

LIONS IN WINTER

Wena Poon was born in Singapore and moved to the United States when she was seventeen. Her fiction and poetry have been widely published and, as a freelance journalist, she wrote for publications such as *Film Quarterly*, *Marie Claire* and *The Straits Times*. In 2008, *Lions In Winter* was listed for the International Frank O'Connor Award in Ireland and the Singapore Literature Prize. She holds degrees in English Literature and Law from Harvard and is a practising attorney.

WENA
POON

lions
in
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LONDON

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To my grandmother, Yeo Ah Siak, the first raconteur I knew.

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PREFACE

In Singapore, someone who leaves the country is said to have “migrated”. Ours is a sparse language—evidently, nobody saw the need to say “emigrated”. Too many syllables. But more importantly, the emphasis is on the idea of *migration*—to leave and settle down elsewhere, never to return.

In mainland China, they call people who leave China *hai gui*, which is translated roughly as “overseas-return”. They are the “returnees”—young Chinese men and women who go to the West for a college degree and then come back to build their society. It is a word pun, for it also means “sea turtle.”

Sea turtles don’t migrate. They exhibit *philopatry*, from the Greek *philo* (“love”) and *patris* (“fatherland”). They hatch, swim out into the wild tides of the vast ocean, and come back from time to time to their old nesting grounds.

I migrated from Singapore to the United States when I was 17, leaving one of England’s smallest former colonies for her largest. Despite liking the rough tumble of ocean waves, I regularly swim back for the shore. I have been a little philopatric.

During my travels, I began writing a series of love letters—masquerading as short stories—to Singapore. Written in the English language, they were published by Asian literary journals and anthologies and eventually collected in book form by MPH, a Malaysian publisher, in 2007.

The Salt edition is the first time these stories are reaching the wider English-reading public. Although written for my compatriots, these stories have appealed to people of different nationalities and ethnicities. If you are not living in the small town or even the country of your birth—and especially if you display philopatric tendencies—I hope you enjoy this volume. Leaving, after all, is never really goodbye.

WENA POON, Austin, Texas
September 2009

ADDICTION

HE WROTE THE WORD on the very first page of the new notebook he had purchased from Liberty's on Regent Street. He watched as the ink sank gently into the creamy smooth paper.

It was a strange word. If you stared at it long enough, you started doubting if it was actually spelled that way. Weren't there too many "d"s?

Addiction.

When he first came to England, he had a thick Singaporean accent. Over time, he sanded it down patiently until it lost its outlines and merged into the pea soup mix of London accents that the immigrant community—including the Tibetan carpet-seller downstairs—had acquired.

A "faint British accent." A decision to pronounce vowels long rather than short, like they did in America. When he first came to England, he had difficulty pronouncing the word "edited." He worked in the student newspaper, and they used to laugh.

"I edited your piece yesterday," he would say.

"Eh-dited! Eh-dited!" laughed the reporter. "Not uh-dit-ed! It sounds like you're addicted to something."

The professor in a poetry class he had attended said it was difficult for Alistair to grasp things like iambic pentameter.

"It is a curiosity among the Singaporean and Malaysian students," said Professor Henley. "They can never hear the beat. Ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum. They pronounce all the words with an even stress on every syllable."

Yeah, thanks for referring to me in the third person, right in front of me, scowled Alistair, writing the word again and again on the page.

Addiction. Ah-dick-shion.

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Well, he took care of his accent. He was shy; he didn't want to stand out in London. He felt that as long as he spoke with his native accent, the people in London would never get over it so as to actually hear what he was saying. And he had a lot to say, a lot to do, during his time there. So he practiced. If Gwyneth Paltrow could do it, so could he. He spent long evenings shut up in his room in the bedsit, reading out passages from Charles Dickens, imitating all the voices in the dialogue parts. When he got excited, his accent slipped back to Singaporean, but otherwise he was able to maintain an even keel on the British accent. A curious thing, the Singaporean accent. Back in Singapore, he felt sorry for the newscasters who seemed to be fighting, with each enunciated word, an inner battle of epic proportions. To be true to oneself, and speak like everybody else on the street, or to fake a British accent. They always compromised horribly.

When Alistair spoke to his parents, or when he was back in Singapore, he reverted to his Singaporean accent. His parents must not suspect that he had changed in any way. His parents called him regularly, every Saturday. They said his sister was getting married. Super achiever Yvette was going to marry this lawyer kid from Cambridge.

"His father works for the Chief Justice of Singapore," said his mum.

"So? His father isn't the Chief Justice," said Alistair.

"Yes, but he *works for* the Chief Justice."

Alistair marveled at his middle class family's complicated schemes for social advancement.

"Why don't you just cut to the chase and have Yvette marry the Chief Justice himself?"

"You are always talking nonsense. Your father is asking, how are your medical studies?"

"Fine."

"When are you going to send your report card home?"

"Mum, there is no 'report card' for you to sign, I'm not a kid anymore." Alistair was exasperated. His parents never made it past secondary school; when referring to his university life, they still used words like "report card" and "principal" and "teacher".

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“I just want to make sure you are doing well, because we paid that seventy-five *kay* bond for you to the Singapore government,” said his mum. She liked to say “kay” for “thousand”. As in, “I paid two *kay* for that diamond ring.” It was a habit that irritated him. It was a sign of barbarism, he decided. A barbaric attitude towards money, that reduced something vast to a small, inconsequential syllable.

She wanted him to be back for the holidays. He braced himself for their usual fight, but this time she introduced a new controversy. He had just met up with her friend’s daughter two days ago. Aunty Somebody’s sister’s daughter’s ex-schoolmate, who was also studying in London. Because of the prevailing belief that young Singaporeans who happen to be studying in the same town must naturally want to meet up, his mother suggested that the girl call on him at his bedsit, which he rented from an elderly English couple. Alistair proposed that they meet at Starbucks, but it was overruled. His mother wanted the girl to visit his flat. There was something illicit about the way his mother forced the girl upon her. Later, he realized why. The girl reported back to his mother. She had been sent as a spy.

“She says your flat smells of smoke. And marijuana.”

Alistair did not respond immediately. Then he laughed.

“Oh my God! How does she know what marijuana smells like? I don’t even know.”

“That’s what I thought,” said his mother brightly. “I thought more likely she was using it herself, the silly slut! Accusing my son of dabbling in drugs.” The penalty for the possession of marijuana in Singapore was death; it was an unknown quotient in that country. Ecstasy, yes. Marijuana, hash, cocaine, no. The stubborn minority of society that in the West has always used recreational drugs since (and before) Thomas de Quincey wrote *Confessions of an Opium Eater* did not exist in Singapore. Look into the dark corners, and you will find nothing, thought Alistair. Drugs were not a big issue. Sex was not a big issue. A lot of things were just—blip, zilch, zero. Never arose in normal conversation. Don’t go there. Ain’t happening. Nope.

He took out his usual plastic bag of grass.

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“The smoke comes in from the flat next door. A bunch of English guys, they smoke a lot. Comes in from under the door.” He rolled a spliff and lit it. He smoked and listened as his mother droned on.

“What kind of people do you live next door to? Criminals? Prostitutes?”

He assured her that his building in Islington was crammed full of respectable folk. His landlord was a retired firefighter and his wife volunteered at the church. That seemed to calm his mother down. She was not Christian, but she had a very Chinese respect for Western institutionalized religion, which she associated with great self-cultivation and learning. Her distrust of white people could often be tempered down if Alistair chose to say that they were “good Christians.” Unfortunately, it was too late for him to redeem his grass-smoking neighbors.

“You better be careful, Alistair. I heard that it is highly dangerous to even inhale marijuana smoke from someone else. Even if they are next door, you might become addicted!” his mother fretted. “That’s why your father is so worried about you being over there by yourself. We can’t watch over you. You’re a boy, so we’re not as worried about you as when Yvette went over there, but you have to be extra careful. Lock your door at night, and don’t get into lifts with any whites or blacks.”

That would mean never ever getting to use any lifts, he thought. He told her not to worry and listened to her plans for a party to celebrate his next visit to Singapore. He was tired, and he still had to finish his student project. He dug his mobile phone out of his pocket and called his own telephone number. When the beeps came through, he said, “Oops, I have to go. Someone’s calling in.”

“Who is calling so late?”

Alistair drew a deep hit and considered.

“Mum, you know I share this phone with my landlord. It might be someone for them.”

She relented and hung up. Until next week, Mum, he thought silently. He looked at the telephone, hating it. The telephone was a tool

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of oppression, a long-distance cudgel that his parents used to remind him that he may be far away but was not yet free. He thought about changing the number. It had grown so bad that the skin at the back of his neck would tingle whenever it rang. His heart would race. If he didn't pick it up, his mother would go berserk. Horrible thoughts would crowd her vision. Once, she said she contacted the London police because she had called and called and left many messages over the course of a day but couldn't get hold of him. It was when he was over at Brian's flat. That had been a horrible day, and of course the last thing he wanted to do was to talk to his parents. He had fallen into a hole so deep, he was lying in Brian's bed, crying his heart out into the dark blue flannel sheets. He was in a place where nobody, not even Brian, could touch, let alone his parents. The thought of their utter irrelevance to his problems made him cry even harder.

"I just can't do it anymore, man," said Brian. "I'm broke. It's too damn expensive in London."

"I could get a job up north," said Alistair.

"What about school? You're graduating next year."

"I can transfer."

"Forget it, you're in the best design school in Britain. You're going to make it big, Alistair. You might get hired by a big shot. What are you going to design in Manchester? Football uniforms?" Brian stroked his head. "You can come visit me anytime. You know where my old man lives."

But for a long time, Alistair lay naked in bed, refusing to get up. He couldn't believe that they had just discussed breaking up. He watched as Brian pulled on his favorite T-shirt, some obscure northern band that Alistair had never heard of. He called it Brian's "stupid band T-shirt".

Later, when hunger got the better of them, they went to a somber little Chinese restaurant round the corner. They were the only customers.

"You ever heard of Annabelle Chong?" asked Alistair.

Brian shook his head.

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“She starred in some big gang-bang movie. She broke records for having sex with the most men.”

“So?”

“She’s from my sister Yvette’s high school in Singapore. Sweet kid. Came over here, got gang-raped. Big shame, couldn’t tell her parents, couldn’t face her society. Ended up being the biggest Asian porn star in cinematic history.”

“God.”

Alistair laughed mirthlessly. “I feel like her sometimes.”

Brian smiled and gave him a shove under the table. “What, like I gang-banged you? You going to be a porn star?”

“No. Not quite. I mean I can probably see how she just ended up, you know,” Alistair’s voice trailed off as he looked out at the traffic beyond the windows of the restaurant. “Spiraling down.”



When he realized, two months into the term, that there was no way he was going to study medicine, he switched to textile and fashion design. A year later, at the encouragement of his professor, he transferred himself out of the university that his parents thought he was enrolled in, and got into the top fashion design college in London. He was the only Asian student in his program, and for all he knew the only Singaporean who ever made it this far. Unlike Yvette’s honors from Cambridge in Law, however, Alistair’s advancement could not be made known to his parents, and could not be celebrated. There were only two professions that the Tan family thought was suitable for their children: being a doctor, or a lawyer. Men who went into fashion, whether as models or designers, were *Ah Kwa*, the Chinese epithet for “transvestite.” As a Chinese man you were not required to be particularly macho—there were few expectations of great physical strength or an excellence in sports—but swing too far in the other direction, and you might as well have had a sex change operation.

There was an *Ah Kwa* in Alistair’s extended family, a distant relative.

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The man's family refused to speak to him and claimed that his condition was caused by a swimming accident in which he nearly drowned. "The shock was too much," said Alistair's mother by way of explanation whenever the topic arose. "It affected his brain."

When Alistair left Singapore, his parents had cautioned him, "Don't associate too much with white people. They are all addicted to sex and drugs. London in particular is full of *Ah Kwas*. Be careful, otherwise they will drag you into their habits. You will be influenced." His mother would have loved to seal Alistair up in a Zip-Loc bag before exporting him if she could, so that he did not bring home any nasty influences. As much as she loved to tell her relatives that her son was studying in the UK, it was expected that he was only to bring home the prestigious title of a UK medical degree, and none of the "other stuff": drugs, sex, homosexuality, divorces.

Ah Kwa, wrote Alistair in his notebook. Or was it spelled, *Ah Gua*? Then, under it, he wrote, *dirty. Dirty Dirty Dirty.*

At his first fashion show, Alistair bungled horribly. They were asked to explore a personal theme. Alistair naively drew from his heritage. He hand-dyed batiks in plastic buckets in his tiny bedroom and bathroom for weeks. His landlord was unhappy. His nails were permanently dyed red, like those of a Malay bride.

When the day came, he watched his models parade down the catwalk in his batik designs, and was overwhelmed with anger. He was stupid, stupid, thinking he could pander to his Asian background. They just looked like cocktail waitresses. They looked like air stewardesses. His designs looked cheap. He saw what the other students had designed. There was nothing he could design that could beat the sheer, studied sophistication of what they were doing. He felt he could never catch up.

Once again he resented the pretty little world in which he had grown up. The flat symmetry of Singapore; the clever, cautious people. None of his London classmates were pretend medical students. Many, in fact, came from artistic backgrounds. One of them was the son of Lady Somebody or other, who had been a powerful editor at British

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Vogue in the fifties. The boy grew up in a mansion with rose trellises in Barbados and collected eighteenth-century French antiques. Alistair grew up in a public housing estate in Singapore and did not see the inside of a museum until he was sixteen. His parents' idea of style was non-crinkle polyester clothes from Japanese department stores. He was light years behind, he told himself furiously.

And yet he always had an innate sense of style. As a child, against the wishes of his parents, he had drawn and drawn and excelled in art classes. His parents accused him of being a "dreamer." He had an instinctive grasp of the human form and its infinite variations. Above all, he had always been in love with painting and sculpture. He gravitated towards Western art because he never saw much Asian art growing up. It was a question of exposure. When he visited Paris with his parents, he clamored to see the Louvre. His parents waited for him at the gift shop, then derided him petulantly for wanting to see so many paintings of "naked women."

"Now I know why you want to come here," said his father, holding up a guide book of the Louvre's collection. The cover showed a seventeenth century painting of the Muses, their breasts bared. His father said in Chinese dialect, in case the other tourists heard: "These Western women, they always had great tits, huh?"

Alistair was utterly humiliated. Little blue-frosted French school-girls trickled past him on their day trip to the museum, listening to their enthusiastic teacher go on about the life of Eugene Delacroix. His mother was tight-lipped and said that young children should not be exposed to so much nudity. "Look at our Chinese art," she said to no one in particular.

In London, Alistair put up a huge poster of the Sistine Chapel ceiling over his bed. He went to sleep among Michelangelo's sybils. He wanted to design something that was completely celebratory of the physical form. He went to the British Museum and pondered among Venuses. So much of what he saw in other students' designs was bitter. Bitter, holocaustic, self-referential, deconstructive. He had to do something different. When he slept, he dreamed hard.

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In the end, Alistair chose happiness. He sent out his models in diaphanous silk dresses, each painstakingly micro-pleated so that they clung, sinuously, to breasts and hips. All the dresses were soft pink. The straps and buckles were made with silver thread and hand-sewn paste diamonds. His models went barefooted. He called the collection *Iphigenia at Aulis*. He created an uproar. “Flapper meets Grecian wood nymph,” said the student newspaper. His faculty advisers were happy: “Beautifully sewn. Well done.” The models were happy. They wanted to keep the dresses. They begged. He met a buyer from Brown’s, and he hadn’t even graduated.

He met Brian, who worked at a nearby student pub. They started going to a lot of museums together, because it was free and because London was cold. Brian played the electric guitar and wrote music. They collaborated for one of the student shows. They didn’t get paid, but got good reviews.

Alistair couldn’t remember when he realized he was gay, only that he was surprised that he didn’t feel uncomfortable when he fell in love. The rest was easy. When you are in love with someone, bodies fall away. It was not true that you would always get hurt when you are naked, he thought. He never thought about telling his parents. After all, they always pretended they never had sex, that he and his sister came by stork. They belonged to a different world. He didn’t tell his sister, Yvette, because he knew she would make him feel ashamed. She was the kind of Singaporean girl who put the name of her church on her C.V. It was important that one went to the right country club; the right church. But even at the right church, things happen. Someone at her church came out of the closet years ago. Big story. Their parents took out an advertisement in the papers disclaiming future family ties with their son. The pastor prepared a special sermon.

“I cannot fucking believe it,” said Brian, looking at him with serious dark eyes. “An advert in a paper, you say.”

“I guess I don’t care,” said Alistair, gluing another paste diamond on a sandal. “But I just don’t want to cause any trouble. I just can’t stand drama. Here, are you going to help me or not? I’ll never finish

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these sandals in time.”

Brian helped him cut designs, bead borders, mix dyes. When winter came, they made angels in the snow and baked Toad-in-a-Hole. They lay on the carpet listening to CDs. They made love. Alistair never felt so accompanied in his life. It was his first love, he was bursting with happiness, but he couldn't share it with his family. He felt that if he didn't tell somebody about Brian he would die. There was a cousin who lived in America, whom he knew was not close to his parents. She had married a Caucasian, and they disapproved of her. Alistair had her email address, and asked for her telephone number. He called her over Christmas. It was an experiment, his first “coming out of the closet” conversation.

“Wow.” she said. “Wow.”

He was very nervous.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

He assured her.

“Are you seeing someone?”

He told her about Brian.

“Oh, Alistair. You know, I'm happy for you. Love is hard to find, whatever form it comes in. You have my full support.”

Alistair clung to the phone receiver, suddenly wanting very much to cry. “You don't think I'm weird or anything, do you?” he asked, sounding like a small boy.

She said no.

“Why not?” he asked, wishing that she was his mother.

She laughed. “Well, I'm a grad student and a Resident Advisor in a college dormitory of about 500 young men and women. You know how I got this RA job? I had to audition for it, and part of the test was a mock scenario where a student comes up to me and says she is thinking about coming out of the closet. I had to demonstrate that I was able to handle this type of situation, otherwise I'm not fit to be an advisor. They take it seriously over here. We get counselor training. You can say I'm a bit of a veteran. That's why I asked you if you are sure. Some people aren't sure, and it can be a very painful struggle. But you seem to

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have gone past that. I'm relieved. And you know, it's becoming easier and easier now. You will still have to fight, but you will find more people who understand you than say, ten, twenty years ago."

Alistair could hardly believe that there was a place where people were counseled to handle homosexuals with kid gloves. A place where, perhaps, schoolchildren were sent to revere the naked breasts of the Venus de Milo, and there was no shame. Was this a corrupt society, or an enlightened one? He wanted to laugh. He wanted to know if his cousin had the magic bullet, if she could counsel him on the parental angle, but she didn't.

"Why don't you just take it one day at a time." said Joan. "I would advise against doing it over the phone. They feel powerless, far away. You are in a magic forest. They can't reach you. Their natural instinct would be to drag you out of it at once, to protect you. You might not want that."



When summer came, Brian moved back to Manchester. Although they had broken up, they raked up huge phone bills calling each other. Alistair worked on his graduation show. His parents were very excited about his graduation and impending return to Singapore. His father said that he had spoken to Yvette's father-in-law, who introduced him to the head surgeon at the National University Hospital, who told him that Alistair could get a residency the instant he came home.

"I've had it all set up, don't worry," said his father. "And by the way, I've invested in a town and country club membership for you. The town club is near your hospital. So you can use it to play tennis at lunch time. On weekends you can go swim and play golf in the country club. It cost me over one hundred *kay*, but I think it's really worth it."

Golf. Alistair wrote in his notebook. Golf, Folf, Tolf. Golf.

He was buried in designs for his graduation show. He took up an interest in costume design, and talked to his faculty advisers about

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getting a gig for a theater or a movie production company. He went to a production of *Romeo and Juliet* by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and wrote a piece in the student newspaper saying that “costumes should not just be a prop expense in a Shakespearean production. *Who is making these god-awful clothes?*” He volunteered to do the costumes for a small theater group which was ambitiously putting up a John Webster play. So he doubled his workload that summer and was smoking himself silly. Hash calmed him.

“I really should stop,” he giggled on the phone to Brian, crumbling hash into cigarette paper. “I might become *addicted*.” It was not true, of course: Alistair discovered that he could smoke marijuana and tobacco, on and off, without particularly being enslaved by either. But he was on a downward spiral; he liked to think of his habits as addictive. “You know, I know people in Singapore who are addicted to golf. Isn’t it funny. I prefer being addicted to hash. It’s cheaper. More convenient, too. You can’t play golf while watching something on the telly. Or after sex.”

“Alistair, you’re pissed.”

“I just came back from the pub with the lads.”

“Are you working on your show? It’s next week.”

“I am. Maybe.” Alistair waived his joint over the piles and piles of paper, the Polaroids on the walls. “I think I have over-committed myself. And the folks back in Singapore are talking about setting me up at the local hospital. Brain surgeon! I’m a fashion designer, for fuck’s sake! And you know what? My mum. She’s planning a big party to celebrate my graduation. No, no, in *Singapore*. She’s not coming *here*. She’ll *never* come here. And she says, she is going to introduce me to somebody’s daughter, some *stupid cow*, who went to Yvette’s secondary school.”

“Alistair.” Brian raised his voice warily. “You have to tell them the truth.”

Alistair screamed. He stamped his feet against the wall. Drawings fluttered to the ground.

“You have to, sooner or later. They must be made to understand.”

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“It’s easy for you to say. You don’t have my parents.” Alistair ran the back of his hand over his nose. “You know that scene, in *Alice in Wonderland*? The Queen says, ‘Sentence first — verdict afterwards!’ Off with her head, Brian. Off with her head! And Alice says —”

“Alistair, you’re not making sense, you’re pissed.”

“And Alice says, ‘Who cares for *you*? You’re nothing but a pack of cards!’ And they all explode into a thousand pieces and sh-she wakes up, and it was just a dream. It’s brilliant. I wish I could say that to them.” Alistair dragged the phone across the room and collapsed on the bed, crawling under the bedclothes. His voice sounded muffled. “They have it all set up, the golf club. The job. The arranged marriage. She’s the daughter of an engineer. An engineer! Big, fucking, deal. My mum sent them copies of my secondary school exam results, my baby photos. I don’t know these people any more. What kind of world they live in. I don’t know anymore.” Alistair began to cry. “I am so *fucking* unhappy. I am so *fucked up*.”

The next day, he woke up with his face all crumpled, and Brian was at the door, wearing his stupid band T-shirt and carrying his battered guitar case.



Alistair’s graduation show was a bit of a mixed bag. The top buyers and recruiters failed to attend, and very few students got job offers. But his designs for the theater company caught the attention of the theater community, and he met with several producers who wanted him to design their next show. He postponed his return to Singapore. He read E.M. Forster’s *Maurice*. He went to Stratford-upon-Avon to meet with a producer and was hired to make the costumes for *Twelfth Night*. He obtained a work visa after some difficulty. He and Brian moved to Stratford that autumn to work on the production. Brian got a job in the local radio station. They rented a canal boat and paddled up and down the Avon. They saw the sun sink in the horizon behind dark trees and smelled the resinous smoke of wood fires. They watched plays and

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concerts for free and went to parties in the dim little flats of actors and musicians. Alistair did not tell his parents of his new phone number or his address. He simply said that he had accepted a job in the UK and would let them know once he settled down. He said it in a letter, so that he did not have to listen to savage outbursts on the telephone.

He got an email from Yvette, full of reproach. He read it at the theater. They were rehearsing *Twelfth Night* upstairs. The actors' lines came into his office through a speaker mounted on the wall. He felt cosy and surrounded. Yvette's beam from an alien planet bounced off him. He barely registered words like "disappointed", "party cancelled", and "ingratitude". A few weeks later, an email came from his father, who angrily demanded that Alistair reimburse him for the "seventy-five kay" bond that he had posted to the Singapore Government that guaranteed his return in time to serve his National Service. He was tempted to write back ("sell the golf club membership"), but he didn't. When further emails came, he deleted them unopened.

The only person outside of his circle in England that he wrote to was his cousin Joan in Washington, D.C. She often called to see how he was doing, and he emailed her photographs of his production designs, of him and Brian on holiday. The following spring, she sent him pictures of her new baby, a half-white, half-Chinese little girl with rosebud lips. He used a program in his office at the theater to blow up the picture and print it. The baby was tiny, quirky and beautiful. He put her up amid his Polaroids and drawings on the wall.

"Can you believe it, Tom and I haven't come up with a name!" laughed Joan.

His eyes strayed at the last word he had doodled in his notebook. "Iphigenia."

"What's that, something Greek?"

Alistair explained that it was the name he gave to his first design collection, and it was the name of the daughter Agamemnon planned to sacrifice at Aulis to calm the winds so that his troops could sail to Troy. Even as he said it, he bit his lip; it sounded a bit unlucky, and Joan was, after all, a Chinese mother.

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As usual, she surprised him. “You know, that’s a bit apt. You guys are the new generation. You have to bear the burden so that more people like you can be accepted back home for who they are. You’re paving the way for future kids.”

He told her that his first collection had created an uproar at his school and was now legend among the new student generation. *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the collection that chose happiness, despite the bitter springs from which it came.

“Iphigenia never was sacrificed,” he said, suddenly, not wanting to omit a happy ending. “At the very last moment the gods switched her for a deer, and then swept her off to faraway lands.”

“Iphigenia,” Joan pronounced the name over and over again, trying it out. “Yeah, I like it. I like it very much indeed.”