

*By Harriet Scott*

I am a child. I am five, maybe six, sat at a table of fifteen other five or six-year-olds. We all wear little navy pinafores and elasticated ties. We are tired and hungry from mental maths, me particularly, because much to my parents' unspoken but easy-enough-to-sense dismay, I am shit at maths.

On Wednesdays, we are fed roast dinner, then milk and biscuits. We pass a paper plate around with the silent politeness that is customary here, but inwardly we are whining in childlike desperation for one of the Bourbons, a lunchtime treasure in limited supply. When the plate leaves the table, we envy the girls who got the good seats for the rest of the sitting, because they got the Bourbons by default.

A girl I do not recognise looks at me from across the table. Her hair is like mine, dark and flat and silky. She is smiling, so I smile back, not only because that is the polite thing to do, but also because I feel sorry that she has been lumbered with a Rich Tea.

"Where are you from?" She asks me.

I am not sure what she means, nor why she is asking. Nobody else is listening, so nobody else can help.

"Are you from Thailand?" She elaborates, dunking her Rich Tea into her milk as if she'd asked my favourite colour.

I start to nod, then stop, then explain. Yes, Thailand. Kind of.

She is Chinese, she says before I ask how she figured me out.

"Something about your eyes." She replies, as I think the same about her.

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Lazy Susans become a culinary wheel of fear, and I gain an irrational fear of their tortuous unpredictability. As somebody spins for what they want, I find myself faced with something else whose mere appearance frightens me.

Granny is to my left, coaxing me in her usual fashion to try things besides egg fried rice and mixed vegetables. Her chopsticks sail between the sharing plates and my own as she ferries bits of I-don't-know-what onto my dish, chatting in animated Thai with her sisters all the while.

On my right, my mother is doing the same thing to my father, but unlike me he is brave, so pops the I-don't-know-whats into his mouth, undeterred, with the chopstick finesse of a toddler.

"Guess what it is!" My mother dares him, in English.

My father is chewing, chewing, chewing. He's chewing on it more than the fish and chips or beans on toast or Weetabix that he grew up chewing. He's still chewing when he finally says that he's not sure.

"It's a duck tongue." My mother reveals whilst his jaw persists. Her cousins and her aunts and are laughing and applauding my father for his efforts. He simply smiles, shrugs, says he thought it might be a tongue. Then, he sends his haphazard chopsticks to clutch whatever comes next.

I turn my attention to Granny's fingers, pinching the mahogany sticks back and forth, back and forth. She has two extra digits; I have a stainless steel fork and spoon glaring up at me.

I tug at her sleeve, ask her to show me. She places my untouched sticks in my hand, places her hand over mine. Together, we feed me some broccoli and shredded carrot, and although I am full of glee, I am still not brave like my father.

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My mother is teaching me how to do things as I am growing up. She has taught me to be studious and to never call my friends' parents by their first names. She is trying to teach me to like the colour pink and mathematics, which I am still shit at, so she is getting me a tutor.

I take her word for it when she points to a little box that says 'Mixed - other' on a form at the doctor's surgery. I ask her why not 'Mixed - Asian', but she says that means somebody else, so I draw a cross next to her fingernail and pose no further questions.

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"I khao jai."

"Do you?"

"Yes, ka."

This happens more easily when I am there, not here: understanding. Granny is thrilled. She rubs my back vigorously, exclaims how impressive that is.

Except, it isn't. I think that I'm pathetic.

Granny speaks to my uncle, who has taught himself to speak (and read and write) back to her, and this leaves me more disappointed in my sputtering engine, paper jam, buffering dialogue. Being the broken machine I am, I compute the input but cannot respond. I phud mai dai.

I ask my mother why she never taught me, why they sent us to an English-speaking school when we lived in Bangkok. Her Thai is marginally better than mine but she says that Granny never taught her. I wonder out loud who taught Granny English when she was sent here.

"I taught myself." She says, stewing over a steel pot of congee, my forever favourite breakfast. She is wearing one of the same quilted robes that I imagine remind her of home.

Once, my grandfather put the robe she wore most often into the tumble dryer, the blue one. Doing laundry is another task that he wordlessly assigned to her, or perhaps that she wordlessly took on, all those years ago. They must have argued that night, I thought, else he would never do such a job.

As the material rolled around, its silk threads unraveled and the quilting escaped. The garment was irreparable. My mother said that Granny wept.

I move to be next to her at the stove, almost tall enough now to rest my chin atop her head. I almost ask her how she learnt a whole new language by herself, but I swiftly realise that I am not bilingual is because I never had to be, so I keep my mouth shut.

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I love being a bartender because there is nothing more satisfying than a still-sober customer telling you that your mojitos are practically medicinal. Such praise satiates the pathological need for approval that has grown with my bones and organs.

"Are you twins?"

Equally, I hate being a bartender. I hate it because this so-called ‘friendly chit chat’ is all too often initiated by inebriated men who only care to ascertain what chance they stand of fucking me or one of my colleagues. Mostly, they are older than my father. Always, the answer is always no chance whatsoever.

“Sisters.” Says my sister.

Eyebrows are raised. Looks are exchanged.

“Where are you from?” Says the first one, or maybe it was the other one.

“No, let’s guess.” Says the other other one.

I am studying my fingers holding the stem of the glass. My sister, who is braver than me, is plunging the sink under the front of the bar, meeting their downward stares with a colder one of her own.

They cycle through all of the countries that they think we look like. This tiresome, familiar game is as common as their strange need to instruct me on how to pull their pint of ale ‘properly’ when I’m already doing it properly. Their slurred sentences blur Asia’s colours in the same way that infants smear paint with their hands, and every deadpan ‘no’ my sister offers makes them more giddy.

I stand there with a furrowed brow, facing away from them. I clean my glass and let it happen, and I will do the same tomorrow.

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“I don’t understand it.” My mother tells me.

My eyes question her. I am sat on the counter, stripping the chocolate off a stick of Pocky with my front teeth.

“Your strangely close relationship with her.” She says as I strip another stick. “And, why you eat those like that.”

“I’ve always done it this way.”

It’s true, I have done it that way since the first time my uncle handed me a piece. The lady at the convenience mart in Granny’s apartment complex saw much of my visiting face that summer, plucking those bright red boxes out from amongst the others on the shelf for fifteen baht a pop.

I hop off the counter and follow my mother outside so that she can stir fry on butane.

Granny cooks on butane, too, so I suppose that’s why my mother does. This way, the smell of burning oil and pork gets swept away into thin air. It doesn’t get stuck in our hair or our clothes or, worse still, in other people’s hair or clothes.

“She and I have a different relationship than you have with her.” I finally say.

To this, my mother nods, explains that it was probably down to all the time that Granny spent looking after me as a baby. When my sister arrived, three years later, no extra care was necessary. It sounds like relief, the way her long huff of a laugh joins the porky smoke and Summer birdsong.

“Do you know her life story?”

My mother shakes her head, repeats her previous statement. That can’t be the reason, I retort, because I don’t know her life story either.

And yet, we are all here. Alive here, born here: the same little seaside town that she'd chosen for us more than fifty years ago because she liked the way that people spoke and the abundance of trees. This was her chosen home.

I watched my mother throwing things into the pan with the measureless abandon that ensures a tasty meal. Oyster. Soy. A drizzle of sesame. This is what Granny cooked for her, so it's what she cooks for me. Granny's tastes better, though.

These moments are gifts from her real home. They are moments in which I wonder what other things Granny brought with her to England and subsequently forgot, because nobody ever asked her to remember them.

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My sister and me work behind a new bar now, one full of university students. It is better.

There is a new boy who becomes especially pleasant after I tell him where our blood trickles from, because he asked, and because he seemed nice enough to trust, loosely.

He has even visited Thailand himself, although his narrative is the same as everybody else's: they hate Bangkok because it is hot and odorous. Somebody once said to me that Bangkok stinks of shit, having only seen the smoggy sunset from their hostel window and got shitfaced on Soi Cowboy as they passed through, undoubtedly in a pair of billowy elephant-print trousers and riding high on the wings of a life-affirming experience in Chiang Mai. Next stop, the islands, Full Moon Party.

The first time it happens, we are stood by the dishwasher, shooting the breeze in rubber gloves covered in leftover food. I see the girl the new boy is pointing at. I note her almond eyes and skin. I listen to the lechery that tumbles from his mouth and I want to scrape it into the bin and let it rot with half-eaten nachos and limp french fries.

He persists, leering at girls all who bear a resemblance to one another. He leers at my sister and he leers at me. He insists on touching us, hugging us all the time. He calls me rude when I call him a creep and shrug him off.

After that, I keep my distance, but I don't tell him again. My sister, who is still braver than me, eventually has him banned from working on shifts with us. It's fine for us, I think, now that we are rid of him, but I worry for the others.

We are collectively his 'type', we are 'exotic' - he said so himself, but he wasn't the first. We are no more than little trophy animals that they like to kill and gather so that they can stroke our skin without the inconvenience of our protests.

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Somehow, I grow up, move to the city and get a job at a big company. Bonus: it doesn't even involve maths, which I am still shit at.

Granny returned home long ago and stays there most of the year with the rest of my mother's relations. We FaceTime every couple of weeks even though she is yet to fully grasp how her iPhone works. She is smaller, older, but perpetually lively in those same house robes when we talk - often until 2 or 3 AM, because she is a night owl like me.

On one occasion, she rabbits on about the price of gold, astaxanthin and my career. We talk about our Zodiacs - she a horse, I a pig - and what our fortunes are for the rest of the year. She tells me to wear red to keep myself healthy, but I argue that I never remove the necklace that she gave to me - the one that her father gave to her when she left for England - so I'm lucky already, she's with me.

Eventually, Granny says that she is proud of me. It's the first time I can remember her saying so; the words are as difficult to comprehend in English as they would be in Thai. Even stranger is the 'love you' that hangs upon the silence in the room once she has gone to bed.

I sit, blinking under wet eyelashes. I wonder why I chose to choke on the lump in my throat rather than to let some tears spill over, but I noticed that Granny chose to do the same. I want to ring her back to tell her that I miss her, that I'm sorry for not calling as often as I should.

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"Why would they even suggest this?" I am scoffing at a recipe card from one of those subscription meal services.

My wife appears behind me, stoops to rest her chin on my shoulder. She can't work out what is wrong.

"It's *all* bloody wrong!" I laugh, turning to wave it in her face, before pointing at the steps to explain that the very point of a stir fry is that you fire up one wok and throw it all in, not to cook one component only to 'set it aside' as you cook the next, as this ludicrous card says.

I am fumbling with my rice cooker by the time she asks whether we should just follow the instructions and cook the rice in a pan. My expression gives me away.

"Why not?" She asks. I sigh, unable to look at her.

Later, she chuckles at how I am 'making it up as I go along', for I'm usually so regimented. She's right, I can barely fry an egg without Googling 'perfect fried egg runny yolk easy,' but this isn't some made up recipe - this one is in my DNA, I stress, swatting her away from the wok. This is a meal that just *happens*, and in a dressing gown and shower cap, of all things, so that I don't smell of burning pork and oil.

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I try to talk to my mother about how our people are hurting, dying. She acts as though, although sad, it is nothing to do with us. They gave my sister and I such a sheltered upbringing, she sighs, telling me not to engage with the 'negativity'.

"It's because of these labels." She groans. "I have always told you not to label yourself - it's silly. You don't need to *be* anything. I'm not anything. I'm just me. I don't feel the need to be whatever it is that people want me to be."

A few months ago, a woman told my sister to go back to where she came from because 'this' was all her fault. It happened in the supermarket that we have visited since before we could talk, in the same seaside town that Granny chose more than fifty years ago, where she liked the accents and the trees.

"Well, you know what she's like. She embellishes things." My mother says to me, to make herself feel better.

I think about my child hand drawing a cross in the 'Mixed - other' box and wonder why my mother told me to do that. . Then, I think of Granny, who does not have my western accent or watered-down face that might allow her to masquerade as 'White - British' if she convinced herself that that was the truth.

I then come to understand that what my mother means by label-less is the ability to tick that 'White - British' box, but alas, her mixed blood will never let her, and thankfully, neither will mine. We will remain the glorious 'Other'.