

Lake Corona

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Malaysia

We're standing in front of the coffee shop waiting for Pa to come back. Ma is in a pink dress with yellow flowers, the one she wore last Christmas. I'm in long pants. I wanted to wear shorts but Ma said, no, Olivia is coming. She's been saying that for weeks now. Olivia is coming. And your Auntie Susan. Do you remember them? I shrug. All I know is that I'd rather be out fishing with Prakash.

The old Datsun creaks into the driveway. A woman in black steps out. She looks around, one hand poised on the stem of her sunglasses as if she is about to take them off but she doesn't. This is Auntie Susan – pale, polished, and skinny like a movie star. She gives us a big wave and Ma flutters down to greet them. The car door remains open. A pair of pink sandals pop out, followed by a girl. She blinks once and wipes the sleep off her face. Her hair is long and curly, and looks unnaturally gold in the sunlight.

The first time I saw Olivia, she was a pink face wrapped up in a white blanket. The next time I saw her, she was a pink face holding a teddy bear. Now the girl in front of me does not have a pink face and standing there with a Barbie bag over her right shoulder, she could be anyone – a friend's friend, a lost tourist, a farmer girl from Derbyshire. But Ma is smothering her like she's a long-lost daughter and Uncle Kiong, who works at the shop, is hobbling towards them like I've only seen him do when the Tobacco Man comes. "Say hello to Uncle," says Auntie Susan. "He's not my uncle," says the girl.

"Liv!"

"But he's not!" Sorry, says Auntie Susan. It's been a long flight. Uncle Kiong smiles and says it doesn't matter, pretty girl.

I'm sitting at one table with Olivia, sipping iced barley. The adults are at another. Auntie Susan is beaming like the moon, dishing presents out from a bag that says Harrod's. I wonder if there's something in there for me. She meets my gaze and hands me a brown paper bag. "U-Tim," she says. "So big already... I hope it fits." I pull out a blue-and-yellow striped t-shirt and hold it in front of

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me. I'd have preferred an action figure or a Liverpool jersey but I know not to complain.

"Thank you, Aunty Susan," I mumble and she goes back to being Santa Claus.

Uncle Kiong says something in Hokkien and she laughs, slapping him on the elbow. "I've never seen her like this," says Olivia next to me. "Like what?" I ask, but she doesn't answer and turns to the road. From the corner of my eye, I see Ma give me a look. So I clear my throat and ask Olivia if she wants to see my sticker collection. "Okay," she says with a shrug that makes her look older than eight.

I take out my best sticker album and show it to her. They're mostly Transformers, Bionicles and I think maybe the new Spiderman strip I got from Tesco might interest her, but when I turn the page, she's staring out at the road again. I ask her if she wants to play table tennis. No. Chess? No. Wanna see Billy, my pig? Ew, no, she says. The plastic clips in her hair make her look like a doll. They're pink and shaped like ribbons. And maybe it's a combination of these clips with her rosebud lips and the way she's stirring her lemon barley like she's wishing she could disappear that I say, "Do you want to see a secret lake?"

"Secret lake?" Her eyes light up and she nods.

Lake Corona is a lake Prakash and I discovered two weeks ago. We called it Lake Corona after the Corona Beer poster in the coffee shop. The poster is mainly of this gorgeous blond woman in a white dress, but behind her is a strip of blue that Prakash swears is Miami. He'd seen it in some James Bond movie and we were going to go there one day. You could rollerblade by the beach, play with jet-skis, and have burgers in a pool, or at least that's what he saw in "Octopussy."

Prakash is a mad James Bond fan. He knows all the lines from every James Bond movie ever made, from Roger Moore to that Remington Steele guy. "Pierce Brosnan," says Olivia as she follows me out the back. "Yeah, that's him," I say. We reach an old wire fence and I lift up the bottom for Olivia. She crawls through, a leaf tacking itself to one of her clips. We follow a path that seems to slope upwards forever. But when we reach a red palm tree we start going down, sometimes getting onto our hands and bottoms. I can hear Olivia panting behind me but the curtain of vines is just up ahead. I push it away and there it is.

The water stretches from our feet to a line of trees five metres away. The wind is blowing gently so you can see twigs circulating on the surface. "It's a pond!" says Olivia. I lead her around the edge of the water to a wooden hut near some rocks. The door is missing so you can see a "Goldeneye" poster inside and some Spiderman comics in the corner. Olivia sighs. "Daddy took me to a lake last summer," she says. "We went to Lake Tahoe, in Michigan." She

says “Michigan” like it’s some designer brand. I go round the back and fetch my rod. “It was huge!” she says, eyeing me unwind a line. I roll up my sleeves and look for a nice, shady spot on the ground. “What are you doing?” she asks.

“Fishing.”

“What am I supposed to do then?”

“You can watch,” I answer.

I’m sitting there looking real cool and calm watching my line sip the water but what I’m really thinking is whether Prakash might show up. But no, of course he won’t.

He has to help his mum clean the house on Saturday mornings. It doesn’t stop me from feeling bad, though. Some things you just weren’t supposed to do. Like rat on your friend. Or break a pact. Prakash would never tell anyone about me “kind of liking” Jennifer Wong from Four Red. Or about our plans to move to the city.

A clump of reeds rustle to my right and I jump. A sparrow hops out, pecks on the soil, and flies off. I turn back to the water. “Oi,” a voice says. “What’s she doing here?” A familiar red football jersey appears, blocking out the sun. Prakash glares at me, his mouth twisted into a snarl. “Did you bring her here?” Olivia looks up from the stick she is playing with. “She’s not going to tell anybody,” I say. Prakash frowns. If I were Olivia I’d just keep quiet, but she’s not me, so she says, “There’s nothing to tell, it’s just a pond.”

“Why does she talk like that? Is that English?”

“Yeah, she’s from England,” I say.

I tell Prakash again that she’s not going to tell anyone. She’ll be gone in a couple of days. “Yeah, but she’s a girl.” Olivia frowns but she stays silent and continues to draw circles in the sand. I hold on to my rod, not saying anything either and Prakash comes over and reaches out for it. I let him have it and start picking up stones and skimming them over the surface of the water.

Olivia pretends like we’re not there and not talking about her and the sun is making her head shine all golden again. She’s squatting down on the ground, two pale knees sticking out of her dress. Prakash pulls in the empty line. “I’m sorry,” I say. “But she was all depressed and stuff.” “I didn’t know what to do with her,” I add under my breath. He recasts the rod and shrugs. I want to say something to make things better but I’m never good at these things so I just keep quiet, hoping the wind will blow the awkwardness away.

“She has to tell us a secret then,” Prakash says suddenly, but loud enough for her to hear. “What secret? She doesn’t do anything, she probably just plays with Barbie dolls.”

“Something she hasn’t told anyone before, or some place no one knows about.”

“Yeah, like we’re going to England tomorrow.”

"I'm serious, a secret for a secret."

"I don't want to know any girly stuff..."

"I have a secret," Olivia says. We both look up and see her staring at us. "A secret garden," she says.

"What's so secret about it?" Prakash tilts his chin at her the way he does to lesser beings. "It's on a roof," she says. "You have to go through this door at the top of the flat which everybody thinks is locked but it isn't. You just have to turn the knob a certain way and it opens." Prakash squints, indicating he's not entirely convinced. So Olivia tells us how when you're up there, no one can see you but you can see them. "It's like your pond..."

"Lake," I say.

"Yeah, okay, lake. From below, people just think it's a building. But on top there's a garden with creepers and trees and possums."

"What's paw-sums?" Prakash says.

"It's a kind of animal, like a squirrel but bigger... like a fox."

"Hm," Prakash says, trying to picture this creature. Olivia flashes us a smile. The first real smile I've seen from her today.

Prakash scratches his crew-cut and turns his attention back to fishing. Olivia, however, keeps talking. She tells us she can see all sorts of things from her garden. A boy digging his nose and eating "the stuff." Cats stealing food from the dustbin. Squirrels and owls that come out when they think no one is around. Sometimes she goes there in the middle of the night when she can't sleep or when her parents fight.

"Your parents fight?" I say.

"Yeah, don't yours?"

"Not really." In fact, they hardly talk to each other. The last time Ma spoke to Pa was probably this morning. She said not to be late picking up Aunt Susan and he said what he always says to her, which was, "Mm."

"You want to know another secret?" Olivia says again. She digs at a stone and continues to talk like she's talking to it. "My dad's left my mum. He's got a new girlfriend." Prakash doesn't say anything. I look at the ground. "Mum doesn't know I know but I heard them arguing one night when I was up on the roof. Dad left the house and he didn't come back."

The air is suddenly so quiet I can hear a leaf fall into the water. "Do you think they'll ever get back together again?" Nobody answers, and Olivia continues, "I saw my dad's girlfriend. She's quite pretty, she's got blonde hair. Do you think blonde women are prettier than brunettes?" Prakash grunts something like "I don't know" and clutches his rod tighter. I release my pebble and it skips four times across the water. Olivia watches with her chin in her hands. The ripples turn from two to four to ten, and the water sloshes up our feet. "You want to hold the rod?" Prakash says. He's not talking to me but holding it out to Olivia. She looks at me for a second, then says, "Okay."

I gaze up at the trees looking down at us like the elders of a civilisation that has been here before there were cars or roads, churches or priests. We are small, insignificant creatures who know nothing of the world beyond the trees and branches and wire fences.

Olivia's laughter tinkles over the water and I picture it as a spray of mist scattering over the ripples. She pulls out a fish and squeals like she's won the Grand Prize at a fair. The water turns from green to orange and then a brownish murky blanket. Olivia tosses the line again but this time it gets stuck around her and it's like the funniest thing in the world.

Up on the road, in the coffee shop, Aunt Susan notices we're still not back. "Livvy," she calls. "Liv!" A stream of light flows in from the kitchen door. She walks towards it and calls out again into the bushes, the path, a wire fence that curls up like a waffle. A sparrow flits by; the evening is still light, she sees. So she goes back into the house and rejoins the laughter and tea, chicken biscuits and jelly. She will look for us later, she thinks. There is so much to catch up on.

They left six days later. And in those six days, time passed so quickly I have to think where it went. We made *muruku*, spicy crackers, in Prakash's house. We went to Uncle Leong's durian orchard. A wildlife park about two hours away. But most of the time we hung out at the lake. Some days it was fishing, on others it was catching tadpoles in the pockets of rainwater.

On the last day, the Datsun was waiting in front of the gate again, the boot and two back doors were open, as if the car was about to fly away. It was like that the first day they arrived. Aunt Susan was dressed in the same black dress and Olivia had her pink dress on. As Aunt Susan said her last goodbyes to Ma, Olivia squatted in the terrace with Billy. "I still can't believe he's black," she said, ruffling his ears like a dog. "In England, all the pigs are pink."

I smiled and shrugged. She looked up at me and I could see that her face was speckled with a spray of freckles. "I think you have to go," I said. Aunt Susan was gazing towards us and it looked like she was about to say something but she didn't.

She stared at the house, the trees peeping out from behind, the money plant creeping up the wall, and she seemed to see something that she hadn't seen before. I looked behind me but all I could see was the sun shining brightly on the zinc roof.

She squinted at a wooden window on the first floor and her eyes looked almost sad. I suddenly remembered what Ma used to say about Aunt Susan and how she used to sneak out of her bedroom to go to the local night club. Aunt Susan was always doing her own thing. First it was a waitressing job in Ipoh's first A & W and then a singing contest in the next town, and when she finished secondary school, she joined the airline and then she hardly came back.

As Pa loaded her luggage into the boot, she shifted her gaze to the clothes line in the side garden, dangling with white tea towels. I wondered if she was thinking of the past or of the future. Of playing hide and seek underneath the laundry or of London with its big busy roads, a three-storey flat and a secret garden at the top. But before I could decide, she put her sunglasses back on and called for Olivia. “Liv,” she said. “We have to go.” And they both disappeared into the car.

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