


All Chinese

Amy Han



I sit at the top of the stairs, trying to see as much of the coffee factory as I can. The doorframe at the bottom is skinny, and only half-open; I catch glimpses of hessian sacks on shoulders, sweat and coffee stained singlets.

The workers bark at each other in a strange combination of Mandarin and Malay—both of which are foreign to me. I’ve heard talk of a giant mixing machine: coffee, butter and boiled syrup, the exact recipe existing only in my grandfather’s head. My head is bloated with the same dark sweetness that has embedded itself, decades of itself, into every crack in these peeling-paint walls, between every creaking, loosely nailed floorboard, behind and underneath and amongst the dust around every piece of furniture in every room.

My grandmother works at the dining table. The rhythmic *ka-dunk* of her sealing machine and the thud of coffee-filled packages landing in the box between her knees adds to the factory noises coming from the bottom of the stairs.

She screeches: ‘Ah Meeeee!’

Like a well-trained puppy, I am on my feet even before she yells, ‘*Lai yi xian!*’

She stops working to examine my face beside her. Her face is round and squishy but barely wrinkled, surrounded by a halo of permed black hair. ‘*Aiyah*, your hair,’ she grumbles in Mandarin. ‘Mama didn’t brush it?’

She says, ‘Ah Mee, what were you doing sitting over there?’ pointing to my spot, still warm and inviting on the landing of the stairs.

I don’t know how to say ‘Trying to see the rest of the coffee factory’ in Chinese, so I shrug my usual answer: ‘*Wo bu zi dao.*’ I don’t know.

You’re watching Gong Gong work, ha?’

That will do. ‘*Dui,*’ I nod.

‘Ah—you can say it, ha? Say, *Po Po, wo zuo na bian can Gong Gong zuo gong. Zi dao, ma?*’

I nod. ‘*Zi dao.*’

‘Ah,’ she places a cool palm on my cheek and chuckles, her eyes disappearing in a banana-shape between folds of skin. ‘Good girl.’

But as soon as I have escaped down the hall to the living room, where my parents sit watching a drama series set in Ancient China, my baby brother Kevin crawling around the floor in his nappy, hair

stuck to his sweaty forehead, I've forgotten.

Miri is a small town built on rubber and petroleum, and it seems to me that every Chinese-Malaysian is a grandparent, auntie, uncle or sibling.

'Call Auntie!' I am continuously nudged to parrot. 'Call Big Brother!'

The roads are lined with shanty houses, bending wood and laundry lines reaching like tent strings to surrounding coconut trees. Dark-skinned Malay children squat in front and watch the cars roll past with saucer-eyes. Their parents set up stands on the roadside, satays and fruit juice plastic bags and giant pots of *ais kachung* desserts. The whole town smells of *laksa* paste, chilli, coconut and durian, and the black rivers of waste running through the open sewers.

My Auntie Alice is getting married in a few days. That's why we're here, getting in and out of showers only to be drenched in steam and sweat again. I lie awake in the room my dad used to share with his only brother, my Uncle Jim, the youngest of five. I'm on the top bunk that has no rail to protect me from rolling to my death in my sleep. A crack has crept silently across the ceiling and a gecko plays statue in the corner. My brother sucks his thumb like it's the tastiest thing in the world. I imagine my great-grand-auntie, who I have heard so much about, sleeping on a thin mattress in the next room, her body small and lumpy beneath a sheet. My great-grandmother, who I will meet in hospital after the wedding, sitting in her chair in the living room, lights off and black and white TV screen flashing, jabbing and kicking at the air as if she is a character in the *kung fu* movie she is watching. Auntie Alice, aged somewhere between my brother and I, rolling down the hall wailing for her father: *Ba Baaaaaa! Ba Baaaaaa!* her little hand-me-down dress ruffling in a swirl of colours with her. Auntie Song, the oldest child, is in the bedroom closest to the kitchen, the room she shares with Auntie Alice and the second oldest child, Auntie Jenny. She is cocooned in

blankets, pale as an egg, sweating out the fever that will make her brain hurt on and off for the rest of her life. Uncle Jim runs around naked, giggling, trying to escape having a bath. Auntie Jenny is on the stairs outside, between her family's double-layered front door and the neighbours', burying her face in her hands and sobbing because she only came second in the local singing competition. My grandfather, having just moved his family into this house above his new business, is a late night hurricane that can be felt in every room. My grandmother, slimmer, smoother and unfailingly efficient, tips a bowl of sliced, marinated pork belly into a wok with garlic and ginger, and disappears behind a cloud of spitting steam.

At home in Doncaster, Melbourne, Dad tells me stories about his childhood. I lie in bed and it's dark; only the moonlight sneaks in through the edges of the curtain. Dad's silhouette sits up beside me, his prickly legs tucked under the blanket. His rumbling voice is like a hand constantly poking me awake. Dad used to skip classes in primary school to go and play marbles with his friends. They gambled outside hawker's stores with the money they stole from their parents. At ten, they were smoking every afternoon in the boys' toilets. Dad dropped strings of lit firecrackers into sewers, ran around the corner and waited for the final explosion. He teased dogs tied behind fences, collected ants from one hole and dumped them on the holes of bigger ants to make them fight. He caught flies, pulled off their wings and dropped them onto the flame of the family stove to watch them barbecue.

Dad tells me about all the trouble he got into: how his dad found out what he was doing and held him over the water tank by his ankles until he cried and promised never to steal money or skip school again. How once, one of the dogs he teased found a hole in the fence and chased him all the way home. He laughs as he remembers. But in the end, his face always becomes stern and he looks me in the eye, shaking his finger: 'I was a very naughty child, Amy. Do not be like me.'

When my parents have Chinese friends over, they play *mah jong*. This involves four people sitting around the dining table shuffling

and stacking plastic tiles that look like Malaysian cakes—*kueh*—from the side but they have pictures and Chinese characters on their faces. I like the flower ones the best, red petals and green leaves drawn with intricate calligraphy-like lines. ‘Now?’ I whisper to my parents, impatient for them to want another player’s tile. ‘Not now,’ they whisper back, until finally the answer is, ‘Yes, okay, now.’

‘PONG!’ I call, giggling and holding my nose as if somebody farted.

At the end of each round the tiles need to be shuffled: I jump up and start breaking down the walls, flipping tiles face-down and pushing them around as if the table is a big mixing bowl. I help my parents rebuild their walls before sitting on my hands again, waiting, glancing around and grinning at their friends as if I know what any of the pictures mean.

In Miri, *mah jong* is a different game. Nobody needs to tell me to stay clear of the little fold out table that can barely fit my grandfather, my dad, and two of my uncles around it on their mismatched folding chairs, pushed far out so that their knees don’t bump together. They swig from Tiger beer bottles, laugh and yell, ‘Pong!’ slamming their palms on the table and making me jump. Their game lasts long into the night. I lie on the top bunk listening for the four distinct laughs: Dad’s high pitch, Uncle Jim’s even higher pitched cackle, Uncle Edmond’s deep muffle, and my grandfather’s: loud, open, so different from the chuckle he saves for me and his other grandchildren, the one he lets out when we do or say anything, that seems to mean, ‘ah, how sweet.’

My clothes are taken off and an itchy white dress is pulled over my head. White stockings cling to my skin and make it tingle when I start to sweat. My hair is pulled and pinned, my face is powdered, and my lips are painted red. I want to sleep but no one lets me because that would crinkle my dress and ruin my make-up and hair. Then I start to cry: I don’t wanna be a flower girl, Mum. I don’t wanna hold that boy’s hand. I don’t even know who he is, I don’t want people looking at me, I don’t care if I look pretty, I don’t wanna

stand up there while Auntie Alice and Uncle Peter get married. Why can't I sit with you and Dad and Kevin? I don't wanna be in photos, Mum. I just wanna stay here.

Amy, stop being silly.

After the wedding, before we leave Miri, we have to pray. My grandmother stands me in front of the alter in the dining room, beneath the cracking black and white portraits of our ancestors. She stands behind me, places red sticks of incense between my palms, holds them together with her soft, moist, cool ones, and prays for me. Mutter, mutter, mutter. I'm thinking, what a waste of oranges. The shiny little Buddha sitting with his legs crossed and his belly hanging out is laughing at me. Finally, my grandmother bows deeply three times, moving my body with hers. Mutter, mutter. She points and I place my incense in the ash-filled pot with all the others.

It's strange to think that my first language was Mandarin, and that within months of starting school it was erased almost completely. I remember what it felt like to speak Chinese without thinking, without trying to translate something articulate into something meaning roughly the same thing but with a vocabulary of about ten words. Dad sat at the dining table, facing the TV. I ran to him and placed my hands on his knees to tell him something important; something like, 'Mum's hair is sticking up!' Or 'I have a picture to show you.' Whatever it was, I said it in Chinese. The words rolled off my tongue as naturally as I picked up my crayons, pencils and textas with my left hand. *Hua yi*. Chinese. I used to speak *hua yi*.

And then, one day, I couldn't. Dad started shaking his head and saying, *Aiyah*, her Chinese is so bad, as if I wasn't in the room, and my grandparents were on the phone saying, *Aiyah*, how come she cannot speak Chinese? And my best friend Melissa's parents were saying the same thing about her, and our parents put their parently heads together to come up with the evil plan to send us to Chinese school every Sunday for the next six years, which basically seemed like the rest of our lives.

The only things I liked about Chinese school were the five-cent

sherbet straws they sold at the canteen. I hated the old high school that had no playground, just a flimsy wire fence that tried to poke my eyes out when I wasn't looking. I hated beginning each class like robots with the teacher saying *Tong xue men hao* and us chanting *Lao shi hao* before taking our seats. I hated the dictations that followed, the sinking feeling I got in my stomach and the way the blood rushed to my head with each word she called out that I didn't know (which was most of them). Most of all I hated that we had to pass our answers to someone else to mark, because even though I could hand mine to Melissa sometimes, I hated showing anyone else how terribly I'd done. I hated the homework, and got it over with faster by reading the *pin yin* underneath the Chinese characters, and writing words ten times by doing one stroke ten times across the page, then going back and adding the second stroke, until they were all complete. Dad thought I was doing really well until he covered the *pin yin* with a ruler and asked me to read, and when my end of semester reports came out.

Melissa wasn't one of the best students in the class, but she did better than me; she even made friends with some of the girls who could speak Chinese so well I didn't know why we were in the same class. Those girls wore puffy denim jackets and parachute silk tracksuits with Hello Kitty's face stitched on their backs. Their hair clips were decorated with lace, pom-poms and ribbons tied in neat little bows. Their shoes shone like the Christmas beetles I found on the oval at my regular school. They placed their hands over their mouths when they laughed. They sat up straight in their chairs. They nibbled dried seaweed and sucked jellies out of tiny plastic packages while I tore fruit Roll-ups with my teeth and crunched Barbecue Shapes. Melissa chatted and giggled with them, but I couldn't find anything to chat or giggle about.

At Doncaster Primary School, Mum leaves me with Mrs Harris and a room full of children I don't know.

'It's okay darling,' Mrs Harris says, taking my hand. 'I'll introduce you to some nice girls over here, see? This is Melissa and Sarah.'

Do you like colouring in? Here you go, take this...'

I sniff the last of my tears away because it's not good to cry in front of other children. I take a yellow pencil from the tin and start colouring like the other girls. Sarah has soft, straight blonde hair, freckles and blue eyes like crystals. Melissa is Chinese like me, and her shiny black hair is braided and hangs all the way down to her bum.

I look back to the open door. I can still smell her perfume on my clothes, but Mum is already gone.

Most of the children here are white-Australian or Greek. It doesn't matter that Melissa and I are Chinese; the other kids treat us the same and we don't have any trouble making friends. Teachers get us mixed up because we always sit next to each other, even though they never get Sarah's name wrong when she sits next to another blonde girl. But Melissa and I yell out, 'I'm Melissa!' or 'I'm Amy!' at the teacher when it happens and then we giggle, feeling special because not everyone's names get mixed up with their best friend's.

But one day, a boy runs up to us at playtime and calls 'Ching-chong-Chinaman!' stretching his eyes out into lines. He laughs and runs off, and Melissa and I keep climbing the big ladder on the play equipment.

'Come on, girls!' Sarah calls from the top, squinting beneath the brim of her sunhat and pressing her fists into her hips. 'I haven't got all day!'

The day is no different from any day that came before it, but after that I start to wish teachers would get me mixed up with Sarah instead of Melissa. I wish my hair was soft and blonde like hers; I want freckles and blue eyes like crystals.

I imagine what my dad would say if I told him what I was thinking. 'I wish I wasn't Chinese,' I would say, while continuing to write a story at the coffee table as if I'd said something like, 'No, I'm not hungry,' or 'We learnt about dinosaurs today.'

'What did you say?' Dad would ask, standing over me. I'd look up. 'I wish I wasn't Chinese.'

‘Hold out your hand, Amy.’

I’d stare at him, giving him a chance to change his mind.

‘Did you hear me? Hold out your hand!’

I would hold out my hand. I’d squeeze one eye shut, and look with the other.

‘Mn!’ Dad’s hand would hit mine with a clap. ‘How can you say you do not want to be Chinese? Ha? Mn! What would Gong Gong and Po Po say if I told them you said that? Do not ever say it again!’

So I never tell him.

And I keep on envying the other girls in my class, Sarah and all the rest of them who aren’t Chinese and never get called Ching-chong-Chinaman or sent to Chinese School or told by their grandmothers over the phone, *Aiyah*, Ah-mee, you do not understand, do you? *Aiyah*, your Chinese is so bad!

Dad says, ‘Po Po says we have to start speaking Chinese at home. Dear? Speak to them in Chinese. Okay?’

I say, ‘It’s not going to work.’

‘What?’ Dad’s already started. ‘I don’t understand English. Speak Chinese.’

I sigh, because I’m tired of this line: ‘We can’t speak Chinese.’

Dad’s snaps, because he’s tired of this line: ‘Speak at home, and then you’ll learn!’

‘What?’

‘Speak Chinese!’ He switches back, ‘I *said*, speak it at home and then you’ll learn.’

He turns to Mum. ‘It’s so bad, dear. How come we let their Chinese get so bad?’

Kevin asks, in English, ‘Mummy, can you cut this for me?’ pushing the chicken thigh on his plate across the table. While he waits, he keeps using his kid-sized chopsticks to scoop tomato sauce-stained rice into his mouth.

Dad’s fist makes the crockery, and us, jump: ‘Speak Chinese!’

Kevin, still with his bowl held to his face, stares at Dad blankly.

‘Say, Mummy, *ni ke yi gen wo ge zhou ma?* Say it.’

Kevin puts his bowl down, staring at his plate with the cut chicken on it and frowning. I can tell by the way his body sways forwards and back that he's swinging his legs under the table, waiting for Dad to forget about it and change the subject.

'Kevin! I'm speaking to you, can you hear? Speak. Chi. Nese.'

Kevin shakes his head, but doesn't dare look up.

Dad shakes his head. '*Aiyah*, dear! What are we going to do with these children? One must put tomato sauce on everything, one is only good at English, both of them cannot speak Chinese. They are Chinese children who cannot speak Chinese!'

'Calm down, John.'

'I want my children to speak Chinese!'

'Dad, I told you –'

'Stop answering back, Amy! How come everything I say you must always answer back one. Ha? I am your father. Children are never supposed to talk back to their parents. Where did you learn this? Do you see me? Even now, when Gong Gong and Po Po tell me what to do, I just say okay and I never argue. Never talk back. It doesn't matter if you agree or not. Understand? *Aiyah*, dear.'

There is only the sound of our chopsticks shovelling rice from our bowls to our mouths, sucking noises as we do so, our arms reaching every so often for more vegetables or another piece of soy-sauce roasted chicken. On the news, a footy player is apologising for getting drunk and punching someone on the weekend. When we are finished, Kevin runs off to continue playing Mariokart while Mum and I clear the table. We put the leftovers in smaller bowls and cover them, put the dishes in the dishwasher and scrub the rice cooker, the roasting tray, the wok. When Mum says, 'Dry these for me, Amy,' in English, Dad glares at us. Slowly, he turns back to the TV, the weather is on now, it's going to be fine tomorrow, and Dad sits there with one hand covering his mouth while his other twists a toothpick between his teeth.

I meet Mark in a Creative Writing class. He is tall, blonde and six years older than me, and his deep voice has a slight drawl to

it. There is a picture of his ex-girlfriend on his shelf. I can't help it; I wonder if my long black hair and the yellow undertones of my skin remind him of her. We're both petite, with round eyes, small noses and full lips. Does he like me because I am a writer like he is, because I can talk about books with him, because I'm fun to be around and I'm a good listener? Or am I here watching DVDs with him in his room because he sees me as some kind of novelty? He watches me and whispers kisses across my collarbone; his fingers dance along my stomach and I wonder if I could be replaced by any Asian girl. I think of my first boyfriend and how he sometimes made me feel like a kind of plaything—he even used to joke that I was his toy. I think about myself, and how I am attracted to white-Australian boys, and whether they are a novelty to me. Is this my way of fitting in? Of feeling more Australian, and less Asian? Is it working? And then I tell myself to stop it.

Mark has a dry sense of humour and he seems to get a kick out of shocking me. 'I've had a full life,' he says often, before accusing me, because of my silence and blank expression, of looking down on people who have sex just for fun. He tells me no boy would talk to me without wanting something more. 'People aren't as innocent as you think they are,' he says. 'You've led such a sheltered life.' When he talks like this I feel like a little girl having all her ideas about people and the world turned upside down and trampled on. Mark can see it in my face. He apologises, and makes a joke that I don't get.

After three months of seeing each other, we are at a student reading our tutor has invited us to. On the second floor of a converted Fitzroy terrace house, we sit at the bar, in the uneven, rosy glow of box lamps with paintings stretched across their faces. I feel old writing of a time when smoking indoors was still allowed, but there it is, smoke thickens the air, loosely blanketing the swirl of alcohol. The readings are finished and everyone we know has left.

Mark turns to face me, a little drunk. As if he'd been trying unsuccessfully to get my attention all night, he suddenly grabs my shoulders and shakes me.

'Amyyy!' he moans.

'Whaaat?'

'Why do you put up with me?'

I sip my water. 'What are you talking about?'

'Amy,' he says, 'I'm your antithesis.'

'My what?'

'I'm Carlton and you're Essendon.'

I don't barrack for Essendon. I don't barrack for any footy team, but Mark is a mad Carlton supporter and I know exactly what he means. He keeps talking for a long time, while I nod and 'hm' at appropriate moments.

I don't want to cry until I'm home and in my room, alone, but when I park my car in his driveway the tears stream out and he's looking at me sympathetically. I hate the way he's looking at me.

Somewhere in the CBD, Thursday night, 11pm. We start with tequila shots, and later, when the boys want to do Chartreuses and 151s, they buy me Bailey's on ice, Cranberry Vodkas or Tequila Sunrises. We dance in a group, but eventually Andy steps in, holding me close as we move to the beat, inching away from everyone else. He murmurs in my ear and his hot, alcoholic breath makes the skin on my neck tingle.

Later, I am resting on the couch not really knowing what I'm doing. Melissa isn't even here. I don't know why I keep saying yes when the boys, who are high school friends of hers, call me to come out—I can't think of a reason to say no, I'm not doing anything else, but that shouldn't be enough. I should *want* to be there, with them. Shouldn't I? Do I? Are they really even my friends? What am I doing hanging out with a bunch of Asian guys, who wear baggy jeans and chains around their necks and used to have long blonde fringes hanging down the sides of their faces? They treat me like a girl, like someone who needs to be looked after. And I like that. Why do I like that? Why do I like going with them to these clubs, full of Asians, who I have never associated myself with, what am I doing here? I don't even like drinking. And I don't like this mu-

sic. The lyrics are full of hoes and bitches and references to sex that make me cringe. They talk about slapping booties and doing it like that and dropping it like it's hot. There are music videos playing on big screens: black girls in short skirts and barely there tops giving rappers a lap dance, buff men with smirks on their faces, shirtless, baggy jeans, bling dripping from their necks, their fingers, glittering across their teeth.

The dance floors are packed tight with bodies moving against each other, bumping elbows and hips, constantly in danger of sweeping the tip of someone's cigarette or knocking someone else's drink out of their hand, smashing glass all over shoes and on the floor. There are micro-shorts, fishnet tights, five-inch heels and bras flashing through thin singlets; girls with false lashes and reflective lips; boys tilting their heads back with a whoop; hands reaching for the backs of skirts and shorts. Feet get tangled, and all around the eyes are glassy, and faces tainted red.

I get the association with black Americans, the defiance, the Yeah we take our shoes off in our homes. Yeah we eat rice every night with chopsticks. Yeah our parents don't speak velly good Engerish. Yeah our ancestors came here on flimsy little boats but you know what so did yours we are all immigrants we may not be white we may not have blonde hair and blue eyes like crystals but we are just as Australian as you are we speak Australian too.

They look like me. I am dressed like them. I get all that. But aren't I more Australian than this? What is the *point* of this? Are these...is this...me?

As I move and feel the hip-hop beats thumping my heart on the dance floor; as I sip my first Long Island Ice Tea on a sofa by the wall; as I yell into the ear of a girl who is a friend of a friend; as I try not to stare at the couple rolling on top of each other a metre away from me; as I watch silky pale skin whisk past; bling catch the disco lights; the sea of lightened black hair bobbing up and down and stepping side to side in front of me, I try to pan out from this scene as if it were a movie, and see myself disappear into a crowd that may or may not be my people.

So I tell my parents, 'My friends say I'm a Banana.'
Mum laughs out loud, but Dad looks at me suspiciously.
'A what?' he asks. 'What the heck does that mean, "you're a banana"?'
'Haven't you heard that before?' Mum asks.
'No.'
'It means I'm yellow on the outside, white on the inside.'
Mum laughs again, but Dad is still frowning.
'Ridiculous,' he scoffs. 'How can they say that? You are not white at all. You are all Chinese.'

Amy Han writes fiction and creative non-fiction, mostly for people younger than herself because it's fun to pretend to be 18, or 12, or 5 again. She has won short story awards and been published in *The Big Issue*, *Farrago*, and *lip magazine*. 'All Chinese' may or may not become a book one day. 