. "Why?" I asked her grandmother.

"Because the old men said so," she said, "the old men told us to keep away. And we did. And we do."

Many people had ideas why they had to keep away, and told stories told by cousin's husband's fathers about what might happen if the bend was visited.

"You'd disappear."

"If you came back, you'd get sick and die. Your family would get sick and die."

"If you caught fish there, anyone who ate it would get sick too."

“For generations your family would be cursed. Women wouldn’t be able to have babies. Men wouldn’t be able to find women to sleep with them.”

“A spirit would sit inside your ear and whisper until you killed yourself out of crazy.”

There were other stories about giant lizards that hid in the underbrush further down river, near the bends. “Have you seen them?” I asked Susumina and her family.

“No, but if you go to the next village, then they’ve seen them,” they said. “They can eat people right up, no bones even left.” I showed Susumina a picture of a dinosaur in an encyclopaedia. “Yes, that’s what they look like,” she said.

Susumina’s grandmother told us the story of the lost woman. “What happened to one woman, what she did in the past is like this,” she said. “There were some Gimbis people who planned to go up to Pikinam— to my father’s, my older siblings’, and my mother’s place there— from their village at Ndokle. From Ndokle, there they came. All the men there, they all came with their pigs and their wives and their children and their sweet potato. Because their things were heavy, when it became night they slept by the *yeges* tree, down where the government school is now built.” Susumina’s grandmother paused; pointed down to the school, making sure we were paying attention.

“While most of them were sleeping, because there was not a built house, a woman, whose name was Agobaga got up and went from that place to a place called Welakni, to cut grass, the kind for thatching a roof. She came into Welakni, and at Welakni a young man cut the thatched grass and gave it to her, saying ‘I will take it’ and ‘you will take it,’ meaning ‘we’ll build it together.’ Though Agobaga was intelligent, she thought ‘yes I will take it’ and she went with the man. The man was a spirit. The spirit took her from Welakni, misleading her heart, and leaving the thatch he took her alone to the forest.

After taking her out there, he carried her, wandering around in the mountains. She slept outside. After she slept, at the spirit's home there the spirit put things in her mouth and gave them to her. Because of that, after she ate the spirit's things, she could not look at people's eyes or talk with people. She got afraid eyes and she became wild.

The people from Pikinam came after her, searching. Eventually they found her and encircled her. By means of that they tried to make her whole.

But the spirit returned with other spirits and worked on her good heart with their hands so it became bad. And while her heart was bad, she died.

That is it, the story of how Agobaga got lost. If she had been afraid and tried to save herself, her body would not have got lost. If she had stayed with her family, she would not have got lost. Because in her heart she casually thought 'I know, I know,' and went with the spirit, later she got lost. Because she did not listen to the talk of her father and uncles and older brothers, she got lost. If she had listened, her body would not have got lost, that would have been good, and she would have stayed alive."

Susumina's grandmother pointed at us, stared at us hard. "This story is now finished. Remember how the woman got lost." She pointed at us again. We giggled.

Susumina and I began to say to each other that we'd go to a bend in the river, the one closest to the fishing spots. We'd meet each other there and we'd catch a fish, gut it on the shores and roast it right there. We'd set up a shelter and camp out all night and never be afraid. And then we'd come back and everything would have changed. Either the stories would be true, and we would be eaten by monsters, or be hunted by the spirits until we became spirits ourselves. Or we would live and be strong and be filled with the knowledge that we went to the bend in the river and lived and this would help us through everything forever.

It became our mantra, our words to get us through everything. “The river’s elbow, the river’s elbow,” we chanted when someone yelled, someone threw a stone, someone somewhere cried, or was sick, or dying and dead. When I said those words I thought of that other bend in the river where Julia’s eyebrow got cut and bruised, and wondered if the same rules here might apply in other worlds.

Chapter 8

“Ruth, can you tell Sonya to wash the sheets today?” asked my mother. Sonya, our house helper, our *pembantu*, was young, maybe eighteen, but she didn’t know her actual age.

“I wasn’t born for the killings on the airstrip, but I remember the time the river flooded as high as the gardens,” she said when my father asked her. My mother didn’t want to hire her. Said it made her feel strange having someone else in her kitchen.

“It’s expected,” said my father, though, “and you will need the help.” So Mum let Sonya do the washing, the floors, the dusting of the ever-dusty shelves. And Sonya shelled the corn and I helped her, fed the rabbits, cut the vegetables for my mother to cook later at night. My mother didn’t trust her and hadn’t learned enough words to build that trust yet. I was the go between.

In the afternoon, when all the work was done, Sonya liked to search through my hair for nits. Nits grew fat in hair in Gimbis because of the humidity and the closeness of bodies. Some of the older teenagers greased their hair with pig fat because it was meant to keep the nits away. Sonya hadn’t found any in my hair so far but her fingers in my hair reminded me of my own fingers, and Julia’s, in my mother’s hair. Once a week, at night, she used to ask Julia and I to pull out the white hairs that were just starting to silver the part in her hair. She lay on one of our beds on her stomach and we knelt on the mattress, hunting and giving each one we found to her to clutch until we were done. She complained about those white hairs but I knew that all three of us needed those nights.

Sonya smelt like smoke from a cooking fire and corn from the cobs she had just finished shelling into a bucket. My father used to smell like new wood from the cabinets

he once built in the garage for middle-class families in the city, now he smelled like mud and kerosene. My mother smelled like clothes that had been in the back of the wardrobe too long.

“Why don’t you like her?” I asked my mother.

“I don’t not like her. She’s young. Too much of a child and I don’t know what to do with her.”

Sonya had two children of her own already; both boys and my mother guessed that she might be pregnant with another. Sometimes she came to work with scrapes on her back. “My husband hit me with a piece of firewood,” she said when I asked how she got them. She didn’t seem sorry to tell me. Just said it like a fact because it was one.

“I didn’t ask for her to be in my house,” said Mum. When Sonya was inside my mother moved around her like they must never touch.

When Sonya had her fingers in my hair I could forget that she was not my mother. Sweat smell was the smell of a body lived in, a body that was solid and to which I could cling. I leant against her knees until her eldest child came to walk home with her. I watched from the porch as they left. She sang the same songs to me as she did to her children and her nieces and nephews but on some days I wanted those songs for my own.

My mother cared more about the bread than she cared about me. The bread became her special project. She only needed to bake one loaf a day but she always baked two. We went through bread like fleas through skin, she said.

It was hard to bake bread in the wood stove. The stove was temperamental and liked to play with my mother’s mind, provoke her, taunt her. One day it might burn the top crust, one day it might leave the centre raw. Every day my mother knelt at the small

door where the wood got fed in, knelt sliding in paper, then kindling, then finally the logs, praying to the sparks, speaking sweetly, coaxing. Her tone was as if she was talking to her best friend.

This was how you made the bread by hand. You mixed flour, salt, baking powder, in a bowl. Always a little sugar. Then you warmed milk with some of the hot water that my mother kept in a kettle on the stove. The kettle was always full. She added the yeast (brought from New Zealand and locked in a drawer when not in use) to the milk and the smell as it bubbled was like Christmas, like the froth on one of my grandfather's beers. "It's alive," said my mother but she didn't say how. This was all added to the dry mix and she used a spatula to fold in the liquid until all was sticky like clay, as if she were making a sculpture just for me.

Then she kneaded. She kneaded on the laminated kitchen table that was small and shook all over with the movements of her arms. My mother had grown muscles with this kneading. They were small and I thought about touching them and if they would be hard.

The flour clouded over her shining dough ball when she sifted over extra to stop her fingers sticking. Then it was time for the ball to go into a bowl, covered with a tea towel, and then it sat on a shelf by the stove, warm and humid with the steam from the kettle, for an hour before it rose like one of those puffball mushrooms I used to know about.

It got kneaded again and this time divided between two loaf tins to rise for the second and last time. How did my mother make their tops so smooth? Bare and vulnerable.

The last touch was to brush the top with egg. Only eggs were scarce and I hadn't found as many under the house where the chickens liked to lay so these days she used

water instead. Then into the oven the loaves went and every five minutes my mother peered in the door with her silver travel torch, monitoring their progress. I imagined her whispering words of encouragement.

My father's hospital wood might be eaten by termites, the house helper's baby might die, ulcers might bite into my shins, the water supply could dry up, her boxes of soap and toilet paper might run out. But the bread had to bake.

There was one woman I thought my mother trusted in Gimbis, though. The old lady first visited my mother on the back porch the day after we arrived, and brought her eggs padded with sweet potato leaves in her skirt pockets. My mother tried to pay her but the old lady said no. After that she came once a week, sometimes bringing more eggs, sometimes beans with long strings, sometimes a watermelon the size of her torso slung in a woven string bag that she hung from the top of her head. My father chopped those watermelons with a machete and made me eat outside so that the juice could bleed free down my shirt and drip on to the ground.

The old lady had a name but we always called her the old lady because she was the oldest we had seen in this village and for my mother she became the grandmother she never met. The old lady had no teeth. When she visited she sat on the bench on the porch and held my mother's hands and words poured out of her like those ants in the flowers that my mother could never get rid of. And my mother talked too. They both talked in their own languages but that didn't seem to matter and by the end of every visit both had tears. When the old lady left, my mother stood on the porch looking out into the bush beyond the fence and clutched whatever she was given to her chest.

Sonya and I made a loop of bright green rope. We spread it wide in the grass beneath a breadfruit tree and dropped dried corn in hills around it. I shelled that corn the day before. I liked the sting and the burn in my knuckles when the kernels rubbed.

It was the rooster with the orange-gold head that walked into the loop after the corn. Tight we pulled the string, and he was caught hanging and flapping like a broken branch. Sonya handed me her red-handled knife. Its blade was stained pale green because earlier we had chopped at grass, seeing how close we could shear it at the roots. She then held the rooster up to me and spread the feathers on its neck, as gently as if it was a baby and as if she was running fingers through new hair. There was pimpled skin underneath the feathers, yellow-pink. It took me two slices. Sonya let the rooster go and it did a half-run, half-fall. Hissed through the rip in its throat. When he came to rest at the base of one of the pylons holding up the house, we caught him again and hung him from the branch of an avocado tree growing by the fence to let the blood drip. As I waited for the body to drain I sat in the grass under the clothesline and thought of chickens and roosters and dark feathers that smelled like dust and dirty pillowcases.

The blood smelled like I imagined warts would smell if they had a smell. It wasn't until later when I was undressing that I realised I still had that smell in my nose and then I saw how the blood had run down my wrists and pooled in patches under my blouse. I looked in the mirror and saw myself stained and I was pleased.

I think it was after I killed the chicken that my mother decided it was time to open the box of school books that arrived for me on the airstrip one month ago, along with melted chocolates and clothes that were too small sent by my grandparents for a birthday, long passed. She set up a desk in the corner of the living room. My father had

painted sheets of triplex with blackboard paint for use one day in the hospital. She cut the end off of one and leant it against the wall.

“I hate chalk,” I said. “It makes me itch.”

“You have to start school,” my mother said. It was the only thing she seemed to know to say to any of my protests.

We came to a compromise: I worked in my school books five days a week until lunchtime and then I was free to go. I think she felt guilty for this, as if she should have made me study longer, but the fact is that she needed the break too. With me out of the house, and my father out working on the hospital site, she could be free to sit on the sofa, read a book, without feeling like someone was watching and judging her.

But she tried to hide that she was trying to hide as well. She tried to do the things that made her feel like “mother” in another place. “Stand here,” said Mum and pressed me against the kitchen doorframe, balanced a cookbook on my head so she could pencil in a mark, just like she used to do every few months in the yellow house. But here, without Julia’s mark nipping at the heels of my own, trying to catch up, mine looked like it was a mistake, a random pencil mark on a white-painted door frame, meaning nothing at all.

Chapter 9

On Sundays the voices of people singing in the church floated with the mist and grass clippings across the airstrip and into our house. At first, we just listened. On Sunday mornings hardly anyone looked through the fence at us. No one came for Band-Aids until after lunch. No planes landed on the airstrip, the police were nowhere to be seen, and the radio, which lived with the giant scales for weighing boxes and peanuts and people in the building down by the airstrip, was turned off.

My parents walked around the yard and held hands. My father showed my mother the mulberry bushes, perhaps brought here by some long ago family just like us, that were trying to grow behind the shed where the generator was kept. "I'll be able to make jam," my mother said, and we picked the few berries that were ripe and spat the stalks at the chickens. Mum sometimes didn't even make bread on Sundays. She let my father make pancakes.

One Sunday, the voices started in the church, like they did every week.

"How about we check it out today?" asked my father. I looked at Mum.

"I think I'll stay back today," she said. "But you might enjoy it, Ruth."

I wore on a dress that I hadn't put on since a Sunday in New Zealand. It was starting to get tight around my arms. I let my mother brush my hair and pull it into uneven pigtails. Elizabeth followed us down the path as far as the airstrip.

When we got to the church, children, smaller than me, were playing on the steps, ignoring the singing inside. Just outside the door was a pile of sweet potatoes, corn, all sorts of green leaves, and taro. My father stopped to add some money to the pile. "The offering," he said. His money looked out of place and lonely tucked between two sweet potatoes. I wondered if things ever got stolen from the pile.

Inside the church, men sat on one side and women sat on the other. All on the floor, with their feet tucked under them. Children drifted from one side to the other. No one seemed to care what side they sat on, for now.

A man stood up when he saw us, didn't let us sit on the floor, and led us to a bench that leant against the back wall. "It's okay," my father tried to say, and he went to sit on the floor again, pulling my hand with his. But now more men were there trying to show us to the back bench, shaking their heads hard when Dad motioned at the floor. So we sat on the bench. My father folded his hands in his lap like he didn't know what to do with them. The bench wasn't tall enough for his legs, and he looked like he was trying to sit in a child's chair. My legs dangled just above the floor.

Some people at the back of the church watched us as the people at the front sang on. A boy blew his gum bigger than his face. Popped it. His brother elbowed him and pointed at my legs. Laughed. A woman on the other side of the church hefted her baby up on her chest so that she could twist around and get a better look. The baby had snot running into its mouth. Flies were mating, eating, dying on the window sills.

The songs that were sung were chants that seem to come from deep inside the people's guts, somewhere below their belly buttons and above their waistbands. There didn't seem to be verses, choruses, melody. A man standing at the front called out, and everyone answered. The men were the deep hum that became the ground that the women's higher voices built on. The voice of the man at the front became the pinnacle of a mountain of voices, all clambering over each other to reach the top. I closed my eyes. I climbed with the voices.

When the singing stopped, the preaching began. It was hot in the church. Above us dangled streamers left over from some celebration, faded from what might have been pink to a dirty white. My father let me draw pictures in one of the little notebooks he

kept in his pocket. His back left sweat patches on the wall when he leant forward. There was the smell of the breath from many lungs. A woman crawled in to hear the sermon on her hands and knees, her feet were twisted, too small, and dragged behind her.

“Polio,” Dad whispered in my ear. Too loud, I thought. The woman went up to the front of the church and the others there made way for her. She took someone’s new baby from their lap and rocked it back and forth. It wore long sleeves, long pants, one of the beanies that all the babies here seemed to wear. Looking at it made me sweat more.

And the sermon went on. We could still hear the children playing outside.

“Can I go out?” I asked. Everyone else seemed to go in and out as they pleased.

“Wait a bit,” said my father. But when another elder stood up to give community notices (someone’s pigs were dying of a mysterious illness, a wedding for the pastor from another village was scheduled for next week), he nodded and I went.

The children had been drawing with sticks in the dirt, but now found a pair of birdwing butterflies. I knew they were those butterflies from my grandfather’s book. Their wings were deep green and black, and their bodies looked as if they were powdered sulphur-yellow. Two boys each held one, and then ripped off their wings, threw them away and they scattered like scraps of satin. The boys put the bodies on the ground where they squirmed and didn’t look like caterpillars like I thought they would look.

“Hold one,” said one of the boys to me. He put one of the butterfly bodies in my hand. Its legs tickled my palm. The boy snatched it back after a while, tossed it in the air with its mate, broke the bodies apart when they landed back in his hands. His hands glittered with wing dust, shone in the sunlight.

The voices in the church went on. I walked home without my father. As I came to the gate, I could just see the silhouette of my mother through the kitchen window,

bending over the sink, rubbing dishes hard because I could see her shoulders shake. She tried every day here to get the detergent to make fluffy suds like they used to do in the yellow house's sink, but the detergent barely foamed because my parents said the water was too hard, too many minerals. But when I put my hand into it, it seemed just like any other water to me.

Rose, my grandmother, used to come over to the yellow house, after my parents took it over and after Julia and I were born, until my father forbade her on account of her dream-catchers (and other superstitions). After that, she kept stones in small silk pouches for us instead, hidden in her lingerie drawer under neat rows of plain white underpants and thick-strapped bras. Turquoise for Julia, Tiger's Eye for my mother. Iridescent moonstone for me, for femininity and balance (she said). Obsidian for herself. She liked to rub it between her fingers and will her anger into its blackness.

Seeing my mother in that moment through the window, before she saw me, made me think of my grandmother and those angry stones and of the ways that anger seems to travel through people even when the person who started the anger is gone.

Chapter 10

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday, the market, the *pasar*, ran down near the bottom of the airstrip. And every Monday, Wednesday, Saturday, my mother sent me to buy the things she needed. She never went down there herself, but before I went she filled up my water bottle, insisted on smearing sunscreen all over my neck. She waved at me from the kitchen window as I went out the gate and then let the curtain fall back in place.

The *pasar* had different parts. There was a tin roof built over a big square in the dirt and where the tables were set up. This was where the noodles were sold, the eggs, the cigarettes, the lollipops and gum, the cooking oil, coloured string for the bags the village women made, nails that my father said were stolen, and sometimes, just sometimes, party balloons, mainly red and orange.

There was also a special long table on one side where those who had meat to sell stood. There might be the body of a bandicoot split open, innards exposed to the eyes of potential hungry buyers, or there might be possums, skinned. Once a month or so there might be the leg or ribs of a pig, spread out on banana leaves and packed with edible ferns, but my mother said this pig meat was too old or might be the kind with worms so we should stick to praying that fresh meat, with the blood still dripping would come to our door to buy. Our freezer that ran on a blue flame fuelled by kerosene was stuffed with little packets of Australian mince from the city that my mother would ration out until meat at our door happened.

Some days there were eggs, not chicken ones, arranged by the meat. Large and blue-grey, that was from a Victoria crowned pigeon, small and spotted, that was from a

dove with no English name. Duck eggs too that we made omelettes with once but they had tiny bodies in them, trying to be ducklings, just two centimetres long.

Around the square of dirt, out from under the shelter of the roof, sat women in the grass with their skirts gathered up around their knees. They sold sweet potatoes and their leaves, taro, small purple onions, peanuts in their shells (still dangling from dirty roots), watermelon, bananas, papaya, chillies. These women sold the small green betel nut that turned to bloody juice when you chewed it, made you forget being hungry, numbed your mouth and all the way down your insides. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday I sat with Susumina and the women as they knitted their bags with their fingers, let the waves of their talk wash over me. They let us eat peanuts and betel nut with them. "Orphan girls," one woman there every week called us. This village looked after its orphans. We called the women our mothers. The ground was stained red with our spit.

Susumina and I held the balls of string for the women making the bags and sometimes Susumina and the others talked about where they had come from. "My great-grandmother's people," Susumina told me, "were the children of the pythons that live in trees. And my great-grandfather's ancestors were the adders that make you sick when they bite, but not sick enough to die if you are full grown. If you are young though, when the snakes bite your hands or feet, when it is carried to your heart, you die. And when the skins of those snakes touched, the beginnings of our ancestors began in their bodies. That is why we are forbidden to kill those snakes, because they are our relatives. We cannot eat them."

Susumina told me about the snakes many times. I made up my own place to come from, my own relatives. "My ancestors came from the rivers, from the pools

where the eels live. That's why bad things happened after my father and I caught and ate some. That's why we don't live far from the water."

Susumina and the old women all nodded.

The *pasar* was also where men liked to yell, where anyone who didn't mind being seen went so that announcements could be made, notices could be shared, news of the dead, dying, and just born could be heard. Fights could be fought and settled, not too much blood shed.

One woman stood up. Last week a young man asked her sister to go back to his village higher up in the mountains and she didn't like him. He beat his last wife and he would beat this one. The chief pastor and another elder stood up. The woman sat down. The pastor and the elder yelled back and forth with the young man until something was decided. The women sitting in the grass occasionally yelled in their direction. Here it was hard to tell who was happy and who was not.

The *pasar* is where we chose sides. Even Susumina, the other children, I, knew that we must pick sides. The children who came from the coast, the ones we called straight-haired, whose fathers worked on the hospital, in the school, in the new government offices that lined the top of the airstrip, as policemen: they were not us. They liked to creep up behind us and pull our ears and hair, call me foreigner and the others dogs, scum, glue sniffing terrorists who could never win. I had to choose but my hair was straight too even though I twisted it when it was wet at night. Even though I could run to my house with a door that locked when I wanted to. We all had to choose.

My mother told me to buy noodles. And chillies, if I could find them, the long dark red kind. I leaned back in the grass, dug the heels of my gumboots in the soft ground. Susumina got to bury her toes in it bare, but my mother scared me with photos

of hookworm burying into my feet. If they stayed in your body long enough they could get into your lungs, make you cough and then emerge at night through the skin on your chest, leaving behind little red pin dots that you see in the morning.

Before I went back to the house I had to wash my mouth out so that my parents didn't see my gums and teeth all red from the betel. I used the bottle my mother sent with me that was filled with water that she boiled and filtered because she said that other worms and worse things live in water that isn't treated like this. I washed and washed, swirled and spat. When I got home, handed my mother the noodles and chillies, sat down for lunch with both my parents, they didn't say anything about any red. So I was relieved. But also, a part of me, a little disappointed.

Chapter 11

One day the little pink-red notes the women clutched at the *pasar* weren't worth gum or lollipops anymore. The pilots told my father that the rupiah was dropping fast. "A good time for people like us," they said. The women started clipping notes together in little piles and they needed to pile those notes higher and higher every week to buy noodles, cooking oil, rubber bands for their hair.

When we first got to the village, everywhere, in the shed by the airstrip, in the places where the policemen slept, in the government shops, in some people's houses, there was President Suharto hanging on the wall, looking down over all of us. He was everywhere except for the market. No walls meant no nails to hang Suharto's face on. Maybe he couldn't watch us there.

"Who's Suharto?" I asked my father.

"He has been the president for a long time. Killed lots of communists in the sixties. Don't talk about him to other people, he has ears." And I remembered something from history books about having to hate the communists and their type of red.

But then it was May and there were more planes landing on the airstrip and sometimes there were soldiers who got out of those planes and stayed. And the pictures of Suharto came down. Another president went up. But now people weren't so careful to have him in their houses. Now there were less eyes looking over our peanuts and bags of rice.

There were stories that my father heard from the pilots and from his radios. I heard bits of them at night and when I followed my father on to the airstrip, crouched under the tail flaps of the plane and leant against the still-warm body. The stories were

of people rioting in the cities. Turning over cars, threatening foreign people like us, setting things on fire.

More planes came, planes that were too big for the airstrip, and which left long ruts in the dirt that we could roll tennis balls down, and they brought bags of rice from the government, to give to the people of Gimbis for free, because of the money not being worth much anymore and because the radio said drought, called La Niña, had finally found her way to us. I drew La Niña for a school assignment on the seasons; made her a woman with dark hair, wide skirts that wrapped the world like cellophane, sealing us away from the rain clouds. A hot wind blew around her feet always and burned off any cloud or fog as they formed.

My father found out that the pastors and headman of Gimbis had started counting dead people and trees, added those numbers to the numbers of live people in the village, and then wrote them down on the ration papers from the government so that they would get more rice.

“Is it ethical not to let the police know this is going on?” Mum asked him.

“I don’t know. It almost seems the opposite, that it would be unethical to tell the police. I mean, what else do they have?” I was starting to learn that the kind of rules you can break and the ones you can’t were different in this place.

“I’m too young to remember the first Suharto fighting,” said Susumina’s step-mother. “But now I am here and remembering and Suharto is gone but the angriness still goes on.”

Time got measured differently in Gimbis. Susumina’s grandfather said he was too young to remember when the Dutch explorers first came to the area and brought their metal tools, but at the time of the killings on the airstrip he was the new father of Susumina’s aunt. The story was the same whenever you asked someone how old they

were. They used things that happened to measure, not numbers on a line. Before and after the expedition led by the white man called Archbold. That was a very long time ago. Before and after the killings on the airstrip. That was a long time ago but not too long. Before and after the first aid workers came. Some young people were born in time for that.

Before Julia, after Julia. So far, all I had to measure by. So I chased the stories of the fighting, of the riots and the shootings. Tried to make them mine so that one day I could say that I was alive for these times, so I could have a rod to measure my life by. Felt like I was stealing the stories. Stuffed them inside my head like a rooster trying to fit too many corn kernels in his beak at once. Overflow and choke.

Chapter 12

The people in the medical handbook for white people living in third world countries said that biting midge and mosquito activity peaks when the full moon rises and that we should stay away from pools of still water. They said that we should wear long pants and long sleeves whenever possible, and paint all exposed skin with the bug spray that stung if it got on a cut or on sunburn or on a mosquito bite that was already there. But it was too hot for the long sleeves and even if we wore them the bugs knew how to get through cloth and chemicals and screens. They were tiny Houdinis (my father's words), minute dark magicians who always knew where to find us.

I remembered this when I woke in the dark and my body crawled with an ache so deep that I could feel it drilling, burrowing into bone. In my stomach was an ice-cold knot or maybe a brick because in moments I could feel it growing and I was desperate and cold, cold and desperate and I moaned in want of a fire to throw myself into. The burn would be worth it as long as it melted the ice.

I fell back down into the darkness of sleep. I dreamed of spiders. I dreamed they crawled up into the bed, over and up my feet: thorn-lined legs, a sea of eyes. They bit down on me as one. I half-awake then and my legs burned with cramps. Next there was a swollen pinch in my groin and, almost pleasurable, the breaking warmth as my bladder emptied into the sheets, ran in hot streams down my legs. There was an itch as it cooled. Sleep's soft ropes pulled me back. There was another dream that told me I got up and changed the sheets, stood in the shower as heat rained down, cleaned up so it never happened. I was spotless. Sun-on-snow-white and faultless. But then the pain and cold woke me again to dampness.

Dengue fever was the disease, and its other name is Break Bone. Except the sharpness of an actual break would almost be a relief in contrast to the grinding pain that made “dull” a lie. The blunt force of a crocodile’s tooth can do more damage than a well-sharpened blade.

I vomited. But still I was flat on my back and my limbs were pinned by the fever to the bed and the vomit was thick in my hair, in my mouth, choking back down my throat and yet my teeth were still rattling on account of the cold in my body. There was a smell of rotting strawberries and bitter bile. I couldn’t see.

I was tired, oh so tired. The vomit was drying, caking on my face, stiffening against my lips. After everything, I heard myself thinking before all was dark again, it might just be easier to sleep.

In the morning I found myself lying on the sofa in the living room. My mother seemed nervous and continuously walked between the kitchen and me, only stopping to pour me small cups of hoarded soft drink she’d sent Sonya to get from the *pasar* to try and settle my stomach. “It will be better than water for you right now,” she told me. “It’s for the electrolytes.” I think she said these things more for her sake than mine. Sometimes she rested her hand on the two-way radio and glanced at my father.

“Soon the hospital will be built,” he said, more times than he needed to. “Then problems like this will be a thing of the past.” He’d been having more trouble with the wood. They weren’t bringing him enough and many of the planks were too small to be of any use. And there was bad news about the road, too. There was a landslide which killed two of the workers. It would take weeks to move the dirt.

“But it isn’t the past *now*,” said my mother. “What the hell do I do *now*?” He never had an answer for her, no matter how loud she got, no matter how many times she threatened to get up and leave, to push that button on the radio.

“Just tell her something!” I wanted to yell, and, in my haze I thought I did. “That’s all she wants. She doesn’t even need it to work, she just wants someone else to be the rock, be the guide, hold her hand.”

On the fifth day a rash broke over my stomach and the name of the disease was confirmed by my mother reading in her medical book. Dengue likes to mimic malaria, but malaria has no rash. Miriam seemed calmer now that the disease was named and cornered. She continued feeding me soft drinks, boiled potatoes with a little margarine, sometimes one of our precious eggs. I slept a lot. I decided that my bones might ache forever. I made my peace with this. I slept some more.

After I was out of bed, light on tender feet, Susumina took me down to the river. We looked towards where the elbow was meant to be. I thought about running there then, of going when my body felt like it was still suspended between earth and sky. I felt as though I could fly there, walk on the water so it couldn’t draw me down into the depths. The pills I took made my ears ring and I could almost hear the bees from the creek on the day Julia and I jumped from the rocks.

“One day we’ll go there,” I said.

“One day,” said Susumina.

Chapter 13

My dad could slide the skins of rabbits right off. So that they looked like red jelly babies, babies who were born too dark and too young. When he slid their skins off, their bodies were still hot and still bleeding. Before he skinned them he cut a line around their ankles so they wouldn't catch when he took the rest of the skin off.

The rabbit breeding programme was, according to my father, a success. The rabbits we brought with us from the city multiplied and multiplied again. Twenty families now had their own rabbits and those ones were multiplying too. In our hutches lived the ten original rabbits, the core breeding group as my parents called them. And we kept a few of the children for ourselves sometimes too, killing one to eat every couple of weeks because the Australian mince hadn't lasted and no one came to our door selling other meat wrapped in banana leaves and smelling warm.

It was my job to keep an eye on the pregnant mother rabbits, to tell my parents when one of them went into labour. They started by moving around their nests which were wooden boxes filled with grass clippings that I left in the corner of the cage. They licked themselves a lot and their eyes got larger right before the babies were born. Then some of the mothers did what they are supposed to do. But some of them didn't. Sometimes they ate their babies or kicked them out of the nest and left them to shiver to death on the bare chicken wire. Sometimes big red and black ants came and chewed away the babies' eyes before we could flick them away.

The first time a mother abandoned her babies, Susumina and I tried to save them. We took the tiny brown-pink bodies and put them on our bare chests under our shirts. I felt nails, still soft, grazing against my skin, a tremor that could be a breath. But the babies, seven of them this time, all shivered to death as if we were not helping them

at all. One by one they died with our fingers cupping them. Susumina shrugged. "That's what happens," she said.

"It's stupid," I said. We buried them in a row of graves near the pit where Sonya burned our rubbish once a week and decorated the graves with lollipop wrappers and the dried petals I saved from a rose my father tried to grow for my mother to remind her of New Zealand before it died from something eating up its stems at night. Susumina stood in front of the graves and sung a half-chant, half-wail to send their spirits off properly.

"What now?" said Susumina afterwards. We decided to hunt for eggs around the house for my mother because the chickens were sneaky and found new places every week. Then we got distracted by the ant lion pits in the silt under the house and crouched in the dirt catching ants and feeding them to the ant lions that we never saw.

"There could be rats under there," my father said when he saw us. "Or snakes, or spiders." We ignored him.

"It's funny," I told Susumina. "When we're under the house, my parents are the ones warning us of snakes and things, and when we're up a tree it's the villagers here who yell and tell us to get down before we are bitten by something." People in Gimbis didn't trust the trees.

"No one knows what they're talking about," said Susumina. She caught an extra-large bull ant and sent it to its fate.

Then there was the day the rabbit cried and the man laughed. On that day, my father was at the hospital site again and Pilem who cut our grass with his machete sometimes, and who helped my father with the water tanks, was given the job of killing the rabbit for my mother. Susumina and I always watched the killing. We didn't know why but we hadn't learnt to be afraid of it yet. It still seemed like a game to us.

Pilem took one of the boy rabbits, the one with a black spot on his side, to the laundry shed and we followed. The killing was always meant to be the same: One twist of the neck and the rabbit was limp and it was over and my father could get to the skinning.

But this time Pilem twisted and there was a pause. And then somewhere there was the sound of a high thin cry. There was no other sound but this. A baby perhaps? And then Susumina thought it was a goat's kid that got lost on the airstrip. And then our ears adjusted to where the sound came from and it was the rabbit and it was still alive but could not move and it cried and cried. Susumina jumped back and yelled and then there were tears in my eyes and I ran and hid in the house, behind my mother who didn't know why I was crying. But in my ears the cry kept on going and never stopped. Outside, I heard Pilem put the rabbit, now dead, on the porch for my mother. He laughed and shook his head as he walked out the gate.

My mother said that those rabbits were always tough. She boiled and boiled them but still the meat clung to the bones.

There was another reason, other than snakes, that the people in Gimbis didn't like the trees, or some of the trees anyway. They didn't like the ones the fireflies flew from, the ones that looked like they could be trees strung with Christmas lights at night.

"We're here to cut the tree down by the front gate," two men, Susumina's relatives, told my father.

"Why?"

"Because that's where the spirits of the dead are getting caught as they try to leave the burial hill."

"How do you know that?"

“Haven’t you seen their eyes that glow in the night?” The men looked at my father as if everyone knows that, as if they didn’t believe someone could be that stupid not to know that.

“They’re just insects,” said Dad. He made a buzzing sound. Everyone looked at him like he was crazier than usual. “Never mind,” he said. “But you can’t chop the tree down. It’s ours.”

When I washed the dishes at night I watched the fireflies through the window. Little people eyes, old people eyes, maybe baby rabbit eyes. All who got snagged in the branches of that tree when they were just trying to find their way to heaven or hell. Eyes, eyes, everywhere. In Gimbis, if an elder sibling died, the spirit had a place to go, into the younger sibling. But if a younger sibling died, that spirit had nowhere to go except for maybe getting caught in the firefly tree.

Chapter 14

The old lady that brought us watermelons and sweet potatoes on her back died. The hut that she had shared with her youngest son and his family was on the other side of the airstrip, near the church, and we could hear the sound of her relatives gathering there and crying together. An early evening fog settled on the grass and even this didn't muffle the wails that sounded as though they were rising from the earth to float up through the white.

She didn't die of malaria or any other disease in the pamphlets that we tried to hand out all year. "Just old age, I think," my father told my mother. Mum didn't cry, just finished chopping the onions for the night's stew and tossed them in a cast iron pot on top of the stove. "I'm sorry," my father said.

"Why are you sorry? She was old, like you said." My mother began on the carrots that were brought in on a plane the week before from a place in the mountains where it was cool enough for them to grow. Yet still they were stunted copies of what carrots should be.

I hovered in the kitchen doorway, scuffing my bare feet on the dusty boards because Sonya had been over on the other side of the airstrip all day with the mourners and no one had kept up with the sweeping. If the air was allowed to be still for just moments here it seemed that the dust started falling, started collecting in the corners, on the soles of our feet.

"You're both getting in the way," said my mother, pushing past to get into the freezer. "Go keep yourselves occupied in the lounge." My father and I obeyed.

"She'll be okay," my father said. But we couldn't keep our eyes on our books and instead stared through the window screen into the fog outside as it, and the voices in

it, threatened to seep through the house. When I leaned my head against the wall, the boards seemed to hum with those voices.

Funerals happened quickly in Gimbis because there is no refrigeration for the bodies in these sorts of places. And definitely no coroner like on TV, no polished coffins with red velvet insides. Three days after the old lady died, the pigs for the funeral meal arrived from the village she left when she got married years ago. The old lady would be wrapped in one of her blankets and carried out in the arms of her son to the stack of wood that her family had been collecting since she died. The wood would already be on fire before she was laid on it. This was her ending, because she had lived a whole life, and the burial hill and graves were kept for those children and young wives whose relatives couldn't bear to see them burn.

“Do we wear black or not?” asked my mother. “I've only got a black skirt and this camisole.” She waved lace at my father. “And the skirt is too tight to sit on the ground.”

“Everyone else just seems to wear the same clothes that they wear every day,” Dad said. He held up a tie in the mirror. He had brought three to Indonesia, thinking that they might be needed for church, for meetings. All three were creased from never having been unpacked until now.

“Honestly?” said Mum. “You know a tie will stick out like a sore thumb.” They left: my father tie-less and my mother with a black ribbon tied around her wrist, just in case.

I stayed behind and listened to the cries of the old woman's family from the house. The pigs were killed in the morning, as more relatives arrived. I imagine that people who buy their meat from supermarkets expect and hope that the moments

between life and death and quick. And it is for some. But for others there are moments called dying and those pigs knew those moments because an arrow in the heart allows for bleed-out time, screaming time. From the window I heard some of the children, Susumina with them perhaps, talking as they waited for the pigs to finish.

Then the rocks were heated for the cooking pits. The people who picked the rocks were careful but once upon a time this land used to be made by volcanoes, and sometimes a rock leftover from that time got mixed in with the others and when it heated up it exploded in shards because of the air pockets trapped within it. When this happened, the young men who turned the rocks with long sticks split halfway to make giant tongs jumped back and laughed at their own surprise and fear.

I knew when the pits were filled and covered because I could smell the meat and the vegetables, imagine them softening. Across the airstrip, in the churchyard where the funeral and feast were being held, the bright skirts of women spread like flowers in the dirt as they sat to tend the pits and their babies. Polyester flashed in the sun. Most of the women would have had half-finished string bags in their laps that they would knit in between wiping a child's face, kicking a dog away that got too close.

Before the cooking pits were broken open for everyone to eat, the funeral fire's flames reached so high into the sky that they looked like they might consume the one tree that stood outside the church's entrance. Then the voices all of a sudden rose, scared the lorikeets in our yard to silence. The body must have been brought out. It must be going, gone.

I still watched the flames. Then the voices slipped quieter, the smell of the cooking pits in the wind got stronger. I made myself a milo and waited for my parents to come home.

My parents' clothes were stained with sweat and clay. Mum had lost the black ribbon somewhere. Her neck was sunburnt and already turning tan like the backs of her hands always had been.

"I'll make you a sandwich, Ruth," said my mother. "We're full, but it's good you didn't come. You would have seen too much."

Susumina came to the door as I ate my sandwich. "Look," she said. She had stolen the bladder from one of the pigs, blew it into a white balloon for us to play with. We kicked it between ourselves in the yard until the fruit bats started flying out for the night.

Chapter 15

No old lady meant no sweet potatoes and onions for my mother. No watermelons, corn, lessons on how to keep ants from coming up between the floorboards. No one to hold her hands, both of them at the same time. After the funeral, my mother didn't even like to go as far as the porch, and there were no outside walks on Sundays. She read the two home and garden magazines that she brought from New Zealand so much that the pages came away from the spines. The tea bags were running low so she used one a day, and made it last for five cups or more.

For a few days I tried to stay in as well. I finished my school work slower, asked her questions that I knew the answer to. "You'll figure it out, Ruth," she said. "I'll be in the lounge if you need me."

After a week, with her still curled in the lounge drinking tea that looked like milk, and trying to hold all her pages together, I didn't try anymore. I ran out the gate and down to the airstrip where Susumina and the others had the soccer ball.

A fresh batch of policemen had arrived on the plane the day before. I had watched them get off the plane with their boxes of noodles and bags of rice as I sat at my desk, writing a journal entry for the English teacher in New Zealand who, every few months, sent my work back to me covered with stickers that shouted "WOW!" in rainbows and wrote comments like "Well, that sounds very interesting," and "Are you sure that really happened?" The policemen's rifles shone so bright in the sun that they looked fake, like plastic water guns for children who liked to pretend they were the real thing.

"Who's this?" the policemen asked as I got to the airstrip. "So white, so pretty! What's your name, little girl?"

“No one,” I said, and grabbed the ball off Susumina, was about to run into the grass.

“Wait,” said one policeman. He looked the youngest out of all of them, had short black hairs trying to be a moustache on his top lip. “You want a lollipop? I’ll give you a lollipop.”

“No,” I said, and went to go again. I didn’t feel like playing the game I was supposed to today, the game where I was innocent and let my cheeks get pinched. The policeman grabbed Susumina’s arm.

“Come on,” he said. “I bet your friend wants a lollipop. Don’t you?” He pulled her into his lap, and, too quick, his hands were under her skirt where I knew no underpants were. Susumina started to pull away, but another policeman put his hand on her shoulder, fingers firm enough to leave marks that showed up later, but he still smiled.

“*Jangan!*” I said. “Don’t! You’re all just old men.”

“Old men who smell bad,” said Susumina. The hands were still under her skirt and she said the words like she was having fun, but there was sweat on her forehead and she was still pulling against the hands.

“Let us give you a lollipop,” said the young policeman. “Then you girls can go play your game.”

“Okay,” I said. “Just one lollipop for me, and one for Susumina.” I stepped forward. The policeman reached in his money pouch for the lollipops. Susumina got off his lap and stood by me. As he handed me one, he reached with his other hand and pinched my cheek hard. “Just a lollipop!” I said, as I slapped his hand. The other policemen laughed. But the young one didn’t.

“What are you doing to my daughter!” I heard then, in English. My mother walked towards us down the path. She wore the leather sandals that she used to wear in New Zealand and that looked too new here. Some of the policemen hadn’t seen her before. Some stood up to get a better look.

“It’s okay Mum. They think I’m lucky.” The other children on the airstrip were watching now. Women walking home from their gardens giggled behind their hands as they passed.

“Lucky!” my mother shook her hands in the young policeman’s face. “You don’t touch a child in that way.” The policeman didn’t smile now. He grabbed my mother’s hand, twisted her wrist and crushed her fingers in his so hard that she dropped to her knees.

“Go home, foreigner,” he said, then let her go.

Mum got up and held her hand against her chest. “Come on Ruth,” she said. There were tears on her cheeks that I knew she didn’t mean to be there. I wondered if maybe she had been watching me all along, all these months, from the window just like I had watched the policemen arrive on the plane. I thought of the bees that bumped against the window, trying to get out.

“It’s okay, Mum. I’ll come home soon.” I thought she was going to ask me again, but she didn’t, just walked back up the path and through the gate. The policemen ignored Susumina and me, and started tossing stones at an empty Coke can, seeing who could hit it first. I gave my lollipop to one of the other girls who had come to play soccer.

When I returned to the house at dinner time, the stove was cold, the wood unlit, my mother in her bedroom with the door closed.

My father yelled. No more soccer, no more policemen. Mum didn't say much. Afterwards I used the peanut butter jar for my shouting words. But, still, anger sat in the back of my throat, large and sticky.

I went out to the back shed where the pile of wood for the stove sat next to the new generator which my father had paid too much for in order to make my mother smile. There were two axes. One tall, one short. One for the big pieces of wood, one for the kindling that burned quick and pale. I held the short axe. My father said the week before that it was blunt, he needed to sharpen it, he'd get around to it one day. I liked how it felt in my hands. The wood handle varnished and smooth, the weight of the steel head that tipped it forward. It felt real. Solid. Forever.

I got a twig and chopped it. I made a miniature bonfire, or funeral pyre, out of the splinters. Then I looked at my finger resting on the stump that was the kindling's chopping block and for a moment the finger wasn't mine. It was my father's and the rage carried through me, down my arm, into the axe.

There was a brief space of time when the cut was only surprised flesh, a peek of bone, enough time to think "Oh, our bones really are white, too," and then the cleft filled with red. Clotted bubble. It became mine again. Tears began but there was no one to hear me so they seemed wasted somehow. It was only a small cut, in the end. The axe was too blunt to do more, and the bone was close to the skin.

I examined the cut edges of my skin and thought about how half of Susumina's grandmother's fingers were all stubs. Once upon a time little girls and young women in Gimbis sacrificed a joint of one of their fingers for each close relative that died. They sometimes even cut their own ears or their own hair and toss it up on the thatch of their roofs. But now, if it happened at all, it was just teenage girls who did it for their mothers, boyfriends, husbands. But you still saw old ladies with their fingers all stubs,

which told others without words of all their losses, of how bad the grief hurt, and of how they tried to keep death from following any more relatives home. The finger cutting could be done by biting, by tourniquet, by axe or machete. And even the women who had nothing but their thumbs left could somehow still sit by the cooking pits or by the airstrip waiting for the planes to come in and make their string bags.

I thought about trying again with the axe, try to punish my father more that way. But instead I left the axe in the shed, went back into the house and walked past my father in the kitchen with the edge of my t-shirt wrapped around the finger to soak up the blood. I wrapped it in gauze and plasters in the bathroom.

“What did you do to yourself?” asked my mother when I came out.

“Just scraped myself on a nail.”

“Good thing you’ve had your tetanus shot, I guess.” A few weeks earlier, four men carried a stretcher out of the bush to our house with another man lying on it. They had made the stretcher out of a blanket and wooden poles, like the ones they used to hang the pigs on, alive or dead. The man on the stretcher had cut himself with a rusty razor. Now he couldn’t open his mouth and his arms and legs were clenched up and couldn’t move. Mum said he had tetanus. He went away on a plane that came to take him to a hospital in the city. Dad said he died there. The man had a striped beanie that was all sorts of colours. I wondered if it was just going to be thrown away at that hospital, or if someone else got to keep it.

“Put some antibiotic cream on your finger before you go to bed,” said my mother.

There’s a thing about secrets: they always make one person powerful and one person weak. This one, for a short time, made me powerful.

Chapter 16

I woke up to the sound of my mother throwing plates against the wall. “You said we would be gone by now!” she said. “You said we could go home!”

The day was a red X that my mother wrote on a calendar with a felt tip, a year since Julia died in the hospital under gauze and blank sheets. The X marked a day that my father hoped that the Gimbis hospital would be half-built. It marked a day that my mother thought we might be lining up with our bags on the airstrip, weighing our suitcases along with chickens and peanuts being sent to the city. It was a day she thought we could leave behind us and never come back and that she could stretch out her arms in cooler air and let the curtains of the yellow house fly wide open.

But, here we were, still in this village as drought settled deeper into every crevice. La Niña remained too, and that was why the dust rose thick and the creek had slowed and would slow further soon. Why the toilet had stopped flushing and my father went to the swamp to bring back buckets of water which were getting thicker with leaves and mosquito larvae. Fish got stranded as the water level dropped. The birds were happy and full, for now. Eels, shorter and fatter than the ones I used to know, skins painted slick with the mud that bubbled up with them from between the tree roots, were revealed.

One year ago my mother wouldn't have thrown plates, but my father might have. During this year in the jungle the rage in my father had been washed over with energy to pass out pamphlets, to breed rabbits, to grow avocado trees and a hospital. We had almost forgotten what it was like to see him erupt and fill a room with words like arrows. We had become used to this father that built hospitals instead of cabinets with glass doors and small wooden trains.

As I lay in bed I heard the screen door swing shut, my father's footsteps leave the porch, and the shower of ceramic and glass continued.

The noise at the hospital site that day started when my father found tools missing from the shed that he locked every night. He didn't have the only key. From the lounge my mother and I heard people yelling back and forth from the direction of the site.

"Angry or not, this time?" my mother asked. The broken plates had been swept onto the porch. Sonya would take care of them later. Mum put everything not broken back on the shelves and tied her hair in a too-tight ponytail. Now she folded laundry and I stuck close, watching for whatever happened next.

"This time it's angry, I think. Because there aren't enough gaps between the yelling." My mother kept folding laundry while I looked out the window and waited to see my father walk up the path and come home.

When he came he seemed large and heavy, hot with anger. Dirt was smeared down his arms and his knuckles on his right hand were grazed from where they rubbed against the planks of wood all day. His left hand was wrapped in his handkerchief, blood seeping through, smears of blood on his legs below the hem of his shorts. I held my own hand against my chest, wondering if my anger and the axe the day before had translated into pain for my father. This gave me a brief thrill, tainted with fear at my own power.

"What happened?" said my mother and she moved towards him.

He didn't talk to us, went to the bathroom and started pouring water from one of the buckets over his hand. We watched from the door and when he took the handkerchief away we could see that the tip of one of his finger pads was missing. He

had that tip still in the handkerchief as it came away. Blood dripped into the sink. My mother went into the bathroom now and took the handkerchief with the bit of finger from my father. I could see the rage leaving him almost as fast as the blood. He no longer seemed as large. I held my finger again, wrapped in gauze, feeling guilt somewhere deep.

“I’ll put this in the fridge,” said my mother. “Maybe it can be sewn back on.” She left the fingertip on the handkerchief and placed it in one of the carefully hoarded, washed and re-washed Ziploc bags that we brought with us from New Zealand. Two weeks later we would find that bag in the back of the fridge with the tip of the finger now grey and hard. I would still be able to see the ridges that used to make up part of my father’s fingerprint.

“What do you need,” she asked my father, “what do you want?”

“Someone stole the skill saw and a drill from the shed,” he said. “No one was saying anything, but you know they did it. No one was listening, and you know how they can laugh. So I got out the electric planer, started up the generator and planed wood until I planed the top of my finger and the blood got them to listen.”

My mother reached for his right hand and both my parents sat on the linoleum bathroom floor. She got a towel and wrapped it around the wounded finger. My father already had a strip of fabric from his shirt around his wrist to stop the blood. “We have bandages,” Mum said. “When the blood stops we’ll bandage it. It’ll heal.” Then they were quiet except for the rattle of my father’s keys hanging from his belt which was the only clue that he shook.

I felt out of place in the hallway, watching, and left. My parents didn’t say anything. Susumina met me at the gate. “Did you see?” she said.

It was like the aches of my illness were back, the ache of a broken bone under a cast that you want to rub at but can't, and we came to the burial hill to get away from it all. No soccer there, no policemen, no parents. So there should be no guilt. Yacob joined us as we neared the top. We settled into the red dust and cross our legs and looked out over the airstrip, listened for the drones of engines in the sky and predicted before they passed whether they would land or not. None of them landed this time.

Susumina made mini twists in my hair, like hers, and tied them with different colours of string. There was a breeze which stirred the dust under our feet but if we faced the right way it didn't get in our eyes. We sent our prayers to the few wisps of clouds in the distance that they might join together and bring rain.

Susumina had snuck some small pink jellies in their little sealed plastic cones from someone (she wouldn't say who) and she passed them out now. They were really only big enough for a mouthful but we sucked on them slowly and let the flies rest on our toes and rub their tongues with their thin black wires for legs.

Yacob had his hand by the waistband of his shorts and he scuffed his feet in the dirt and made the dust worse. "Stop it!" said Susumina and slapped his shoulder. Yacob grinned. He brought out his hand and in it was a packet of cigarettes, the kind the policemen smoked and the kind that was not sold at the market. Susumina and I drew the air between our teeth the way we had seen the old women do at the market when they were not pleased.

"Where did you get those?" Susumina asked.

"Just around," said Yacob. He took a cigarette out of the packet and brought it to his lips, pretending to suck on it.

“Don’t be stupid,” said Susumina. But Yacob lit the cigarette anyway and tried to puff it like the policemen did, leaning back with one hip cocked. He coughed and blew the smoke our way.

“Idiot,” I said.

“Try it,” said Yacob.

“You just want us to cough too.”

“Try it,” he said. Susumina nodded and reached out her hand. She passed it to me and I rested it on my bottom lip a bit. But there was too much sweat smell mixed in with cigarette smell and I couldn’t get the policemen and their damp hands, damp uniforms, out of my head.

“Here, take it,” I told Susumina. She did and crushed it with her foot.

“All idiots,” she said. “I prefer ones I can make myself, anyway.” Yacob laughed and put the rest of the packet away. We watched the wisps trying to be clouds again and we forgot all about cigarettes and blood and policemen. Then later, after we had left, we turned and saw the hill on fire.

It was about four in the afternoon when the burial hill caught on fire. When my mother looked out the kitchen window, between the curtains she had been trying to hide behind, the flames had already covered the entire side which faced away from the airstrip. When the men washing down in the creek finally heard the crackling above the sound of their splashes, the whole thing was covered. The drought had bleached the grass blonde and dry. The red clay pressed over the graves on the hill had already cracked. The men ran to nearby houses in their towels. There was a lot of running, a lot of buckets, but, in the end, they just stood with their buckets and watched the flames because there was nothing anyone could do about the hill and the graves on the hill. The

fire would burn itself out on the rocks before it reached any homes, so now all they, all we, could do was watch.

It was after six and dark, except for embers that blinked like eyes on the hillside, when someone found the child with burns down her legs and lower back. They carried the child to her mother. It was then that the cries began and everything was all chaos and noise as when lava tips over a cliff into the sea and turns to rock and steam.

My mother sat Mendina, the girl with the burnt legs, on our porch and painted her with something brown to kill bacteria. Strips of dead skin hung down like papery bark on a tree and my mother used her embroidery scissors to trim them back. This whole time Mendina never cried, only looked down at the floor. I helped my mother wrap Mendina's legs with bandages. My mother's fingers tried their best to barely graze her. At the back of my mind tugged the pale memory of my father putting us to bed, whipping the sheets high and letting them float back down to kiss our legs softly. When Julia was in the hospital, in the room that smelled like cornflakes, sweet milk, and steel, I wanted to do this for Julia. Do it with a sheet made of spider webs, so soft and fine so that its touch wouldn't hurt the raging burned skin.

Mendina's father came to carry her home when we were done. "Will she be okay?" I asked my mother. She didn't answer me. I wondered if she knew about the cigarettes. I wondered if she knew about the finger too. And I wondered if she, all along had known about Julia, and that I didn't save her.

Later, in bed, I heard the water running in the bathroom. We had only been allowed half a bucket of water to wash with for the past week. This time the water ran and ran and through the sound of the water I heard my mother's sobs.

Chapter 17

The next day, Susumina and I went down to the river. We stopped by the spot where people fished. We dipped our toes in and I sat back against a large rock and scribbled faces on it with a bit of charred wood that had been used in an old cooking fire.

But Susumina didn't sit. She stood with her hands on her hips and looked down river, down towards the first of the bends that we were not supposed to talk about, think about, know about. In Gimbis we were only supposed to know about the world between the mountains, nothing further.

Someone else with other cigarettes might have been the cause of the fire, not us. Or cigarettes might not have started the fire at all. Just hot air and a spark, a wind that picked up at just the right time. We didn't know.

Someone else could have saved Julia. And who could have known that she would trip? That her nightgown would burn that quick and that my feet would be weighted to the earth and the screams wouldn't come from my mouth fast enough? I didn't know.

"Let's go," I said, then. I had been watching the rapids and for a minute, if I looked at them just right, they made me feel like I was being carried along with them. The river was lower than it used to be but still resisted La Niña and flowed deep in some places.

"What?"

"Let's go. To the river's elbow!"

Susumina laughed like everyone in this place did when they didn't believe something or were so shocked that they didn't know what else to do but laugh because the alternative is crying or horror. "We can't," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because! Because the old men say so."

"Well I'm going anyway. You don't have to come."

Until then I was half-serious, half-joking. But after I said this I knew more than anything else that I had to get to the bend in the river. I got up from the bank and started walking.

"I'll just follow the river," I said. I didn't look behind me.

The further I walked along the edge of the river, the fewer feet seemed to have pressed down the grass and brush sprouting from the sides. The weeds whipped my shins red. This only made me walk faster. It was late afternoon and quiet as most fishermen would have finished in the morning to avoid the heat, and there were fewer bathers these days. In pockets, where the trees blocked the wind, the air was so still and thick that I thought I might comb my fingers through it, part it like the Red Sea as my body moved through. I heard the swish of another body behind me in the grass. Susumina had followed. I still didn't look behind.

We passed patches where pigs, wild ones, had been digging. Though there had not been rain, somehow water had collected in their footprints. Worms rolled under broken roots. Mosquitoes hovered, the big kind with black and white striped back legs. Susumina slapped one and the sound of her hand against her skin echoed through the trees. Somewhere, something bolted off into the leafy darkness. From the corners of my eyes, I caught glimpses of movement and colours as I walked. I assigned them to objects, animals. The jewelled red of a juvenile tree python. Furred caterpillars that I

wasn't supposed to touch. So many things lined with thorns and spines: plants, insects, reptiles. Everything trying to survive, stepping on the heads of everyone else, all fighting for that one drop of water, sunshine, life.

We passed a small dam made for catching fish. Half of it had toppled into the shallows. It hadn't been used for a long time. But the river was getting deeper even without the dam. Somewhere along the walk it had turned another shade of green. Its surface was smooth, deceiving us into thinking it ran slow, but a leaf carried swiftly by told us of the current that moved underneath. I felt a leech settle behind my knee but didn't stop to pick it off yet. Everything was damp, defying the drought that chewed at the forest edges. The high-pitched whine and rasp of a cicada cut through the heated afternoon hush.

We were close. I was close. Susumina was quiet now. This trek to the bend in the river was for me. And then— a break in the bush, a curve in the bank, and there it was. The river's elbow, or one of the many, but for us it was the one. There was space for the wind to find us here and it licked the sweat on my neck and legs cool as I made my way down to a stretch of gravel where the river water bubbled up around the stones.

There was something that I later decided was disappointment in my throat. Perhaps I was expecting a bang straight away, the envelopment of evil, something to make me believe in the stories. Gravel sprayed into the river as Susumina slid down the bank beside me.

“Now what?” she asked.

I sat. After a while she did the same and we watched the river together, trying to see what might swim beneath our toes. The roots of trees came right down to the water here and leached their tannins and oils into it, leaving slick patches on the surface that

caught rainbows in the right light. I reached to skip a stone, like it was something that I couldn't help when faced with an open space of water. But I put it back down.

While we sat, time passed like in a wildlife documentary— time folded up, then stretched out to show the movement of grasses, petals, the relentless thrust of stems upwards into the light. I don't know how long we sat. But I stared so long at the river that the light falling from in between the gaps of the leaves on to the water seemed to start moving on its own. I closed my eyes and thought of moths with grey-green wings, stuck in a syrup of lights.

An orchid grew from a crack in a rock that jutted out from the bank. It was sheltered here, the tree above it, one that reminded me of a weeping willow but wasn't, hung down and let its curtain of leaves droop in the water. The orchid's roots were exposed and made their own cracks further into the rock. Its leaves were small, polished and its blossoms were open, pale green-yellow. Just inside the throat of each one sat furred legs, a fleshy body. Spiders, I thought, but then saw that they weren't, that the flowers were just pretending. The furred petals wobbled in the breeze. Prey or predator? I wondered what the flowers were trying to be.

I scooted down near the rock. I wanted to touch the orchid, fit its beauty into the book my grandfather gave me.

“What are you doing?” Susumina asked.

“I want to take it home. Have you seen one of these before? Do you call it anything?”

“No. It's just a flower. No use for anything. Let's go now.”

Susumina watched the path now, didn't let her back turn to it. The fireflies would be coming out soon, and the cries of night birds would replace those of the day and I knew Susumina only wanted to hear them from inside walls. I balanced the orchid

against my hip like a child. As we began to leave, something about the shadows and the cool wind here made us bolt suddenly. Now we were running back the way we came, running from the bend.

As we ran I remembered the blue satin nightgown that melted, the one I hadn't wanted to pass on to my sister when it grew too small. I remembered the fantail that danced with its reflection just outside the hospital window and the nurses like a flock of birds settled on the ground below. I remembered how the sunlight pooled in the kitchen sink on the day of the funeral that I didn't go to and the bleeding of jam into pale sponge cake, leftover from that same funeral. And the sympathy casseroles that came afterwards. There was a counsellor with shiny silver earrings, and a shiny silver pin stuck into blonde hair that was crinkled like crinkle-cut chips. There were dreams of bones folded together, bone upon bone, in the depths of a river, air bubbles rising through the water like strings of pearls and the white face of a girl that could have been me or it could have been Julia and it didn't matter because fire or water, me or Julia, I couldn't save anyone.

My sandals slipped in the leaves and rocks and thorny lantana poked at my feet, and Susumina and I gasped as if the spirits might be biting at our heels. We ran until we reached the airstrip, lay down in what was left of the grass that hadn't been burnt off by the sun.

At home I sat the orchid in one of the leftover avocado seedling pots. My father had his radio out again. My mother paced in the kitchen.

There wasn't a name the orchid in the book my grandfather gave me. So, lady in waiting I called it. For my mother, because she was (and is) always waiting, always putting on her lipstick that no one would see, always hiding behind her curtains. For

Julia, because she might forever wait for me to come to the bend in the river again and rescue her.

The flowers had died the next day, dry petals scattered. Little fake spider bodies littered all around. They were no use at all in Gimbis. No good for food, no good for making houses, and no good for making headdress decorations or medicines. No good for keeping spirits away or asking them to come closer. Just like me they might appear where no one expected them and then vanish for no reason and no one might ever know why.