A Home Somewhere

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol22/iss1/17

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
A Home Somewhere

Abstract
Chester had expected a little girl, but Suyin is already taller than her mother Li Ann. Perhaps that isn't surprising, as his parents are tall, and he had been one of the tallest boys in his high school. He had thought she would have been immediately recognizable, like his sister would have been had she survived her infancy. Fair and pink, gold-red hair, straight high nose, and finely etched lips. 'A rosebud,' Mother had said to a visiting neighbour a long time ago, when he was about five. He had never forgotten the word, because Mother hardly ever spoke about her, and the doubled sound, 'rosebud,' lingered as a mysterious effect — he had not known what a rosebud looked like when he first heard her say it — then took on the folded shape of a pink flower when he accompanied her to a florist a few months later and the woman at the shop had asked, 'Do you want some roses?'
Chester had expected a little girl, but Suyin is already taller than her mother Li Ann. Perhaps that isn’t surprising, as his parents are tall, and he had been one of the tallest boys in his high school.

He had thought she would have been immediately recognizable, like his sister would have been had she survived her infancy. Fair and pink, gold-red hair, straight high nose, and finely etched lips. ‘A rosebud,’ Mother had said to a visiting neighbour a long time ago, when he was about five.

He had never forgotten the word, because Mother hardly ever spoke about her, and the doubled sound, ‘rosebud,’ lingered as a mysterious effect — he had not known what a rosebud looked like when he first heard her say it — then took on the folded shape of a pink flower when he accompanied her to a florist a few months later and the woman at the shop had asked, ‘Do you want some roses?’

His mother had replied, ‘Oh, aren’t they the sweetest rosebuds?’ gesturing to the leafless stems from which single creased heads of infant roses sprang. But she bought the spicy scented freesias instead, burying her nose among the blooms hanging like orange bells from stalks just bursting out of spring bulbs.

Closed-in, meshed petals, crimson bleeding into black, dark red rosebuds were his wife’s, Meryl’s, favourite flowers, and each time she carried some home from the First Avenue Chilean florist, he felt a pang, as at the moment of the first sounding of the word, for what had stood between him and single childhood, not even a remembered ghost of a sister but an image of a flower.

A vague disappointment stirs at this memory.

‘Suyin.’ The child announces herself prosaically. Her colour is all Asian: brown and ochre mixed, like a tropical clay, no leaden grey or gravely chalk. She is sun-coloured brown, pecan-shelled, and her hair is dark, Chinese-same, in the low-lit cafe. He sees she needs braces; her large teeth crowding in a small mouth, will need expensive orthodontic repair to straighten the haphazard angles.

Her eyes do not meet his. He finds them small at first, but once she gazes at him fully he sees they are round, with broad whites and shiny green hazel irises the colour of his.

The pulse in his chest hurts like a tick after too much exercise. He has not felt so much hurt even after the last argument with Meryl, only this time the hurt is with himself.
Through the cafe noise he says things about the food, about his English-language-use research: it is like talking above the engines of planes landing on runways on every side. A roar inside his body echoes outside with the bass voices of the white men in the cafe. He hears a French accent, Californian, tones like German or Norwegian, lots of British, flat and broad vowels, all speaking English — and the high-pitched nervy jingly paces of the women, ‘Yes, lah, so Susan say what for, true-loh, my boss don’t give me day off, my mother like chocolate, meh, we buy Col’ Storage.’

Chester watches her scoop the ice-cream, shiny cream dripping off the small bowl of the spoon. She is a dainty eater and takes a long time finishing it.

By then he is talking recklessly, not understanding why he is asking if she would be interested in a visit to New York. He will have to call Meryl if Suyin accepts. For once he does not know what Meryl will say. His plans are changing even now.

He had not wanted to change on returning to New York twelve years ago. The Peace Corps year in Malaysia was finally over, like a too long movie, fascinating in the first few hours, dreadful with smoke and blood in its conclusion. He had wanted reality, the bland clean shampooed middle-class reality of his students. The reality of his parents’ life that bright energetic Meryl promised. No puddles of darkness, no dark skins, no nasal curses, no sharp unidentifiable smells. Vanilla ice-cream.

He strokes his thighs thinking of Meryl.

The noise in his head subsides. He can pay the waiter without fumbling for change.

‘Auntie Ellen is waiting outside,’ Suyin tells him.

He shakes Ellen’s unfriendly hand. In the white-hot sunshine he sees red-gold hairs shining on Suyin’s arms, and her black hair gleams with auburn streaks.

He knows it is shame he is feeling, shame which is like a different kind of love, the first time he has loved so shamefully, as he watches his daughter walk away.

Li Ann

It was my idea to have a family vacation.

‘Yuck! With Auntie Ellen and Grandma Yeh! I don’t want to go!’

Suyin used to be a quiet child. I was worried that she never talked to me about school or her friends. ‘I don’t have any!’ she said when I asked her last year, although I knew it wasn’t true. Her teacher had reported she was a popular student. Now she’d become loud and assertive. I almost wished she hadn’t changed.

‘What do I call Chester?’ she had asked me the first time he was taking her alone to a movie.

‘Call him “Chester”.’ I knew she was asking me a different kind of question. Like I had let my husband Henry discover Suyin for himself, I let Suyin discover Chester. If she had asked me directly I would have told her.
Perhaps I am more Chinese than I know. Writing about stocks and shares is easy. It is all that murky everyday stuff — relationships, feelings, what’s there and not there, love, guilt — that I leave unspoken.

I didn’t ask Suyin what she and Chester talked about, what they did, what she thought about finding her father at the age of eleven. Let Chester carry the weight of their relationship!

All right, Port Dickson is not everyone’s idea of a holiday, but it is nicer than St. John’s Island, and we can all go without much fuss, because none of us have given up our Malaysian passports.

‘I’ll get around to it,’ I told Sonny Ang when he pushed for me to change to a Singapore national. National identity is the kind of information that seems important when exchange securities are discussed, he said, and the shareholders are concerned about where my loyalties are as editor of BioSyn-Sign.

‘Aren’t you still an Australian citizen?’ I asked.

‘Catty, catty!’ he mocked. ‘But Australian has more cachet than Malaysian, you know.’ Sonny never worries about being superior. He simply enjoys the condition. He’s good with the Board of Directors. He knows their every social-climbing impulse and beats them at it.

Most Friday nights Sonny comes by the office in a tuxedo with a red or white cummerband, his hair slicked down with perfumed pompadour, on his way to some charity function or art-gallery opening. Bi-Syn’s own mambo-band-leader, I tease him. He likes boys more than women, some kinds of women more than others, but that is the kind of information that doesn’t count on the balance-sheets.

‘Lay your sleeping head, my love, human on my faithless arm.’ None of the British lecturers at the University of Malaya had told us about W. H. Auden and his Chester when we were studying Contemporary Poetry, and all that time I believed Auden was writing about men and women. For a long time I thought faithless Auden was speaking to me, that Chester and Auden were one male voice, one male body, betraying my desire. Then when I read Auden’s letters to Chester I was confused. It may have been the first time I saw how I had betrayed Henry, whom I had never loved. I had believed love and faithfulness to be the same. Without love, how could I have been unfaithful to my husband?

But in Malaysia it is husbands, not lovers, who are open to betrayal. And Chester, that name I had found so profoundly and remotely American? Like me, Auden had also loved a Chester. Now I imagine his Chester to be a small nervous envious alcoholic to whom Auden had addressed some of the most moving lines in the English language. Auden and Chester were lovers. My Chester was only a passing body. Or I was only a passing body to him, a handgrip, a spasm, an unmemorable memory. If I had not read Auden’s poetry, perhaps that was all Chester would have been for me also.

Now, Suyin forms the only chain between us.
I had her despite everything that made her impossible. I believed a child was
born to you, not of you. I did not think that Henry would not love her. Had I,
morning-sick then heavily pregnant, been slightly crazy? I deluded myself that it
made no difference and Henry need never know. It was easier to slide with the
days and months, till on February 13, 1970, exactly nine months to the day if
one was counting — an improbability the gynaecologist had said, to have a first
baby exactly nine months after conception, it usually waited and waited,
refusing the world — six months after I last saw Chester, the water broke and
although she did not want to come out, there she was, cut loose, with those long
fringed green eyes, almost blue at first.

What if she had been born with dark brown eyes like mine instead? Would
Henry have allowed himself to love her? Green un-Chinese eyes, no Yeh of
mine. He did not have to say it. When he came up to my bed, I saw immediately
he had been crying. I watched him cry quietly for the first time at Ah Pah’s
funeral after the curfew was lifted. This time he must have cried at another
death. I must have hurt him so badly that he never wanted to see me again.

‘Dadah kills!’ The anti-dmg posters are plastered over the concrete pillars
behind which the border guards are talking. The Causeway immigration police
are even more hostile this Saturday. The two men go through our bags as if
looking for smuggled swimsuits and towels.

Ellen had said we should bring along tins of ham. ‘Hello, oink, oink!’ That
would get us through without stressful pawing. But I wouldn’t do it. After all, I
respect Abdullah and Samad. Nasty immigration officers were simply nasty, not
because they were Muslims, I argued.

‘Mom, are they looking for something?’ Suyin wrinkles her nose when they
dig right down to the bottom of her duffel.

‘Yes, heroin, cocaine, amphetamines, opium, marijuana, dadah! Avon
lipstick, Brecks Shampoo, Maidenform bra, Elizabeth Arden compact, Cadbury
Chocolates, Newsweek....’

I stick Ellen in the rib to shut her up. They hear her mocking voice and shake
out the car-mats, determined to find something. Then they lose interest and
wander off to the car behind. But we have to wait until one of them remembers
to wave us on.

‘Terima kaseh!’ I say loudly as Ellen puts the car into gear.

‘Ah, so rush!’ Grandma Yeh mutters in the back-seat, skeins of wool on her
lap.

Suyin had reminded her that she got car-sick each time she tried knitting on
a trip, but Grandma Yeh wouldn’t leave her work behind.

‘Nothing to do in Port Dickson,’ she declared, ‘only look at waves and
casuarinas. Cannot swim, and not good to walk in sun. So I must have my
knitting!’

‘But sand, sand, sand...’ Suyin had pointed out.
I don’t worry Grandma Yeh will have a hard time keeping sand out of her woollies — she is meticulous in everything, including keeping wool separate from sand.

In Suyin’s *World Atlas* Port Dickson and Singapore appear barely a finger-tip apart. The Esso road map is more accurate, showing new winding lines — first-class roadways — nailed down to towns. Muar, Ayer Keroh, Melaka.

Finding a toilet for Grandma Yeh is difficult. She’s sixty-one, not old by today’s standards, but as a recluse she has grown almost un-toilet-trained. The few times she travels with us we calculate distances by toilet need and access. And we cannot stop at the urine-drenched pits in the petrol kiosks. Instead we call ahead for coffee-shops in the air-conditioned hotels for Western tourists. Suyin accompanies Grandma to the fresh dry restrooms of Merlin, Emperor, and the Riveria while Ellen and I order coffee.

It is almost sunset by the time we arrive at the Casuarinas Resort. When Henry first took me there it had wooden cabins and a small swimming pool. Now the cabins have been replaced by cottages with thick pagoda-style attap roofs, carved lintels, and batik curtains drawn over wall-sized sliding doors, and the giant swimming pool shimmers like an up-turned blue bowl in which near-naked captive mermaids stroke their languorous arms. We decide who shares the two interconnecting bedrooms with twin beds in each, and Grandma will not share with Ellen.

‘Aiyah, must we have air-conditioning?’ Ellen is looking for the sunblock when the hum starts up.

‘It’s Grandma Yeh, you know she’s suspicious of Malaysian air.’

‘Singapore is better?’ Ellen and Grandma Yeh are friends only in relation to Suyin. The two of them co-operate to make sure she never misses having a family.

I don’t argue. ‘Let’s get down to the pool.’

Suyin carries the hotel beach chair for Grandma Yeh from the pool to under the casuarinas. The trees are as tall as I remembered, their low sweeping branches green-piney fragrant, and the earth around them covered with brown needles. I have brought thongs to walk under the casuarinas.

‘Really, Mom!’ Suyin says when I hug the patchy trunk, the rough bark grating against my arms.

Grandma Yeh settles into the chair. Pearl and chain, pearl and chain. She looks as restful as anyone’s grandma.

I go into the pool where Ellen is already doing her breast-stroke laps. She swims vigorously, brown arms like flashing chopsticks devouring the distances. Back and forth, back and forth, a frothing beast upsetting the equilibrium of the evening. Everyone else has packed off for tea or to get away from this sudden churning torpedo. I watch the sunshine slip over my body in the shallow end like liquid colour. Suyin wanders to the beach, an empty jam jar in hand, to pick the miniature whorled shells for which Port Dickson is noted.
Ellen’s white swim-cap bobs beside me. ‘Have you told Suyin anything about Chester?’ Her voice burbles with water like a mermaid’s just come to land.

‘She knows.’

‘But have you told her?’ She ducks her head into the shimmering pool, then raises it alert, for my answer.

‘No.’

Splashing her arms, she blows a jet of bubbles. ‘Now, why does that not surprise me?’

‘Because you know I am a coward.’ I look away from the pool. So much glittering light!

‘Not true. You can be a tough lady.’ She stands up beside me, the water slapping at her chest. ‘But you can’t be tough with Chester. Or Suyin.’

‘You know I haven’t spent any time with Chester.’ I’m anxious about Suyin walking alone on the beach. But I am also anxious about leaving Ellen with the wrong impression.

‘It’s what you feel that counts, isn’t it? I don’t know why he should matter to you after all these years. After all, he’s married, he seems to have gone on with his life. Now he wants to meet his daughter, but you aren’t in the picture, right?’

Water is dripping from her hair under the cap into her eyes. Ellen never swims with goggles. ‘Cannot. Must see where I am going, even under water!’ she joked to Suyin who had offered her her goggles.

I squint at the beach, searching for Suyin. Five foot five and a half at eleven years old. She should be easily visible. Is she wearing the Chinese straw hat Ellen had bought at the Riveria lobby this afternoon? It is the Australians who like the conical peasant hats, too coolie for Malaysians. Suyin had wanted one immediately. She has no idea of Chinese sentiment.

‘If I were you,’ Ellen says, then pauses.

I look for the tall hat. It is moving up the beach toward the casuarinas. She must have gotten tired of picking shells.

‘I would talk seriously to Suyin. Tell her about the May 13th riots. The trauma. How much you love her and how Chester is simply a minor player in her life. Of course it’s good he is finally taking an interest in her existence, but he’s leaving after his research is over. You don’t want her to be upset when he goes, do you?’

The watery sunshine is beginning to lull me. My body tilts, rocking, half-afloat.

No one has ever told me why or when I was conceived, whether in passion or duty. Was it on a daily bed, smelling of bedbugs and long dried sweat? Or on the grass in the park, late at night, after the football players, peanut vendors, other murmuring couples had left, when the heavy tropical dew was condensing like a protective mist over their inventive bodies? The beginning of my life is wrapped in silence, in sacred ignorance, as is everyone’s I know. I want Suyin to be no different from other children; her birth no freakish accident to be explained. She will arrive at her father’s significance by herself, and if she is to be hurt by him, she will make a meaning for herself out of that hurt. My hair
floats around me and air bubbles gurgle as I lie back. The water feels cool and warm all at the same time.

‘If Suyin were my daughter,’ Ellen says, ‘I wouldn’t be so relaxed. I would jaga her happiness like, like....’

Ellen stops talking.

I remember Suyin in her white snake costume. It had hurt me to watch the play. The parents laughed as she slithered on stage just as Mrs. Weng had taught her. ‘Crawl on your elbows, left, then right, and squirm from your waist down!’

Suyin had practiced on the living room floor. ‘See, my elbows are dusty, Mom! On the stage more dirtier. So black I must wash in the smelly toilet after rehearsal!’

She had quickly discovered that wriggling her body got her attention from the boys. In Singapore Suyin will never be Chinese. She will never be the lead actress. And she will learn to enjoy the eyes of the boys as her body moved, sinuously exaggerated.

The sky is burning orange bruised with purple. I close my eyes. Soon it will be sprinkled with spots, a dusk that is never totally black. The surge of the waves whooshes dully yards away, and Suyin’s cries seem like the sharing of seabirds above the water’s rhythm.

**Suyin**

If I had stayed with Grandma like she wanted me to, she would have been all right.

‘Get another chair and sit with me.’ She was arranging the green and yellow balls so the skeins would pull up together smoothly once the needles began jabbing sideways and in and out.

I liked sitting with Grandma, she was so peaceful, not like Auntie Ellen or Mom who never stopped moving. But I never wanted to sit close to her when she knitted. I was afraid one of the long needles would jab me some day, and she would be so engrossed with the pattern she wouldn’t notice the blood bleeding all over me. Jab, jab.

‘No,’ I said, ‘I want to look for shells.’

Grandma stopped fussing with the wool to stare at me. I knew I was being rude; *boh tuah, boh suay*, Auntie Ellen would have said, neither big nor small. Not knowing my place, which is the smallest in the family, although it seemed funny to hear her say that now because I am taller than all of them.

Usually I would have gone back to sit with Grandma. She was pathetic the way she needed someone around all the time for company. Mom said she had a fright a long time ago, before I was born — some hooligans who had broken into her house and killed Grandpa Yeh — and she had never been able to be alone since then. So she needed a minder — an amah — when I was in school, otherwise she worried no end.

But I was careful not to get out of sight. I stayed right by the water where I knew she could see me even if I wasn’t looking at her. I could not think when Grandma was clicking her needles, clicking like those beetles we found in the
old library books. Click, click, click, click. Deathwatch beetles, so called because they munch up books, the Biology teacher told us, more interesting to study than termites that only eat wood.

I kept right on picking up the pink and purple shells. The nicest biggest ones always seemed to have hermit crabs still in them. Click, click, click. I could hear Grandma’s needles as I dropped the shells into the marmalade jar. After a while the clicks were making me crazy. I shook out all the shells and left those with the hermits on the water’s edge. I couldn’t see bringing dead hermit crabs back to Singapore. I picked through the rest. Most were not pretty — colourless, broken or so tiny they weren’t worth keeping. But the sand felt good on my bottom after those hours in the car keeping my mouth shut about Auntie Ellen’s wild driving.

Although I had complained when Mom suggested coming to Port Dickson I must admit I had a good time on the way. Auntie Ellen concentrated on the driving — so many timber lorries and speeding taxis on the road! Mad, Mad! she kept muttering every few minutes — and Grandma fell asleep, so I looked out and had some very good ideas for my class play.

Mrs. Weng had said that even if I couldn’t act I had good dramatic sense and maybe I could try writing a play instead. But so many things to include! Costumes, short speech, long speech, characters’ names, staging, must have love interest, action cannot be too crazy, exits and entrances. Really, finally, what to say.

First, I wanted to write about the school bullies: make fun of Poon and Hong who always say bad things about me. But after meeting Chester, I stopped hating them. Chester said they were just narrow-minded mean kids.

‘Chester wants me to go to New York,’ I told Mom last week. I didn’t know what to expect. Sometimes she’d cry at nothing, sometimes she’d be laughing when I’d be crying.

She didn’t say anything, just kept stirring the Ovaltine for me. ‘Do we have the money?’

Money, Mom keeps telling me, is why we are in Singapore instead of Malaysia. ‘All I want is a home somewhere,’ she’d sing in a horrible flat key, then add, ‘Singapore is home!’

‘Singapore is money and home,’ I reminded her the last time she sang it.

But she ignored me and continued singing, ‘Far awayiii from the cauld night aiii.’ She isn’t funny even when she tries.

I don’t believe her anymore when she talks about money because I saw a Malaysian bank statement for Grandma Yeh which had seven figures in it. That’s over a million. Even in Malaysian ringitt, I think it means that we can live in Malaysia if we want to — if Mom wants to, because she makes all the decisions for us.

There must be some other reason why we are in Singapore. I think it is because we are all women, four women and no man. Grandma said we live in
Singapore because we feel safe there, but I know Mom and Auntie Ellen are afraid of nothing.

I took the cup of Ovaltine from her and asked politely, ‘If we have the money, can I go?’

‘There are savings for your university fees, and Grandma Yeh’s medical bills are getting higher…’

I didn’t want her to keep lying so I turned on the television set, and for once she didn’t tell me to listen to her instead of watching tv.

All mothers control their daughters, Auntie Ellen tells me, but I have three mothers, with Grandma and Auntie Ellen always backing Mom.

Chester told me about his wife, Meryl. She’s a big shot in the New York City Parks and she doesn’t want to be a mother. Why is it that American men marry big-shot women, but in Singapore men are afraid of women like Mom and Auntie Ellen?

New York is much larger than Singapore. It even has a Chinatown, Chester says, although I won’t be interested in visiting it. It can’t be as big as People’s Park. But I can stay with Chester and Meryl for two months, during the school holidays; Chester says Meryl has invited me, and wants to show me where she works and everything. He sounded really excited about my going with him.

Then I noticed that the sun was sinking like a giant egg into the sea, and suddenly I realised I couldn’t hear the needles clicking and I was alone on the beach. All the other children had gone back to the hotel for dinner. I looked for Grandma. She was still sitting on the beach chair under the shade of the casuarinas, except the shade was now so large I could only see her shadow. Perhaps she had fallen asleep, I thought guiltily, knowing how she hated to be alone. Then I remembered that Grandma could never fall asleep when she was alone and I ran toward the trees, frightened.

It is Mom who tells me she is dead, although she still looks like she is simply closing her eyes from the glare of the sunset. I stay behind with Auntie Ellen and Mom goes with Grandma in the ambulance to the hospital. It feels like a play, only I have not written it — Mom climbing up the back of the ambulance, and Grandma on the stretcher with a sheet covering her face. I would never write a play like that.

Auntie Ellen has gathered Grandma’s balls of wool; they are full of sand and brown casuarina needles. I had dropped my jar and shells on the beach but it is too dark to look for them, and we have to pack. No one wants to stay here. Tomorrow morning we are driving home and Grandma’s body will follow us in a lorry sent up by the Singapore Casket Company.

‘If I had stayed with her like she wanted me to, Grandma would have been all right,’ I cried as Mom was searching for Grandma’s identity card in the room, while the hotel doctor was waiting for the ambulance to fetch Grandma from under the casuarinas. Mom had this white colour in her face; shock, Auntie
Ellen called it, although it seemed like a determined and faraway look. She had to make a police report, call Singapore for funeral arrangements, re-organise her staff meeting for Monday, contact lawyers and Grandma’s relatives in Kuala Lumpur. She didn’t comfort me.

Auntie Ellen and I wait alone a long time for Mom to return from the hospital.

‘You’ll be getting Grandma Yeh’s assets when you become eighteen,’ Auntie Ellen whispers, sitting up in my bed and brushing my hair. ‘Then you can leave Singapore if you wish.’

I am getting drowsy as the brush eases through my hair, up then down, up then down, and I remember Mom singing her lullabies. I see Chester like a wind-up toy flying in the wild tornado to America; he’s growing smaller and smaller, and my eyes close.