

## Run of the Molars

LILY'S MOTHER arrived on a late October morning when winds were heralded from the Arctic north. Matthew insisted on driving Lily to Heathrow to meet her. Lily had brought Matthew's fishtail parka, which she knew her mother would refuse to wear, but it was cold outside. When the wind blew, it felt like being lapped with an icy tongue.

Lily's mother had a lot of prejudices. She disliked fake Chinese cooking ('chop suey' for example, was not Chinese cooking). She hated going out at noon if the sun was blistering. She abhorred religious pamphleteers, beggars, or people who harassed you for donations on the street. Usual things that most people didn't like—roaches, spiders, crammed buses, having to sit on a suitcase to shut it—were on her shit-list too. But there were an awful lot of things peculiar to Lily's mother, like not minding if her face was tanned as long as her arms weren't, or needing to have a spotlessly clean sink before she could brush her teeth in it, or refusing to drink an imperfectly steeped Oolong or one that wasn't the right tint.

This year, Lily's father had passed away after two years of fighting throat cancer. Along with her two sisters in the UK, Lily didn't manage to make the funeral. The cost of airline tickets

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was astronomical and her father was buried within two days. 'They sure were in a hurry to get him in the ground,' Lily's middle sister, Ah Won (aka 'Winnie'), said. 'Afraid he would smell,' her eldest sister, Ah Kim ('Maggie'), said.

Although Lily was never close to her mother, she was even less close to her father. He was an intemperate man who often flew into rages over his gambling losses. He spent a lot of time at the races and brooded whenever he was home. When he lost big, he took his belt and randomly chose a daughter to blister. When he died, Lily reflected that there was rough justice, all in all: a man whose 'damn terrible' cussing could be heard three doors down in the terraced housing they lived in was rendered mute towards the end of his life.

With her mother, Lily shared an inherent trait: they could both read faces like tealeaves. Oddly, for all this perspicacity, it hadn't made her mother a more empathetic soul. Lily herself found it a nebulous blessing. It was how she knew, the very first time she met Matthew, that he'd been struck by her and wanted to marry her. It was also how she knew that, while he had married her, he also married an ideological vision of 'her as representing the Chinese race', and yet, paradoxically, it was because he really didn't 'see' race; she understood it was about bridge-building, about wanting to connect.

Neither Maggie nor Winnie was close to their mother, but Lily at least had an uneasy alliance. Unspoken dialogue often bloomed between them when together, interpreting the other's faces, but seldom liking what they read there.

The last time she spoke to her mother was just a couple of weeks ago, when Ah Teng ('Terrence'), her brother, whom her mother lived with in Singapore, was complaining about their mother.

*'Simi tai ji?'* What happened?

Terrence swore in Hokkien. 'Every night she asking for these

Chinese medicinal soups with ginseng and whatnot. Just *si beh* extra, you know. Ah Lan is driven crazy boiling these soups, eh? Who can boil and boil and boil? My poor wife, her face now boiled as red as the top layer of a kuih lapis.'

When Lily spoke to her mother, she found her oddly quiet, not her usual querulous self. This resulted in long lapses on the phone when neither of them said anything, and all that could be heard was the tinselly chirp of some other dialogue interspersing their trunkline. That, and a curious susurrations, a clicking like crickets, mysterious and faintly disturbing.

Lily had a strong feeling after the phone call that her mother was having more trouble dealing with her father's death than she let on. Surprising, considering that they stayed together 'only because of the children'.

She spoke to her sisters, a sort of huddling conference held over a potluck that was also a sumptuous feast of eight or nine dishes—kangkung with belacan shrimp paste, curry fish-head, beef rendang, char kway teow noodles, nasi lemak—enough to feed a small orphanage.

The consensus was that they should bring their mother to London for a trip. Just to dissolve tension with their brother, and assuage their own sense of guilt for not making the funeral. Then, the question came up as to who should host their mother. At this, both Maggie and Winnie balked. There was no question of Winnie hosting. She was having an affair with a married man. 'Not like we could go over to his house, eh?' She grimaced, but Lily could see shame etched in the hang of her chin. Maggie demurred: her hours at a Chinese restaurant were close to slavery; Mother would be on her own a lot. Lily sighed, she'd already known it'd be up to her. What would it be like to have her mother stay for a month? The thought made her restless and uneasy. If they couldn't stand each other, she hoped they'd both be able to swallow each other the way one

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swallowed abominable chicken parts—in one big gulp aided by peristalsis.

When her mother finally emerged from Customs, Lily was struck by how old she looked. Her hair had gone white a long time ago, but now it was also thinning. Her stoop was more pronounced and she shuffled, as if she were wearing cat slippers. Dragging a teal-blue suitcase behind her, she wore a red sweater with pink polka dots and a cyan knit skirt. She looked like an outrageously dressed garden gnome.

‘They shouldn’t serve fish on a plane,’ her mother said, by way of greeting. ‘How is it a good idea to serve fish on a plane? I should have flown Singapore Airlines. They’d never serve stinky fish on a plane.’

Her mother’s eyes settled on Lily. *You look like crap, Ah Hong*, they said.

*And you need to wax your upper lip.* ‘You must be exhausted, were you able to sleep?’ Lily reached out a hand to pat her mother’s shoulder briefly. The way one would tap a piece of toast to get some of the burnt bits off.

‘A humpback whale on my left and a snoring baboon on the other side.’ *Why didn’t you book me an aisle seat?* ‘And where’s Ah Kim and Ah Won?’

Matthew leaned over to take hold of her suitcase, a broad happy smile on his face at hearing the wah-wah-wah of the Hokkien dialect, and Lily’s mother finally registered him. ‘Eh, he’s come, too?’ *Look at his big nose, so kayu, wooden only.*

‘Took the afternoon off work just to come pick you up, Mother.’ Lily showed her the fishtail parka. ‘It’s freezing outside. You need to wear this.’

Her mother examined it as if she’d just been presented with a drift net. She lifted the sleeve and gave a sniff. *What do you cook in your house?* ‘No need. Straight to the car, I won’t feel a thing.’

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'Mother, I insist.'

Lily's mother caught the exasperation in Lily's tone and blinked twice. Her jaw set stubbornly. 'I will not wear that thing,' she said. *It looks like a death shroud.*

On the way back, Matthew wanted to give Lily's mother a drive-around, so they detoured through Shepherd's Bush and Ealing before heading down to Earl's Court. Her mother sat behind her in their old Mazda, shoulders reclined, arms wrapped around her midriff, her big purple leather handbag resting between her legs like a crouching show dog, her eyes swivelling, taking everything in. Lily avoided looking back at her mother's face, she didn't want to know her mother's thoughts as she took in London for the first time. When she was little, her parents talked about the British Empire as if it were the famed Middle Kingdom—all greatneses hailed from there, including pot pies and the much-coveted Battenberg cake. When Lily got into Bristol University, they were ever so proud, went around telling the neighbours, even though they couldn't pronounce the name—Beh-lissi-towf was the best they could do, and it sounded like a new-fangled way of saying shit tofu in Hokkien.

Although Lily once spoke Hokkien fluently, after all this time the language had receded to the back of her throat, and she found a disconnect between what she wanted to say and the accurate Hokkien words for it. People sometimes asked her what language she dreamt in when she told them her native tongue wasn't English. She'd feel stumped, because the people in her dreams, including herself, were wordless, *sans* language. When she called home, though, she affected the Singaporean intonation and accent of speaking English, but felt fraudulent all the same.

A clicking noise made Lily look back. Her mother was working her jaws, running her top row of molars against the

bottom row, back and forth, and the sound was the grind of sliding enamel. A wordless, chattering noise that was ghostly and surreal, as if her mother had been reduced to a sagging sack full of scuttling mice.

Maggie and Winnie came over for dinner. Each brought three Tupperwares filled with home cooking. Maggie even made sambal petai—gator beans, otherwise known as ‘stink’ beans, stir-fried with stinky shrimp paste. Matthew shrank away after peering at it, and wisely opted for an evening with the boys at the pub.

Lily’s mother came out from a nap. Patting her hair, she eyed the Tupperwares like some bizarre line-up of crooks and villains. *Id rather have steamboat*, her eyes said. A cauldron of hot broth in the centre of the table, into which one dipped and swirled everything one wanted to eat. Cook and eat at the same time, very efficient, which was why her mother loved it. ‘Oh, too much food. Why cook so much?’ her mother cried.

‘We wanted you to feel at home,’ Maggie said. ‘Has Lily given you a drive-around?’

Her mother sniffed. ‘Everything is so old, I thought this country was full of rich people, so why don’t they fix up the buildings, huh?’ She parked herself in one of the dining-room chairs and her eyes took in the room, from cornice to fireplace to their IKEA furniture, judging, judging. Lily averted her gaze. She concentrated on serving dinner.

‘It’s full of history. Don’t you get history?’ Winnie scowled.

‘History, my foot. Your father brought back all these photos of Shanghai when he went with that tour group, and you should have seen the skyscrapers. That’s what I call a city.’

‘This country is older than anything. As old as...’ Maggie cast around for comparison, looking to Lily for help.

‘It’s certainly old. Decrepit.’ *Shame on all of you*. Lily could

tell Maggie and Winnie felt lumped in with all the *ang moh* Britishers who were responsible for all this decrepitude. They didn't like it either, because they didn't feel they actually belonged. Maggie wanted to retire back to Singapore one day. Winnie didn't know yet what she wanted to do, but she was having too much of a *shiok!* time just now (she and her man loved cosplay and going out in regalia to have English high tea).

And so it went. The entire dinner filled with subtle sniping, like getting your fingers caught in a mousetrap multiple times. Lily had made her mother's favourite e-fu noodles, with straw mushrooms and mangetout and crispy tofu sheets. Out of the nine dishes on the table, that was the only thing her mother ate.

After dinner, Lily made Oolong in a pot. Her mother lifted the lid. *Not enough tealeaves.* 'You can get Oolong here?' she said. She rose from the table and went into her bedroom. The sisters could hear her rustling about inside.

'What's wrong with her?' Winnie said.

'Her usual grumpy self, *leh*, I wouldn't worry,' Maggie said. After the dishes were done, she'd file her fingernails, as if dirt from Lily's house had gotten trapped in the crevices, and then, she'd get ready to leave. When Lily was a university student, she'd worked at a Malaysian restaurant on Wardour Street with Maggie during the summer and term breaks. Everybody was there illegally (lots of Malaysians and Singaporeans) and they all holed up together in one-bedroom apartments around the East End, sharing clothes and food and mobile phones. The atmosphere was so redolent of ethnocentrism and reverse bigotry that Lily felt stifled and depressed. She decided not to return one summer, preferring instead to work at a mani-pedi salon, and because she didn't have a beautician's qualification, she ended up being an attendant, bringing tubs of hot water and washing people's feet. Maggie had argued with Lily about her decision, staring at her like she was one big, festering,

recalcitrant molar, denouncing her with, 'What *lah*, you telling me you rather wash stinky feet than get tips bussing tables?'

Her mother brought out decorated tins of Oolong. Six giant tins, clattering on Lily's countertop. 'Two for each of you.'

Maggie and Winnie broke up with laughter. 'Mother, don't be so *suaku lah*,' Maggie said. 'You think this country don't drink Chinese tea?'

Her mother's lips thinned into a straight line. 'How should I know? They kill their own princess and queue up to go to the loo.'

Maggie and Winnie laughed even harder, but Lily could see the spread of an underlying emotion across her mother's brow, something akin to mortification.

Her mother brought her fist up to her mouth and coughed. 'There's something I've been meaning to tell you girls,' she began. Her face became mottled. 'Between Ah Hong and Ah Teng...there was another child.'

Maggie and Winnie stopped laughing. Lily watched her mother, stunned. Her mother's face crumpled, the way paper crumpled into a ball. 'We couldn't afford help, and there were already three of you, all girls. This one was going to be a girl, too, I knew it, the way my belly curved out, same as when carrying each of you.'

They listened in complete silence. The mantel clock on top of the fireplace ticked and tocked, punctuating their mother's Hokkien words. It was rhythmic, and also numbing.

'And your father...you know, he wasn't fond of girls.'

Maggie rolled her eyes at this juncture. Winnie pressed three fingers to her lips. Lily bent her gaze, like bending a steel ruler, and it landed with stretched tension as far as it could out the window. Landed, coincidentally, on two men hoisting between them a cellophane-wrapped mattress and crossing West Cromwell Road, traffic buzzing by in both directions.



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Lily's heart rate sped up—the two men's faces were creased with tension. It was almost premonitory.

Everything that happened after that was a blur. A car travelling at speed slammed into the mattress, and first was the sound. It was the sound of exploding plastic. It was the sound of a bomb. It was the sound of the crack of one giant popping firecracker. After the sound, came the silence. One of the men rolled on the road from the impact. The mattress flew up into the air and suddenly ripped foam cascaded and fluttered down from the sky, as if it were snowing. Then, the honks sounded, a shrill jangle of continuous PEEENNG!! as cars slammed bumpers and wheels rolled on to pavements and dented lampposts, and a dog on a leash began yelping in high-pitched alarm.

'Oh my god! Oh my god!' All of them rushed to the window, their eyes peeled on the commotion outside.

'Is anyone hurt?' It was Winnie, and there was great fear in her voice. Lily heard a noise behind her, and she turned to see her mother still sitting in her dining-room chair, her face as blank and white as a slab of cemetery stone, her mouth agape, so that Lily could see the sliver of chives still caught within her teeth. There was no emotion on her face. Nothing at all. If there was, it was the first time Lily couldn't decipher it.

It was on the news the next day. The name of the mattress company was, ironically, Silent Night. Lily read everything with horrid, perverse curiosity. One of the men carrying the mattress was badly injured. He was Polish, had three daughters, had been in the country two years. 'Now it looks like we have to go back to Poland. How are we going to survive?' his wife wailed.

Lily shuddered. A dank fear gripped her. The accident was so tragic, so ridiculous, that all night she subsisted on a shallow

sleep that felt like floating on a thin film of brackish water, so that occasionally she sank beneath the surface and couldn't breathe.

Before he went to work, Matthew asked if she was aware that she'd been grinding her molars. She wasn't. To her knowledge, she'd never done it before.

Her mother came out for breakfast, and Lily immediately saw that she hadn't slept much either. Her hair was mussed, and her pores oozed a kind of old-lady smell mixed with stale Chinese mentholatum oil. Did one pick up one's mother's mannerisms so naturally, so habitually, goaded into becoming one's most dreaded personage?

'Tea?'

Her mother nodded. 'After that big to-do, really cracks your mood.' But Lily sensed her mother was more deeply disturbed than she cared to admit. This was good; Lily felt better about her mother, realising this. And what a secret her mother had imparted, eclipsed by the awful tragedy last night. Nobody picked up again the thread of conversation, they'd simply stood at the window, like standard-issue Chinese busybodies who didn't want to get involved, watching for hours the jack-knifing red and blue police and ambulance siren lights and the pandemonium on the road.

Lily bustled about making tea, but out of the corner of her eye, she saw her mother sneaking glances at the photographs in the paper.

Lily cleared her throat. 'I hope that man doesn't die. He's got three daughters.'

Her mother ran a finger across her upper lip. Back and forth, as if she were brushing her teeth. 'Ah Hong, what I told you girls last night, your brother doesn't know. I hope you won't tell him. He already hates me enough.'

'What are you talking about?' The shame that had leaked

out on her mother's face, unfolding like a dark flower, twisted in Lily's heart.

'His wife hates me too. That old lady, when will she die?'

'Mother, she's not like that. I'm sure...'

'What do you know?' her mother barked. 'Did you see the way they treated your dad?'

Lily bit her upper lip. She hadn't. It was true. She hadn't wanted to know. In her heart of hearts, she felt he had it coming.

'One day, you'll find out what it's like to be old, to be a burden on your family. All you want is a word of kindness. That's all.' Lily's mother bowed her head. 'But maybe, it's justice from above. For killing a child.'

She'd whispered this, knowingly perjuring herself, but Lily felt as if there was an element of drama her mother wanted to produce with the words. A forcible wrenching of pity and sentimentalism from her daughters.

Her mother's unspoken emotional demand squeezed Lily's lungs, made her resistant to giving it. Lily gasped, 'Don't! Don't say that.'

Her mother's eyes brimmed with tears. 'There are ways of paying. Ways and ways.'

Lily turned away. 'Please, Mother. That stuff is too long ago.'

'You don't understand,' her mother said.

'What's there to understand?' Lily said, with a hint of steel. 'It's stuff from long ago.'

The first week, Lily begged off work and took her mother places. They walked around in Piccadilly and went shopping in Chinatown. Her mother became animated. 'It's just like China!' Although she'd never been to China. They had dim sum ('It's just like the hustle-bustle in dim sum restaurants in Hong Kong'—but she'd never been to Hong Kong either). Her mother sneered at the Malaysian restaurants there; she didn't want to

touch fake Malaysian food, she said. She refused to travel on the tube or the bus, because she feared the handrails were covered in germs. So, Lily had to drive everywhere, but because parking was difficult and expensive, she ended up taking her mother mainly to the grocery stores, like Sainsbury's and Tesco. Her mother's observation was, 'Giant much better. Sell everything. One-stop shop.'

When Lily went back to work the second week, her mother stayed at home. Lily was the accounts manager for a private medical practice. She'd call her mother on tea breaks and find herself having bizarre conversations. Her mother recounted to her in detail the commercials she was watching. She found UK commercials hilarious.

They chatted about the accident. Her mother wanted to know, blow-by-blow, what happened next. Turned out that because the workers could be considered negligent—parking illegally on the pavement, manoeuvring across busy traffic with a huge object—job insurance might not pay. Her mother was incensed by this. On the bright side, however, the injured man was no longer in intensive care. *The Telegraph* ran a full-length feature about the bright star the elder daughter was in school, which got a lot of important attention from the right sorts. When Lily translated this article for her mother, in her halting Hokkien, she could hear her pause of astonished awe, the click of distinct approval.

An unwitting camaraderie had bloomed between them. Or perhaps it was that window of naked humanity her mother had chosen to reveal. The one that Maggie and Winnie studiously avoided discussing.

Her mother never asked after Lily's job, but in the evenings, she listened with eyes constantly flickering with attention and interest while Lily told about her workmates or the doctors in the practice—one of them was named 'Brer Pitt' behind

his back, because he was handsome as Brad but had rabbit teeth.

Matthew, too, seemed to enjoy having her mother around. The two of them communicated by way of energetic gestures, with her mother shouting at him in Hokkien, as if by shouting, he would peripatetically catch her meaning. Most of their conversations centred around dinner. Matthew would lift his chopsticks, pincer a slice of beef to his mouth, do a thumbs-up sign, or smack his lips for good measure. Her mother would shout, 'I make much better at home. You come and visit, you'll see. This has too much peanut oil. Too much oil will give you colonic trouble.' Matthew would nod, as if understanding. 'Very good!' Watching these interludes, Lily felt a catch in her throat, a gnawing, and for the first time she thought about having children.

What she'd never told Matthew was that she simply couldn't envision raising children here in England. She feared that they would drift away from her, reject her country bumpkin ways as they grew up. Like all three of them had done with their mother. She'd been to a children's birthday party once and had been shocked to discover that even children of three could compare—they'd been given yoyos, but everyone wanted the one with the best rebound. Fighting, screaming, hot wails of anguish, all over a yoyo.

Lily and her mother did have a conversation about children, over the phone. Like many Chinese mothers, Lily's mother did not own tact. 'Are you barren?'

'I am assuredly not barren!'

'It's abnormal not to have children after being married five years.'

'It's a matter of time and opportunity.'

'I don't know what that means. Have you considered a fertility specialist? In Singapore, you could consult Mr Ong.'

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‘Mother, I just don’t feel it’s the right time for Matthew and me to discuss the issue of children.’

‘Well, why not? What are you waiting for? The buffaloes to crawl home?’

‘I’m not having this conversation.’ And Lily hung up. But it’d made her laugh.

Strange, Lily reflected, the only reason they could have that conversation was because they’d been seeing each other every evening, forced to spend time together, forced to talk inanities. Something else had changed. A couple of nights, Lily had caught her mother sitting in her room whispering to herself, her fingers working a kind of red bead necklace. When she peered in, she noticed her mother’s eyes were closed as she rocked back and forth, soothing herself with words. She tried to listen, but both times, her mother unexpectedly blinked her eyes open and directed a stare at Lily, as if to say she knew Lily was there but chose not to acknowledge her until just then, or that she’d meant for Lily to see her caught in the throes of meditation, perhaps repentance.

Lily felt emboldened enough to ask, ‘Are those rosary beads you’re praying with?’

Her mother’s eyes shrunk to tiny points of light. ‘Don’t talk crazy. A Buddhist monk gave me these.’

‘Buddhist monk?’

‘Yes. I recite meditation lines that he’s given me. It’s supposed to clear my *qi*. It’s black.’

For a long time, Lily had felt herself losing confidence. Ever since she graduated from university with her accountancy degree and couldn’t get a job in any accounting firm. One of her friends had cited racism as the reason. Another had said, ‘It’s your accent. You know I go to a speech therapist? You have to whitewash your accent away.’ With her mother here, Lily

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found herself finally admitting her waning confidence problem consciously. She had problems with looking people in the eye. She felt an immediate shrinking of self when someone looked at her too hard or volunteered an intimacy that requested a reciprocal exchange. And now, when she crossed roads, she found herself flailing, hesitating especially on the busy roundabouts London was notorious for, until drivers honked at her. Her faith in the heavenly grace that attended random events had evaporated. She caught herself listening to a woman regretting her abortion on the radio. She caught herself thinking that she and that aborted foetal-sister could have randomly traded places. Sibling order was surely random. But when did this belief in randomness end up as her substitute for faith? How could her parents have so cavalierly decided that a fourth girl was one too many? To terminate because the baby might not be the gender they wanted? What kind of foul reasoning was that? Was it just a stroke of randomness that they didn't decide to terminate at two? It was too horrible to contemplate.

Maggie called to suggest an outing. They could take Mother to the London Eye. 'So she can get a damn terrific aerial perspective of London. Very worth it. Take the hillbilly out of her. Not a city. Pah!' Maggie huffed.

So, Maggie picked them up in her car. Winnie begged off at the last second, complaining, 'I *pengsan* already. She called me to ask why I'm not married yet. I hemmed and hawed, then she accused me of carrying on with a married man. It sounded like her fevered brain conjuring up accusations, except in this case, it's true.'

Lily's mother had bought herself mittens and a scarf from the big Tesco on Cromwell Road. She'd caved and now wore Matthew's fishtail parka. She looked like a giant dumpling or a snowman; children actually swept a wide arc around her, and

poodles barked. The wind was brisk, snapping their scarves in their faces like tails. The queue snaked past the Aquarium, and lots of people—tourists, children, vendors—milled about. A Mr Softie van was doing amazing business despite the weather.

When Lily's mother saw the giant cantilevered wheel, she gasped. 'Can you really see all of London from up there?'

'No, we see all of Germany. *Wah lau,*' Maggie said.

Lily shook her head. 'On a day like this—' she pointed up, the sky was overcast and leaden grey, and pigeons dive-bombed among the café goers, splattering the cement with shit '—visibility is not great. We might not see much of anything.'

'Should we still go up?'

'*Arbo!*' Of course.

But her mother balked when she saw the ticket prices. Lily could see her perform rapid mental calculations in her head. 'Almost thirty-six dollars to go up to see something I can see from an airplane for free?' her mother shrieked. So calculating and logical when it came to the inconsequential things, so thoughtless in others. There was no persuading her. She told them they could go if they wanted—*wo bo chap!*—but she was going to sit on a bench and watch the children and the birds in the nearby enclosed playground.

Both Lily and Maggie tried their best to change her mind. 'Damn one kind one!' Maggie fumed. Their mother sat on the bench and swung her heels in mute rebellion. In the end, they sat with her, like the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker, and Lily translated for her mother from the brochure they picked up. She faltered numerous times, but cracked on. Until Maggie ripped the brochure from her and said, 'Stop, your Hokkien is really fucking *busuk*. It's not a bubble. It's a capsule. Here—' she jabbed the brochure hard '—it's not pillar, it's cable. Six backstay cables. Try saying that in Hokkien, you *goondu!*'



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But the language they shared in common from birth had failed them. Neither of them knew the Hokkien words for backstay cables, and neither did their mother. She didn't look like she ever envisioned she'd need a language to transcribe all that she was seeing for the first time.

Every weekend, they had dinner together with Maggie and Winnie. Maggie offered for her mother to come over to stay the second last weekend of her mother's trip. 'At least see where I live,' she begged, and her mother had nodded. Maggie's husband, Tom, was a Malaysian—a big, hearty guy with a bulbous stomach, who didn't speak a lick of Hokkien. He couldn't speak any Mandarin either. This meant that conversations would have to be switched to Malay, with her mother speaking shrill *pasar*-Malay (the Straits Chinese market-place pidgin version she'd picked up since she had no formal language schooling). 'Really *malu, leh*, and damn weird,' Maggie said.

They congregated at Maggie's house in Shoreditch. Maggie's house was narrow and tight, and hot as a furnace, because both Maggie and Tom liked to simulate Singaporean heat.

There was steamboat. Her mother gazed at the broth as if to discern the tidal urges of fate, but her mouth narrowed immediately, and she tucked in her chin. The broth was missing key ingredients, like goji berries, liquorice root, dong quai or jujubes. These were things on her list of must-haves. Their mother was about to leave and all Tom and Maggie had succeeded in doing was climbing on to her shit-list.

True to form, when they sat down to eat, her mother didn't pick up her chopsticks, didn't look at the platters of shrimp, fish-balls, tofu cubes, choy sum, or anything else jostling for space on the Formica-laden table. Instead, she asked for two slices of white bread. 'You have?' she asked Maggie.

Maggie stood up and flung her chopsticks into the corner.

She started cussing in Hokkien. Her eyes bulged like a pomfret. Winnie clapped her hands over her ears. Tom tried to downplay the escalating emotion by shushing Maggie. Matthew stood up as well, but sat back down when he realised there was little he could do. Only Lily and her mother exchanged glances. Her mother's eyes were curiously glassy, a dull flush mottled her cheeks, and Lily could see the gleam of her teeth between the agitations of her jaw. As if grinding her teeth at a succubus over Lily's shoulder.

'Why is nothing ever good enough for you?' Maggie was shouting.

'Everyone please be calm,' Tom said.

'Let's just go get her damn jujubes,' Winnie said. She made a sound like gargling. She began to pull on coat, hat and scarf. 'Who's coming with me?'

'You're going now?' Maggie said.

'Do you seriously see us eating anything while Mother eats two slices of Kingsmill?'

Nobody had anything to say to this. Maggie got up to go amidst Tom's repetitive querying, 'How long is this going to take?' At the last minute, Maggie turned back to lambast Lily with a stare: *Coming or not?*

Lily's heart felt as though it had landed on a pike. She recognised the sisterly call to solidarity, but her mother's face was as pasty as sesame seeds. She remembered, once, her mother had dropped an old hankie during a hospital visit. She'd made everyone search the corridors for the hankie, including forcing a patient to get out of the bed she'd been temporarily using. Lily remembered the blaze of thrill in her mother's face then. How much she'd enjoyed the drama, the voluminous attention.

Nothing like that here, just anxiety—a grinding run of her top molars against her bottom set, as if she were holding in unbearable pressure.

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Matthew must have seen Lily's indecision. He volunteered to go.

Lily stood up. 'No, it's my mother. I'll go.'

They tumbled into Winnie's Fiat, but her heart nagged her. Maggie and Winnie carped about whether to go to Lung Fung (a very long drive to North London), or just drive to Chinatown instead. Winnie drove carelessly and attracted a lot of ire from other motorists, especially when circling roundabouts. There was just enough crazy careening in this madcap rush for jujubes and Chinese herbs to make Lily hold her head down in mock despair.

'*Beh tahan*, what?' Maggie said. Can't stand it, can you? Her pupils glowed, little dark pebbles set against a pool of iridescent white, and Lily felt that she'd never understood either of her sisters, that they lived on different continents, could be of a different race, even though physically they lived in the same town and had squeezed out through the same birth canal.

'You know, I think Mother is haunted by the abortion she had,' Lily said.

Maggie snorted, turned her nose towards the windshield as if avoiding a smell. 'Big deal.'

Winnie's brow beetled. 'I don't think it's a good idea to bring on maudlin subjects when I'm manoeuvring London streets, yeah?'

'When are we going to talk about it, then?' Lily said.

Maggie shrugged. 'Why do we have to talk about everything? You're so fierce westernised, just because you've married an *ang moh*. Put you on a couch, Freudy-dreudy, this solves everything, eh?'

Winnie's herky-jerky driving almost made them run a red light. Maggie's words hit a nerve. Lily ground her teeth with tension. 'Well, I suppose I should be more like you both. Able

to squeeze big TRUTHS into small grid-like cubicles in your head, ice-cube thoughts, like every single fucking repressed pragmatic Chinese person. You guys see a tragic accident but it contains no useful information that impacts your life, so you stuff it into a mental suitcase.'

'Oh, listen to her, with the psychoanalytic mumbo-jumbo. You want black and white?' Maggie began to shout. 'I'll give you black and white. We had an abusive father who tanned us whenever he could. We have a critical, controlling mother. When she had trouble accepting something about herself, all she wanted was to be drama queen. We have a clueless brother. Okay, what more do you want?'

Somehow, it wasn't Maggie's shouting that made Lily really upset. It was her summarisation of facts. What a scattering of taut clichés their lives were. And she was the one who looked ridiculous by wanting to think about things that had happened, words their mother had said, choices that their mother had made. Without even thinking it through, Lily realised, her sisters were happy to live with randomness, to be blown hither-thither like spores, floating along life, occasionally bobbing up for those bubbly bits of potential revelations.

Silence prevailed suddenly in the Fiat. '*Si lang gui,*' Winnie growled. She'd barrelled down Clerkenwell Road on to Theobald's Road, and Lily watched the blur of humanity outside the window, the queue of red double-deckers, bound for destinations spread out like the spokes of a wheel. All these people blowing off in different directions—random multi-cellular gametes just barely grazing each other—without ever connecting, permeating, integrating.

'If you ask me,' Winnie suddenly declared, 'she thinks she's evil to have had the abortion. People didn't do that sort of thing in her time. Dad's death unhinged her—brought home the fact that she's going to die, sooner or later. Death is a resident evil,

all that sort of thing. She's looking at all the bad decisions she's made, and guess what, it's like IKEA furniture. Looks good in their showroom, looks cheap in your home.'

They'd turned on to Shaftsbury Avenue by now, and Winnie waved her hand. 'Start looking for parking space.'

Lily felt Winnie's words sink in. The IKEA reference notwithstanding, her respect for her sister had suddenly deepened. 'I'm kinda sad mother is going back soon,' she said, apropos of nothing. 'I feel like I've gotten to know her better during this trip.'

Neither Maggie nor Winnie replied. Then, Maggie bounced in her seat. 'Parking space!'

Winnie expertly drew up beside a blue VW bug. She pulled into reverse gear, hooked a hand over Maggie's seat, then looked behind her. 'Don't you think it's terrible that we wish for different parents?' Her voice was bland, matter-of-fact. 'We do, don't we? Let's face it.'

She backed the car into the spot, her wheel rolling on to the pavement with her misjudgement of distance. She didn't look like she cared one bit. 'I mean, don't you think it's terrible that Mother looks at us and wishes for a different set of kids?'

Lily flushed hotly. Her heart set up a wild patter. 'No, she doesn't. You're presuming terrible things. You're making these horrific assessments because our family has a dysfunctional communication system. But WHAT CHINESE FAMILY DOESN'T?' She didn't know why she'd felt this need to shout. But there it was, she'd shouted, and it felt like relief.

Both Maggie and Winnie now turned towards her, their faces lit with ferocity, and Lily realised that they'd already discussed this, and what's more, they agreed with each other absolutely. 'You're the only one who refuses to believe anything,' Maggie said. 'That's what's so terrible.'

Winnie's face turned still and solemn, her lids heavy with

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meaning. 'Don't you think it's terrible that you have chosen to live your life according to a set of false precepts?' She waited for that to sink in, then she rolled up her window, with energy bordering on violence. 'You're not one of us any more, you know? Let's get those damn herbs before the shop closes. Or this Waterloo will never end.'

Dinner ended up balanced on a knife's edge. No one alluded to the conversation in the car. It felt unfilial, like betrayal of a certain honour, to Lily. Yet, the undercurrents of menace ran strong. Her sisters wouldn't look at her. They were conspiring to shut her out. Her mother wouldn't look at her either. Her chin sunk into her chest; it was too much effort holding up the family honour on her own. Lily glanced at Tom, obliviously slushing and slurping his food in big gulps. She looked at everyone masticating. All that could be heard was the massive churning of teeth against mucilage, grinding, grinding. Lily's mother, too, ate with surprising gusto, her chopsticks nimbly splicing cooked meat and dipping it in the spicy sauce Maggie had prepared, grabbing the last slice of thin-sliced beef, sawing through her chestnut mushrooms, her jaw chomping away. Oh, the agony of meat. Lily watched her and wondered if her mother had ever been happy. Even now, with this display of food around her, her mother ate with vigorous desperation, as if it were her last meal. Only Matthew, her husband, looked at her. He looked at her with such warmth and camaraderie.

The rice noodles were the last to go in the broth. Their chopsticks clattered against each other—a drama re-enacted in the fight for food—and only Matthew and Tom talked. 'You don't mix eating and talking,' had been the mantra around their dining table when her father was alive. Talking muddled up things, including sisterhood, digestion and familial relationships.

## *Run of the Molars*

Lily went to bed that night with indigestion, anyway. She padded through her house to the kitchen to make herself some mint tea, and found herself glancing at the empty bed in the guest bedroom. Her mother had liked to sleep with the door ajar, and in the dark, Lily imagined her sloping shoulders, a shadowy hulk covered with blankets, and the pang of it was strangely welcome and restorative. She actually missed her mother's presence. In her heart, Lily felt that she was right to ask herself questions. Some instinct was telling her that her mother needed her. Perhaps Winnie was right; perhaps Lily had fallen under Western indoctrination, imbibing strange values, like wanting to understand one's parents. But why shouldn't she acknowledge her hurt? To her mother, she'd been just another squalling baby, to her father, just another mouth to feed. Duty. Filial piety. These dratted Confucian values that were forced upon her when growing up; when duty overtook love, did she understand the application of these values? Did her parents? And now, Lily was a disappointment to her mother. Here it was, the judgment: if she had been her mother having that unwanted baby, she'd never have been quite so cavalier about life. She'd have thought about children carefully, as she'd done these five years. Life wasn't random. But they'd been cavalier too. They'd been cavalier about their father's death, and wasn't that just the other side of the coin? These were facts you didn't acknowledge to anyone because they brought such shame. It made her crush the mint leaves into her cup and watch the leaves weep.

Her mother was leaving. Having checked in her bulging suitcases, she sat with Lily at an airport café, her shins crossed under the table, her hands clutching her big handbag. 'You should bring Matthew back for a visit,' she said.

Lily had talked a lot to Matthew the last few days. Told Matthew her mother's secret, told him about the sisterly fight

in the car, and it was as if they were discovering each other for the first time. Matthew listened, so closely, his hands clasped together under his head, his eyes speaking to her in the dark with sympathy and the need to understand. She didn't know if he really did, but it made her feel as if they were family unto each other. And wasn't that enough? His relationship with her mother had changed, too—a wariness had set in. She'd not meant to make him think ill of her mother, but he no longer saw her as a simple old Chinese lady who had stale breath and wagged her finger indiscriminately.

'He might like that,' she said. 'Are you glad you visited us?'

Her mother thought for a bit. 'I saw how each of you lived. With these old eyes. Who would have imagined it? Ah, well, I don't know about Ah Won. She behaved so strangely. She doesn't want me to see her place. Don't think I don't know. Giving yourself away like that—to such an undeserving man—it's not worth it. But what do I know? I'm just an old lady.'

'About that, Mother, why did you tell us about that fourth child? Why dig up all that old stuff suddenly?'

Her mother paused. She bit her lip. Her eyes welled up, which surprised Lily. 'I blamed your father for making me abort that baby. I blamed him this whole time. I thought, he made me do it. But that's what marriage is. His mistake is your mistake. You have to share the blame.'

This, from her mother, was such open-hearted, insightful candour that Lily reached out to touch her mother's hand. But her mother clasped her hands together just then, and Lily's fingers tingled from dry spark.

Her mother wasn't finished. Her voice became thin, slightly fevered, 'I was going to tell you. I didn't get to finish. The night your father died, I saw her by his bed. All grown up. She wore a mourning outfit. That's how I knew he was very close to going. She was beautiful. Hair so straight, dark and long. Eyelashes



## *Run of the Molars*

like the barbs of a bird's feather. Skin that was like porcelain. She looked straight at me. Didn't say a word. Just stood there while your father breathed his last. None of you was there. Your brother was travelling in Seremban. His wife was sleeping. No living children, only the dead one. Standing there like a spring sapling, her hair sweeping like a black shroud. You'd think she'd hate me, but no, she looked at me with...Oh, I don't know how to say this. She looked at me, so...so very tenderly.'

Lily gasped, 'Mother!' This—this was family. Her mother's face became as white as marzipan, the old acne scars like the tiny craters of fried egg white in a sizzling pan, but she sat resplendent even so, even grinding her molars together, and Lily thought how indecipherable and contradictory one's parents were—a shrouding mystery of details and autobiography and era and culture. What was random was trying to catch understanding from this morass. The understanding here was as circumstantial as accidental negligence. For a spectral moment though, Lily thought she glimpsed a pipkin of pain skating through her mother's features.

'If she'd lived,' her mother now whispered, 'I'd have named her Ah Chun. Her name—Spring—the way she'd looked, that would have been a perfect name for her.'

Right then, Lily was struck with forcible hope. She really didn't know what to say to her mother now—everything that came to mind smacked of asinine platitudes. Lily's mother looked at her—*I shouldn't have let that one go*—and Lily looked back—*yes, I know*.

Her mother let out a sound, a sound that was a croak.