

agency and asked them to begin a search for my birth family. They called me about eight weeks later. My birth mother was alive and wanted to meet me. The social worker happily announced that she would be travelling up to Seoul the next day by train from a country town in a southern province.

When I met my birth mother, she confirmed the reasons I had imagined for my relinquishment. I looked at her face and could immediately see myself. It was like her eyes, nose and cheekbones had been imprinted on my face. I asked how she had chosen my name. She hadn't. She'd handed me to the social worker the day I was born and had no say in the name I was given. This shook my comforting idea that my mother had given me my name in love.

I was able to travel to Pusan. With the help of my adoption agency and the local police, I located the building where I was born. In the eighties it had been a maternity home, where unwed mothers could have their illegitimate children in secrecy. Now it was a worn building. The top storeys were occupied by shifty looking offices with metal doors and deadlocks. The floors were cold cement. The thought crossed my mind that the map was wrong or that the policeman had made a mistake. This was not where I had imagined arriving into the world.

The adoption agency had printed out a map to help me find the building. I examined it and noticed that in the vicinity there were a lot of landmarks with the name Soo Jeong. I realised that my name had been given to me arbitrarily by a social worker with very little creativity. My heart sunk a little.

Slowly, it dawned on me that those little snippets out of which I had created Korean Blossom still had little real meaning. I had thought I had a foundation – a name, a place, a date and a temperature. But what did it all mean? Now that I'd learnt that those facts were so unromantic and inconsequential, I wasn't sure.

I have spent many hours contemplating what might have been had I grown up in Korea. It is a cyclical process and I am no closer to a conclusion. Had I stayed, most certainly I could never have had the opportunities that I have had in Australia. I might not have grown up with a loving and stable family. I would not enjoy the open and critical thinking that Australian education seems to encourage. But for each of these factors, another question opens

up, sending my mind on another adventure. For all of Korea's shortcomings, I have never felt such social cohesion and an almost familial insularity. As frustrating as it was, I miss that about Korea and I wonder what it would have been like to grow up knowing only that world.

I cannot know how my life might have unravelled had I lived it in Korea. I can't pretend to understand Korean society as though it were my own. But I do feel as though I stand on a kind of cusp, looking in. Material circumstances pushed my life to where it is now, but they might have pushed it in a very different direction. I might have had a life with my Korean family, in their dusty country town on the beautiful southern coast of Korea. I might have grown up with values and a language and temperament that matched my face.

I have come a long way since I was a little girl who recoiled at the image of a wrinkled Korean woman – now I know her as *Haldmon*, or Grandmother. It has taken some time for the different bits of me to fit comfortably, and I am sure they will continue to realign and I will continue to question. For now, I think questioning is good. It seems to make things clearer.

Baked Beans and Burnt Toast

Jacqui Larkin

The plane slaloms around the buildings, which seem to reach up to grab us. We're in a concrete jungle of chaos and neon when surely we should be above it. I don't know what keeps a jumbo jet in the air – something vague about low pressure and wind-flow over the wings I think I once read somewhere – but as our plane undertakes what is essentially a triple twist with pike, it seems as though the same rules don't apply in Asia. The sick-bags are in short supply as we are buffered around the sky. I don't know if the laws of physics apply here, but it's clear that the noise pollution laws are also a little lax. Surely-the sound of a 747 screaming past your apartment window would require more than double-glazing to keep out.

One more sharp, gravity-defying turn and we are thumped unceremoniously onto the tarmac at Kai Tak airport.

'Welcome to Hong Kong,' announces the steward in several dialects, including English. 'We hope you had a pleasant flight? *A pleasant flight?* That was nothing more than a controlled crash. I search for a hint of sarcasm in the steward's tone, but there's none to be found. I hope they hurry up and finish the new airport out at Lantau Island, because I'm not sure I could go through that again.

Despite the flight attendants' pleas, people are up and out of their seats, rummaging through overhead bins, getting themselves organised long before the plane has come to a halt at the terminal. Anyone who has survived a landing at Kai Tak develops a certain devil-may-care attitude and is not about to be made to sit down by a leering stick-insect in lip-gloss.

I look through my window at the lights of the city and up to the distant Peak. I can't believe that I've come home. Home to a land that I've never even visited until now. Dad was always promising to take us home one day, but a brain aneurism broke that promise in his fiftieth year. So now I'm bringing him home.

I collect my bags and smile at the customs officer when he calls me up to the counter. Not only does he totally fail to return my pleasantries, he actually sneers as he starts flicking through my Australian passport.

'*Simmu sic gong Tongwah?*' He doesn't even look me in the eye when he asks me this. I trawl through my memory, hoping to translate, but, try as she might, my *pan-pan* abandoned any hope of my ever speaking Cantonese when I was about four. It would have been worth sixteen further years of practice just to avoid the embarrassment of this moment.

'I'm sorry, I don't understand what ...'
'I said, "DO YOU SPEAK CANTONESE?"' he interrupts in English, as aggressively as only someone who has the authority to order a recital probe can. He says it slowly and deliberately, as if he's talking to a monkey at the zoo.

'*Noei?*' I reply, feeling shamed into replying in Cantonese, even if it is just a 'No' with a bit of attitude on the end.

The customs officer mumbles something to his colleague in

the next booth and they both have a good laugh at my expense as I feel myself starting to turn crimson.

'Do you speak Cantonese?' the words hang in the air and taunt me. No matter where I am it seems as though I will always be caught in the middle. Lost in that grey zone where the borders blur. I'm East meets West, an ABC, a banana. As I collect my passport and head off towards the taxis and shuttle buses, I'm transported back to my first day in kindergarten.

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Even I feel like staring at me as we shuffle into class and sit on the floor. The only black head in a sea of blond, brown, sandy and ginger. I stand out like a plate of chicken feet at a sausage sizzle.

'Good morning girls and boys,' says the teacher in that singsong way that kindly teachers do. 'My name is Mrs Barton. I will be your teacher for the year.'

Mrs Barton starts marking the roll. Everyone sticks their hand up as their name is called and I feel every single eye trained on me when it's my turn.

'Jacqui?' continues Mrs Barton and, for the first time but certainly not the last, I feel myself turning red. She doesn't do a double-take on anyone else's name, so why mine?

'Yes,' I reply.

She looks closer at the roll and adjusts her glasses. 'Jacqui Five-Hundred?'

For a minute I think there must be two Jacquis in kindly.

'No,' I offer tentatively.

'Well is that *you* or isn't it?' she snaps and then holds up the roll so that we can all see, not that any of us can really spell, though I can recognise my own name.

My friend Jo-Ann, who I've known since preschool, puts up her hand. 'It's Soo, Miss. Not Five-Hundred. Her name's Jacqui Soo.'

Mrs Barton looks back at her roll. 'Oh, I see. The administrative staff have put Jacqui Five-Hundred. Well then, Jacqui Soo, your mother needs to write more clearly so that people can read it. Or else get some help with her writing.'

I try to imagine someone having a last name of Five-Hundred

but it doesn't make any sense. Unfortunately there's no one after me on the roll so the teacher's focus is still on me.

'Anyway,' she says. 'Welcome girls and boys. You too, Jacqui Soo.' I don't know why she has to keep using both my names. She wouldn't call Jo-Ann 'Jo-Ann Bakoss'; it'd just be 'Jo-Ann.'

'Tall me, Jacqui Soo, DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?'
I'm not sure why she's shouting. I *only* speak English. But I just nod because my tongue feels as though it's swelling up in my mouth.

'Does she, Jo-Ann? Does Jacqui Soo speak English?'

'Yes, Miss,' replies Jo-Ann, already revelling in teacher's-pet status.

'If she has any trouble, Jo-Ann, you can always help her.' Then she turns back to me. 'Where are you from, Jacqui?'

'Carlingford,' I reply, because I am. Mrs Barton bursts out laughing and the rest of the class joins her, though they probably don't know what they're laughing at.

'I mean, where are you from originally? We might even be able to look it up in the atlas. Where were you born, Jacqui?'

I look around for some help, but even Jo-Ann looks blank. Is Carlingford even *in* the atlas? 'In a hospital, Miss' I finally reply, and Mrs Barton and the class have another great snort.

'Yes, but WHERE WAS THE HOSPITAL?'

'Oh,' I reply, finally getting with the program. 'In ... Chatswood, I think.'

The smile fades from Mrs Barton's lips. The conversation is over, and she turns abruptly to another student. What's wrong with Chatswood? I wonder.

At lunchtime I sit with the girls and open my lunchbox. It's fried rice with mini spring rolls. Why couldn't I have vegemite or peanut-butter sandwiches like everyone else? Okay, I can't stand vegemite, it makes me want to vomit, but it's hard enough being the only Asian kid in the school – couldn't my lunch at least be anonymous? I feel like crying until I see, or more crucially smell, what Jo-Ann has on her sandwiches. Hungarian people really go in for smelly sausages and fairly soon Jo-Ann and I have a large space all to ourselves, which I secretly hope is because of Jo-Ann's sandwiches and not me.

Jo-Ann and I are playing chasings with some other girls from class when I notice a boy approaching us. He's much older than us, probably even in second grade, and for a while he just stands there staring at me.

'Ching-chong, ching-chong sitting in a tree. Eating chop suey with a flea.'

From that day on I have that stupid taunt stuck in my head. At least he could have come up with a better rhyme. 'Eating chop suey on her knee,' for instance. Or, 'Eating chop suey for tea.' Or maybe even, 'Eating chop suey with glee.' But with a flea? What had the flea got to do with anything? And as for the chop suey, well, I didn't even know what that was.

My teaser's name is Peter Nugent, I learn after he has been dragged off to the administration block and issued with six of the best, and he is a child psychologist's dream. Nowadays he would be diagnosed with ADHD and dosed up to the gills on Ritalin; but back in the early seventies his type were allowed to roam free. They would tear around the playground like the Tasmanian devil in those old cartoons, beating other boys at random, setting fire to girls' skipping ropes while they were mid-skip and taunting anyone who showed up on their radar.

After that, Peter became a regular part of my lunchtime schedule. As soon as we'd finished eating, Jo-Ann and I would play chasings, king pin, elastics, or that strange game that involved inserting a tennis ball in a pair of old stockings and hurling it about like a set of nunchukas, and Peter would turn up and stare at me. Sometimes he would call us names. Jo-Ann was 'baked beans' and I was 'burnt toast.' Baked beans and burnt toast? It never knew what it meant. Still don't. But mostly he just stared.

And then, just when I got curious enough and confident enough to ask him what the baked beans and burnt toast were about, he wasn't there anymore. I don't remember him leaving. Maybe he just exploded or something. All I remember was that part of me missed the attention. He'd become a bit like a stray dog that follows you around all day. You shoo it away, throw a log at it, ignore it, but it would always be back. And then, suddenly, there's just a hole in the air and you realise that it's gone.

As the years went on, I sometimes wondered what happened to

Peter Nugent: How do kids like that adjust to civilian life? Probably left school as soon as he could, did something breathtakingly unskilled on a building site, married the obligatory Sharon, had a couple of kids called Zac and Tiffany; beer, footy, pokies, smokes, meat-raffle at the club. In other words – a walking stereotype with a beer gut.

I don't know why I'm even thinking of Peter Nugent as my taxi driver winds us through the backstreet maze of Kowloon. Perhaps he's just the face – that ugly face – of all those Aussies who've enquired, 'Why don't you go back to where you came from?' down the years.

Well, I'm back now. Back to a place I've never been to before. Happy?

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A philosopher once said, 'Hong Kong is like a slap in the face that makes you feel good.' Actually, I think it was Chuck Norris, but you could hardly use that as the frontispiece of a novel, now could you? But as my taxi lurches down Nathan Road I can see what he meant. The neon makes my eyes flicker. Customers and sales people spill out onto the street. It's mayhem: everyone seems to be on the make or out for a bargain. I notice cured and shrivelled bits of something or other hanging in shop windows. I check in to my hotel and take the lift up to my room. I don't know which was more tiring – the nine-hour flight, or the drive from the airport. I'm looking forward to a long, luxurious bath, some room service and then a good night's sleep before getting out and discovering home tomorrow.

I sleep so deeply that I may have lapsed into a coma at some point. Breakfast comes with the room, so even though I'm not hungry I make my way down to the restaurant. It's fairly quiet; either everyone is already up and about, or maybe Hong Kong is a nocturnal city.

The head waiter is Anglo (white, skip, westerner, *guzia*, whatever the correct term is) but he is speaking fluent Cantonese and sharing a joke with a couple of businessmen. When he sees me by myself he excuses himself and makes his way over to me with his coffee pot.

'*Seng sic di ma yeh?*'

'I'm sorry,' I reply tersely. 'I don't speak your language.'

'Beg your pardon,' he says. 'That was very presumptuous of me. It's full buffet, but can I get you a coffee to start with?'

'I think I'll pass on the breakfast. Just a coffee, thanks.'

He pours the steaming coffee into my cup but I'm in such dire need of a caffeine hit that I'm pretty sure I could absorb it through my skin.

'Long flight?' he asks.

'Not so much the flight as the last five minutes of it.'

'Yes, Kai Tak can get a little hairy. Though it is one of the safest airports in the world, apparently.' He continues as I sip my coffee. 'Pilots are so on edge when they come into land, they're wound up like springs. Senses working overtime. Lantau will be finished soon enough, though.'

'Good,' is all I can reply as he tops me up.

'First time in Hong Kong?'

'Is it *that* obvious?'

'You're from Sydney, right?'

I don't want to show him that I'm impressed. 'Do you know my star sign too?'

He ponders this for a moment. 'Sagittarius. Year of the Rat.'

'Well, you're right about the rat.'

'I'm a Sydneysider too,' he acknowledges. 'Working in hospitality, you get to pick accents.'

'Well, you're obviously very busy,' I say, hoping that he'll take the hint. Perhaps he's after a tip? Then I realise that I've been rude. 'So, how did you learn to speak Cantonese?'

'It's a bit of a talking dog thing, isn't it?'

I don't know what he means.

'It's not that the dog talks well,' he continues, 'it's that it talks at all.'

'So?' I press. 'How did you learn? Don't most Westerners here speak English?'

'I grew up in the suburbs,' he says, taking a seat at my table. 'It was all football, meat pies, kangaroos and Holden cars. Just before Sydney went multicultural and got some class about it. Anyway, this little Chinese girl came to the school and I just thought she

was so beautiful, so exotic, so not me, that I couldn't take my eyes off her. But of course, like most emotionally retarded eight-year-old boys, the only way I could communicate with her was by calling her names. Pathetic really, but what do you do?'

I look at his name badge. Pete. I feel my jaw slowly starting to drop open.

'Then my parents split up and we moved up the coast with Mum. But the door had been opened for me and I knew there was another world out there beyond the whole football, meat-pie thing. By the end of my teens I knew that I was an egg.'

'An egg?'

'Yeah,' replies Pete. 'If you're a banana, then I'm an egg - white on the outside but yellow in the middle.'

'Oh,' is all I can manage in response.

'As soon as I finished uni,' continues Pete the egg, 'I moved over here and I've been travelling around ever since, though Hong Kong is home.'

Having finished his tale, he stares at me closely. 'Are you okay?' he says. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'I don't feel so good,' I reply. All his talk about bananas and eggs has stirred things up a bit.

'Travel sickness,' says Pete. 'Wait here. I'll be back in a minute.' And with that, he races off towards the kitchen.

I try to breathe but it's not easy. I need some fresh air. I need sea air. As soon as I've finished breakfast I'll catch the Star Ferry to Hong Kong Island, take Dad's ashes over to Repulse Bay and say goodbye. And then ... and then ... well, then I'll go shopping in Stanley Markets, because in a strange way that's what Dad would have wanted. No big ceremonies. No big send-offs. Just his little girl doing something simple, enjoying herself, smiling with the sun on her face, and him watching over her.

'Here,' says Pete, interrupting my thoughts and placing a covered plate in front of me. 'It's an old Irish remedy for when you're feeling queasy. Mum gave it to us whenever we were feeling bad, or sick, or just off.'

I imagine black pudding, boiled cabbage, pints of Guinness mixed into a thick gruel and I know that I'm going to vomit.

I take a deep breath. 'What is it?'

Pete whips the cover off the plate and rather than puke, I smile.

'Works every time,' he says confidently.

'I'm sure it'll help clear things up,' I say, picking up my knife and fork and tucking into my steaming hot plate of baked beans and burnt toast.

Hanoi and Other Homes

Sim Shen

The drive into Hanoi from the airport was disorientating - first the sweeping boulevards of the outskirts of the city, then the gradual pressing in of the characteristically thin and tall Vietnamese houses, then over the Red River and finally into the narrow alleys of the old city. I felt as if I had stepped back into time, and not just any time, but my own past.

If I tried hard, I could pretend that I was seeing my hometown in Malaysia - not the way it is now, another rapidly modernising South-East Asian city; but the way it once was, the way I remembered it as a kid. The little skinny shophouses with second-storey windows from which lines of washing were skewered on poles, slung out over the street to dry. Plastic wrappers, bits of paper, scraps of food and cigarette butts were underfoot. Little stalls on the street displayed the carcasses of roasted meats as they hung from hooks, steaming behind glass. People spat publicly; sometimes in front of themselves, sometimes by the side of the street. Men in singlets squatted on plastic footstools, languidly working away with toothpicks at the remnants of their latest meal. Little boys huddled everywhere there was some space, flicking marbles in the dirt. Hundreds of motorbikes sizzled past at each intersection, horns constantly beeping. A humid heat forced everyone underneath awnings on the sidewalk - and where there were no awnings, women raised their umbrellas against the sun.

Yet this wasn't quite a vision of Kuching in the '70s. The voices chattering at every street corner were only vaguely familiar, but