THE QUARRY

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Ketchup

‘Did you know that a fifth of the world's ketchup comes from Xinjiang?’

‘Mmph?’ Jonah's mouth was full of hamburger.

‘Ketchup,’ Abigail repeated, ‘a fifth of it is from Xinjiang.’

Jonah swallowed. ‘Huh.’ He took another bite.

When she was thirteen, in the second term of her new school in Australia, Abigail wrote a play for Musical Theatre: Romeo & Juliet style. Lu Shan, a Han Chinese boy, (sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif), had fallen in love with Parida, a Uighur girl (*my child, my child, my life, my life)*, but the riots of 2009 had their fate star-crossed yellow on red. Huang Hua, in unrequited love, gave her own life to save Lu Shan, but at the cost of Parida’s life when the riot police turned tear gas on the crowd.

Abigail paused for breath. ‘In hindsight, it’s more like *Les Miserables*.’

The class blinked slowly up at her. Dust twisted through the double-glazed windows and drizzled across the carpet.

A Fascinating Story, I'd love to see it in action! 14/15.

Jonah had never come to any of Abigail's plays, even later when they were dating. For her final HSC piece, he had promised he would be there, then didn't have any money for the train ticket down from the Central Coast and was too embarrassed to ask his parents. He got to the auditorium in time to watch her performance through the glass window that steamed his breath.

Her monologue was about a woman who fell in love with a dying man.

'So little has changed.' Abigail squinted at the sky of Smiles.

Abigail's Dad flapped his arm over the road, sweat beading on his nose. Tuk-tuks rattled past, irritated by the pair's much-too-accurate bargaining. Tourists were better fair. Although they were tourists now too.

Do you remember do you remember do you remember

This—this was the Yok where they shopped for groceries, for caramelised rice drizzled with palm sugar. And this was the road that was gravelled all the way up to the hotel and dust thereafter that flicked mud onto your calves as you shuffled in flipflops back from the pool. And this was how it felt to ride on the back of a cherry red Songtheaw—she had never been allowed to ride them as a child.

And this, oh, this was the Mekong Centre.

She ripped through the air-conditioned office corridors, kicking up memories with the dust. Here's the kitchenette stacked with tea-stained ceramic mugs from too many afternoons of *fika*. Here's a haphazard stack of post-it notes full of names embellished with asterisks. Here's the dozens of posters on the walls—trailing borders around Central Asia, North-East Asia, and A-Muslim-Majority-Country-in-South-East-Asia.

Ever made up a secret code when you were a child?

Up and down humid flights of stairs and around and behind and over railings and up trees, playing freeze-tag with her past.

Abigail and her father slip into the meeting room on the wicker veranda above the resort's pool. This is the reason they are here. It is Spring Conference, like they used to go to every year, back when they were one family.

But now a large agency had pulled out of the Mekong organisation, sparking a chain of withdrawals, and now a gathering Abigail remembered being 300 was down to 30. The organisation was closing, and this was the very last Spring Conference. This was why alumni were invited. Abigail is the only alumni child present.

The Kashgar markets, like in most desert cities, were a maelstrom of colour and noise, scent and sound. Guttural cries advertised coarse bundles of work-shift coverings and silken chains bearing silver talismans. Anointing oils bearing various spicy scents mingled with the sharp odour of camel dung and dusty sweat. Melons brushed with gleaming oil leaned against plucked carrion feathers, strewn beneath hanging carcasses of scavenger birds and their prey, wrapped in dirty cloth to deter flies or perhaps to conceal the age of the flesh. Women wandering through the throng boasted baskets of desert flowers and cacti needles. One stall displayed dozens of jars each filled with a different hue and texture of sand, another claimed medicinal mushrooms of richer spirit than the standard fare. A man with no beard and a breathy accent advertised sea shells all the way from Calsorme—a popular stall for men attempting to impress their jaded wives, or perhaps longing for a world of translucent waves that moved with the moon rather than the wind.

So went the tales of Momas to their grandchildren, wrapped in grey school-coats with scarves of red tied round their throats.

‘And now, an old favourite of Spring Conference—Storytime with Jean!’

Smiles blossom across the room as a woman, creaking with age and good humour, settles in the wicker chair, calling the children to her.

‘Now, this is the story of a Little Princess who lived in Nepal.’ Her voice quivers with smoky enthusiasm. ‘Now, do you know why she was a princess?’

The children chortle in agreement.

‘That’s right, because her father was the King!’ Jean points to the sky with one crooked finger.

And everyone followed that finger as it drew our protagonist down steep crags, up swirled tree houses, and, most riveting, across a flooded glacial river during the monsoon.

‘So the wind was rearing up! Like a tiger! And the rain was coming down in *sheets*! Crash, crash! And then I said—I mean, the Little Princess said—’

The adults chuckle. This is how it was every year. Jean would always start off intending to be clandestine about the source of her story, but in all the excitement (I mean, it was a *monsoon*) she would forget herself, and then forget that she had forgotten herself, and then, just in time for the finale:

‘And that is the story of how I—oh! —I mean the Little Princess, got to church in time for m-her friend’s baptism.’

‘Hey Jean,’ Abigail asks her later.

‘What, chicken?’

‘Why don’t you tell any stories from Tibet?’

‘Oh, well, I’m still working with those people you know. Perhaps one day when I leave. Stories about Nepal are, you know safer because they were, oh, twenty, twenty-five years ago!’ Jean winks. ‘I’m showing my age!’

The Exodus was brief and sharp, the edge of a knife held to the throat of a culture.

The first people to leave were the foreigners. The 'm's and the 'mk's, diplomats and diplomat's wives.

We didn't understand that we were the lucky ones. That this was only the beginning of Tibet 2.0.

Don't tell the Party I said that.

The compressed air leaking out of the plane in a soft whoosh felt familiar, but it was one of the last times Abigail would feel it in her childhood.

She doesn't remember much about that time. Was Dad seated somewhere else on the same plane, or did he take the next flight? Did we check overweight luggage, like we always did? What was the name of the woman we gave our dog away to?

The tails of planes on the taxiway shimmer like corners of a flag.

On the last night of the last Spring Conference Abigail catches David Penrose following the timeline of photographs across the walls. His first OC was all the way back in 1983, grainy in cutting-edge colour technology, and with a full head of hair.

'Will you stay in Xi'an indefinitely?' she asks. Abigail thinks 'until you die' would be a bit brusque.

'God, no. I don't want to retire in China. I'll go back to England.'

'Do you have connections there?'

Daniel nods. 'Some.'

Abigail's mother got into creative writing a lot before Abigail. Not because she was interested first, but rather because she was older, she flounced straight into a masters while Abigail was 'stuck in drama queen year 9'.

'What is your book about, Mother?'

'It's about… the… It's about the response of a extended family to childhood sexual abuse. It's about XinJiang… It's about Uighurs… It's about Muslims…' Mum turns to Ray for help, 'What else is it about?'

'It's about the impact of the political power over a culture,' he says.

'It's a survival story, as well, focusing on one matriarch and her family,' she says.

'It's a story of loss.'

'Loss and survival.'

'Drugs. The impact of drugs.'

'Yeah.'

'Powerlessness, of being… help me…'

'Well just, family life.'

'Control.'

'Isn't it? Yeah.'

The room is decorated with framed tapestries from XinJiang that have survived half a dozen cities. Pride of place is a Dutar. Abigail knows one song on the Dutar, but she doesn't know the words because she never learned Uighur.

Abigail's house has three Uighur items. A skirt (too small), a tiny model dutar (from Spring Conference in Chiang Mai), and the family carpet (won in an argument). Only the skirt was ever truly hers. It hasn't fit for years.

I—I mean Abigail—used to write poems on stormy nights two years after her father remarried, three years after her mother remarried, five years after leaving Thailand and seven

years after leaving China.

She had never spent more than two years in XinJiang; she had never spent more than two years anywhere. But everyone needed a home, right? A place to long for, to miss, to call heritage to, to boast about, *my child, my child, my life my life*—she whispered a Uighur proverb, but she did not remember it from XinJiang, no, she had asked her mother for a Uighur proverb to spice up her story, to give it authentic flavour.

Oh, don't tell her I told you.

'Did you know that a fifth of the world's ketchup comes from Xinjiang?'

'Mmph?' Jonah's mouth was full of hamburger.

'Ketchup,' Abigail repeated, 'a fifth of it is from Xinjiang.'

The man I am calling Jonah swallowed.

'Huh.' He took another bite.

'It's one of the reasons that China values XinJiang so much. It's full of coal and oil and natural gas, and a fifth of the world's ketchup.'

He nods considerately. He's always open to learning more about my home culture.

I don't tell him that I learned that fact this morning from a Facebook video.