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Cross-Play

By

Phoebe Yeoh

Jia-li is only two smells away from home. The bus has just passed the untrustworthy *sate* vendor, who smells like he has decided to use rancid meat for his roasts again. In a few seconds, they will turn right and pass the slightly more trustworthy and far more expensive *sate* vendor, who sets up shop opposite the *kopitiam* that Jia-li's family owns, lives and works in. Around this point in the ride, her eyes are shut tightly to abate the mild motion sickness caused by the irregular lurch of her bus and the smell of leather, mixed with trace of armpit and other bodily odors, beneath her thighs.

The pungent smell of grilled meat drifts away, returning as the bus veers around the second vendor. Jia-li pulls her nose away from the slit in the window, slowly opening her eyes.

"Jalan Ikan!"

As the driver pulls over to the side of the road, Jia-li jerks her schoolbag over her shoulder and shifts to a half-standing position at the edge of her seat. Slowly, her body lurches forward and she stumbles down the aisle, catching her balance just as the whining of the brakes dies away.

The bus driver, a fat middle-aged Hindu who spits out the window whenever other vehicles cut in front of him, turns to give Jia-li a dirty look.

"No standing when bus is moving. Next time you break neck and lose head. Then how you think you go to school?"

Jia-li shoves past the bus driver and jumps out before the rest of the kids on the bus, as eager as she is to go home, can yell at her to get off. Tonight she starts working the evening shift, from 19 o'clock to midnight, taking orders for beverages at her father's *kopitiam*. The post was previously held by her eldest brother, who has been forced into retirement by their parents so that he can begin studying for his upcoming O-levels.

She runs home, not because she is eager to begin work, but because she wants to take off the itchy skirt of her school uniform and finish as much schoolwork as possible before the evening crowd arrives. Her parents have often calculated that after her eldest brother, they will only be able to sponsor a university education for the child who shows the most promise. Though Jia-li knows that beating her elder sister won't be a problem, she is not sure about her younger brother, who, at nine years old, has already developed an aptitude for reading English books two years past his level "for leisure." Based on this observation, Jia-li has decided that he is the sort of person who will do just fine in life without a university education. Therefore, in addition to hiding his books and furtively destroying his homework, she strives to maintain her position in the top four of her class, focusing particular energy on her sciences and foreign languages so that her parents might consider sending her somewhere outside of Malaysia. The U.S. or U.K. are expensive stretches, but if she keeps up her scores in Mandarin she might be able to go to Taiwan.

Leaping up the tile steps of the *kopitiam*, she notes all the food vendors cleaning and setting up for the evening rush. Her mother, who runs a fried *kway teow* stand near the entryway in order to make more money, casts a handful of dried shrimp into a large wok in preparation for the next batch.

Jia-li veers towards the stairs so that she can take the skirt off first. A large spatula, heavily coated with oil and bits of noodle, swings out to block her path. She exhales harshly and turns towards her mother.

"Ma."

Jia-li's mother glares at her. "Your skirt will flip up! If you run so fast." She jerks the spatula upwards for emphasis, then uses it to dump a portion of fresh *kway teow*, finished only seconds earlier, onto an orange melamine plate. The fragrant steam of hot fried noodles envelops her face, almost as good as a hug.

“*Jiak.*” Her mother shoves the plate towards Jia-li and turns back to her wok. Jia-li tugs the irritating skirt further down her waist, then rushes her plate to the small table in the back, set up next to the granite counter where her father makes the *kopi* and other drinks. It is the private family table, where they linger to do homework or watch TV during slow periods. Jia-li’s elder sister perches on the edge of a plastic stool, eyes scanning the room for new customers as her hands rely on muscle memory to separate *ringet* into denomination-defined stacks.

Jia-li pulls a pair of matching orange chopsticks from a container and begins tossing noodles into her mouth. They are still sizzling, and the hot oil burns her tongue. Her sister begins slamming the *ringet* down a bit harder, and Jia-li can tell that she is irritated. “Stupid *Koko* is still not home. Don’t know *why* they make me do his work when he doesn’t even bother to study *lah!*”

Jia-li shrugs sympathetically. “Probably off daydreaming again.” As an avid reader of her brother’s hidden diary, she is the only one who knows of his secret and unreasonable fantasy to take over the *kopitiam* and turn it into the most famous *kway teow* joint in Kuala Lumpur. There are *kway teow* stalls on every other street corner. Her brother cannot fry noodles without mooning off into the distance and burning the entire batch. Their parents have already decided that their oldest daughter will be the most savvy proprietress for their business once they retire. *Koko* will hopefully gain entrance into a local university and, as per his right as firstborn son, receive an education that will enable him to become a clerk somewhere and work long hours that will keep him too busy for silly thoughts.

“*Di chi!*”

Her younger brother scoots a stool up to the table with his own plate of noodles and his favorite book, *Great Expectations*. He is already out of his uniform, having finished school an hour earlier.

“Papa’s in the back. Says you should go see him.”

Jia-li instantly becomes irritated with him for speaking, for being in comfortable clothing and for finding the copy of *Great Expectations*, which means that he has rummaged through her drawer of underthings. Next time she will hide it in the rubbish bin.

“*Aiya.* What is it?” At this point her frustration with the skirt is bordering hatred. Skirts have always made her feel overly exposed. The uncomfortable feeling she has when

wearing them deepened after she turned twelve. Each month she feels as though her strength is being pulled down the toilet. Her mother has told her it is a feeling she'll grow out of, but Jia-li sometimes worries that this might never be the case.

Suppressing her frustration one more time, she scoops the last bits of noodle into her mouth and brings her dish to the back room. Her father is counting inventory, checking items off a yellow paper pad. When he sees her, he pulls her favorite drink - a grape Fanta - from one of the stacks of cardboard boxes and hands it to her. Jia-li twists it open, pausing in between gulps as the fizzling bubbles sear her throat. Her father watches silently, and she glares up at him.

“What?”

“You begin to serve drinks tonight?”

“Yeah?”

“Got lots of *pai lang*. Different from daytime people. Most ones are OK, but some not. Someone fishy comes, you ask whether you can serve or not, *hah?*”

Jia-li bobs her head up and down as respectfully as she can. After receiving her head-pat, a parental token of both good favor and dismissal, she tosses the empty Fanta bottle into the rubbish bin, rinses off her noodle plate, and runs upstairs. Stripping off the uniform, she quickly changes into a comfortable old T-shirt and shorts, formerly owned by her elder brother. She opens up her books and settles at her desk, exhaling a sigh of relief. Her few silent hours of intense study, when she can wear whatever she wants and use her books to escape from reality, are the only times when she feels at ease.

Halfway through her shift, Jia-li flings her rag down on the counter and takes a short break to gulp down some chilled barley water. The evening crowd is busier than she is used to. A lot of young adults, many of whom are still wearing their thin office polos and whose culinary talents are limited to pouring hot water over Maggi noodles, have come in either for their dinners or the equally large midnight snacks they eat a few hours afterwards. At the request of one of the parties, a football game is playing on the wall-mounted flat screen. Nobody else is really paying attention to it, now that the Malay team has been cut from this year's Championship.

Jia-li can make out more people walking towards the shop in the dark, humid night air, and she gulps down the rest of her barley so that she can take their drink orders as soon as they

sit. The first person to step inside is a woman who looks as though she has just come from giving a theatrical performance. Her hair is teased into a towering beehive on top of her head, and she wears a long-sleeved pink dress with an excessive amount of sequins. She ascends the steps, emerging beneath the fluorescent lights of the *kopitiam*. Jia-li takes a closer look and nearly chokes on the last gulp of her barley water. The woman's facial features, heavily accentuated with makeup, are unmistakably those of a middle-aged man.

Pondan. Jia-li is used to seeing the Malay versions, who either don *tudongs* in the marketplace to mask their distinctly male voices or linger too long in the alleyways, clad in scanty western clothing. This person, however, is Chinese, with light skin and heavily lined eyes. Instead of lurking near the outermost food vendors of the *kopitiam*, as most other *pondans* have done in passing, he pulls up a stool inside, arranging his long skirt gracefully around him.

Jia-li has never served beverages to a *pondan* before. She does not know whether she is allowed to. Last time she saw a *pondan* in the market, her mother grabbed her hand and led her the long way around.

“*Shht!* Papa!”

Her father glances up from the counter, where he has been slicing the tops off coconuts. Jia-li jerks her head in the direction of the *pondan*, and he pauses to take a long look. At last he glares at Jia-li, gives a cautious nod, and turns back to his work.

She stalls for extra time by weaving around tables the long way. Her parents are busy preparing noodles and drinks for the 10 P.M. crowd, so they don't stop, as they normally would, to chastise her sluggishness by yelling across the room. Three steps before she reaches the *pondan* she takes a deep breath, puffing out her chest in an attempt to be stoic.

“Order?”

“Could I have a plate of *kway teow*? And do you still have fresh *kopi*?”

His accent is textbook British, identical to the audiotapes she listens to in her advanced English class. Jia-li swallows hard. “*Kopi* got.”

As soon as she says it, she knows she has blundered in more ways than one. Her father typically doesn't make fresh *kopi* this late at night, and they have just run out of instant Nescafe. Then she blunders again.

“Name?”

The *pondan* lifts his head in surprise. He stares at Jia-li for a few awkward seconds, and then suddenly reveals a dazzling smile. His makeup is sweating off at the creases of his eyes and his beehive is clearly composed of false hair. His teeth, however, are white and completely genuine. “*Madame Zara.*”

Jia-li nods and scurries back to the counter. Generally, she memorizes orders by table, rather than by name. There are so people who go in and out of the *kopitiam* that it is not worth her time. She had asked in order to determine whether she should address the *pondan* as *ma’am* or *sir*. However, she begins to wonder if there was even been a point in asking. Despite calling himself by a female name, Zara was still biologically a *he*, no matter what he wore or how much he wanted to be a woman. That was the way things were.

When she names the last drink order, her father blanches.

“Fresh *kopi* cannot! Already finished for the day. *Siu di!*” Her little brother looks up from his book, shooting Jia-li a dirty look. “Go get some Nescafe at the next door market. *Di chi*, tell customer *sorry* and fetch his *kway teow*.”

Jia-li hurries over to her mother’s stall, where a batch of noodles waits, and carries the *kway teow* to Zara’s table. Normally, under these circumstances she pretends that she didn’t hear the customer’s order. *So soh-lee Sir, couldn’t understand your Western-style English.* She pictures Zara’s polite, dazzling smile fading. For some reason, the thought of insulting him feels less pleasurable than it normally does.

“We’re out of *kopi*. My brother is fetching Nescafe for you. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

Quickly, she repeats the sentences in her mind. Everything had been grammatically correct. Though it lingers on the tip of her tongue, something in the back of her mind stops her from adding on the word *Sir*. She sets the *kway teow* down on the table. “Eight *ringet*.”

Zara pulls a pair of chopsticks from the container in the center of the table and tries the dish. His mouth twists in pleasure. “*Sedap!* Thank your cook for me.” He inserts a manicured hand into the neckline of his dress, prodding his padded breasts. Jia-li awkwardly turns her attention to the football game, where one of the teams has just scored a goal. The flutter of paper brushes her hand. It is a ten-*ringet* note.

“Regarding the *kopi*, it’s not a problem at all.” Zara beams at her. “You’re a good girl.”

Jia-li lowers her head and returns to the counter to collect more drinks. As she circles around the remaining tables, she makes a mental note to spit in Zara's Nescafe once it is made.

She hates being called *girl*.

#

Two evenings later, Jia-li is rapidly wiping down dirty tables when she sees the beehive hairdo from the corner of her eye. A cold sensation flashes through her torso. Of all the days that the *pondan* could return, this is one of the worst. Her sister has caught a mild cold, due to the sudden shift in weather that usually falls around the beginning of the rainy season. Jia-li and her younger brother have had to work extra hours, cutting into precious study time. As for *Koko*, today he excused himself for a fifteen-minute break in the early afternoon, and then disappeared. One of his friends has confirmed that he is alive and loitering at the local shopping mall that recently opened, but calls to his mobile have gone unanswered.

Jia-li tucks the table rag into her pocket and slowly begins making her rounds, serving new customers at the edges of the room first and working her way in. All of the *kopitiam*'s fans are whirring at top speed. Customers' tempers have risen with the humidity, causing them to order after-supper suppers and cold drinks while viciously badmouthing Malay politics, bad bosses and mother-in-laws to whomever around them will listen. Jia-li tries her best to keep a neutral face on. Occasionally she sneaks looks at Zara from the corner of her eye. He does not appear disgruntled. Perhaps the wad of phlegm she left in the bottom of his cup had dissolved undetected.

As she approaches Zara's table, she notices a small array of containers in front of him. The *pondan* is reapplying his makeup in public, of all things. She clears her throat, trying to remind herself that he is no different from any other customer. As far as she is concerned, she has done nothing.

"What you want to drink?"

Zara flicks a mascara wand through his lashes. "Nescafe, same as last time except for the spittle." The calm British accent cuts through the din of the *kopitiam*, ringing louder than an argument being held at a table several feet away.

Stiffly, Jia-li turns around and retreats to the counter in the back. Her father alternates between two fridges behind the counter, breathing heavily as he locates cans of Yeo's soymilk

and chrysanthemum tea. Hoisting a stack of plastic cups from beneath the counter, Jia-li begins scooping ice into them in order to speed up the process. From time to time she glances across the room at Zara, feeling the cold sensation returning and settling at the bottom of her stomach. Why has he come back? Will he suddenly lash out, call the *polis*? Would they even take him seriously? She grabs a glass mug from beneath the counter, quickly checking to make sure that no grime has been left inside it, and fills it with boiling water from the dispenser.

At last, her father catches up with the orders. Picking up an overloaded tray of drinks, Jia-li serves them in a different order than she normally would, so that she can end the route at Zara's table and buy a bit of time to talk to him. After handing off her last pair of coconuts to a couple, she sets the mug of hot water down in front of Zara, tucking a Nescafe package and small steel spoon onto the side of the saucer.

"So sorry for last time," she murmurs, turning her head aside so that if her parents glance over, they will not see any incriminating emotions on her face. "Was not thinking straight."

She holds her breath as Zara peers into the clear, steaming water. At last, he rips open the package, delicately pouring the Nescafe powder into his mug and swirling the mixture with his spoon. "Not a problem." He looks up at Jia-li. "I was just like you when I was a boy. Didn't respect others 'cause I didn't respect myself. It got better after I went overseas and became who I am now."

When I was a boy. Jia-li sounds out the impeccable English in her head, trying to imagine what this *pondan* had looked like when he was small. Had he chosen to dress like a woman because he, as a boy, had felt the frustration she feels every day as a girl? Every time she puts on her uniform in the morning and notices her hips growing rounder and wider, flesh erupting out from the comfortably flat chest she used to have, she wants to kick things, destroy things, hurl them against the wall. She only holds back because she knows that Ma would give her a worse beating than the ones her brothers would receive for the same behavior. Because she is a girl.

"Why return to Malaysia?"

She blurts the thought out quickly, so that she cannot take it back. Zara removes the spoon from the mug, watching the swirling Nescafe slowly come to rest. Lifting the cup to his

lips, he begins to take small slurps. Across the room, a man wearing a red shirt calls for a refill. For now Jia-li ignores him. She stays still, waiting for a response.

At last Zara sets his mug back down on the saucer, sighing deeply. “To prove that I could make it as a performer and businessperson.” He focuses his gaze intensely on the rim of the empty cup. “Things here don’t change unless you make them change.”

“*Jia-li!*”

Her mother has finally taken note of her sluggishness, and is pointing frantically at the customer still waiting for his refill. The glazed look leaves Zara’s eyes and he pushes his stool back, yawning as he rises. “Time for *Madame Zara* to depart!” From his padded breasts, he once again produces a crisp five-ringet bill and hands it to Jia-li. “Keep the extra. I will bring my friends and order more *kway teow* next time. It’s very good.”

Jia-li bobs her head and collects his empty mug before racing over to the annoyed customer. The man begins yelling obscenities at her once she arrives, but after picking out the fact that he wants more barley water, she tunes out the rest of what he is saying. *Five ringet*. Nescafe costs no more than two. She glances around the *kopitiam*, but the beehive hairdo has already disappeared.

Continuing to ignore the customer’s rant, she picks up the empty glass and wanders back to the large pot where the barley water is stored. Her father has heard the obscenities and is giving her warning glances, but she ignores his gaze and focuses on ladling the barley water.

Things don’t change unless you make them change. The noise of the *kopitiam* has become a distant buzz, and she can feel her heartbeat thumping rapidly in her chest.

The next day after school, Jia-li mounts the stairs to her bedroom at a deliberately slow pace. After closing the door, she lays her books open on her desk and pulls her chair out so that in case anyone comes up, she will be able to sit down and feign studying. She closes the door of her room, muffling the sounds of frying food and conversation floating up from below. In the corner of the room are some trunks containing her sister’s old clothes, packed away for her to grow into. Jia-li opens the one on top, where her mother keeps the most recent additions, and scans it for anything that appears distinctly female. A pink cheongsam dress sits on the top of the stack; Jia-li last remembers her sister wearing it several years ago.

Mentally memorizing the dress's folds so that she can recreate them later, she shakes it out and lays it over the back of the chair. Then she removes the blue skirt and polo shirt of her uniform, tossing them to the floor around her. Her room, being the closest to the rooftop, is the hottest in the house, and the fan is off since nobody else is upstairs during the daytime. Still, she shivers as the pink silk of the cheongsam grazes her skin. After pulling the zipper up all the way, tugging the high neck of the dress flush against her throat, she closes her eyes.

In one fluid motion she turns to face the floor-length mirror, scanning her reflection. Her face burns. Despite the heavy, awkward bumps her body has developed and the visible tenseness of her shoulder muscles, the dress fits perfectly. Her sister will claim that it is beautiful, and her mother will probably want her to wear it for the next occasion they are invited to. It takes everything she has not to tear it off.

Jia-li unzips the zipper, shaking as she jerks the cheongsam down and off her ankles. Naked, she rummages through her drawers to find a clean pair of her elder brother's old clothes. His T-shirt is baggy, masking the shape of her body, and the pants hit right below the knee. They are faded and comfortable and do not carry the murky, effeminate smell that all of her own clothes have developed. As she pulls a woven belt tight around her waist, however, her sense of comfort does not return, as it normally does when she changes after school.

In the back of her mind, she knows that she had been hoping for some sort of miracle, that maybe wearing the dress would magically transform her and make her feel normal in her body again. Now she wishes she had never tried it. Zara is lucky. He can choose to wear a dress and perform as a female, whereas she is stuck having to wear things she doesn't want to wear. She wants to have a flat, lean chest like she used to when she was younger, not the tender lumpy breasts that weigh her down and hurt when she runs too hard. She wishes she could be stronger and faster, not slower and rounder. She wishes her body weren't changing in the way that it is now.

Usually her brother's baggy shirt and pants shroud the details of her body from view, helping her to forget temporarily about what is happening to her. For some reason that effect is dampened today. Turning back to examine her reflection again, she realizes her hair, limp and tousled from changing clothes, is getting to be too long. School regulations require all girls to have hair at least a centimeter above their shirt collar. Many of her peers keep their coiffures

neatly in place with plastic hairclips, waiting till their hair is barely passable before reluctantly cutting it short again. Jia-li has never seen the appeal of long hair. She wants to get her hair cut shorter, cropped close to her head like her brothers. Her mother has always prevented her from doing so, claiming that her face is too broad for it to look attractive. Her mother would probably say that Jia-li in the cheongsam is attractive, that if she washes her hair and starts using conditioner and bobby pins, she will look even more attractive. Right now, attractive is the last thing Jia-li wants to be.

She glances over at the top drawer of her desk, where the sewing supplies are kept. Quickly, she opens the drawer and rummages around, locating the large pair of iron scissors that she used several years ago when helping her mother cut out window curtains. She turns the scissors over in her hands, opening and closing the blades several times. They are easier to wield than she remembers.

Recklessly, she picks out a thin, stringy section of hair and snips it off midway. It falls awkwardly in front of her face. The more she looks at it, the more she wants all of her hair cut off. Maybe she can trim her hair in a way that is neither effeminate nor ugly. Maybe that way, her mother won't mind.

Scooting her chair and rubbish bin up next to the mirror, she selects another lock of hair near the side of her face and rubs it between her fingers experimentally. Sliding her left hand up and down the piece, she measures out a length that seems as though it would look alright. Taking in a deep breath, she opens the large pair of scissors, draws the hair between the blades, and snips. The hair drops neatly into the rubbish bin. She exhales, blowing the stray bits off her face, and sections off more. Another piece, and then another piece. Her heart beats faster as more and more bits of hair flutter to the floor.

In between snips, someone pounds on the door. Jia-li looks up quickly at her reflection in the mirror. Half of her hair now falls in jagged pieces across her scalp, with the other half still hanging down limply. It looks horrible. She grabs what remains of her long hair and shears it off, tossing the hank into the rubbish bin. At least now it is even.

“Jia-li?”

Her father's voice echoes from outside the room, and he bangs again. She lets the scissors fall on the floor, one blade narrowly missing her foot, and hurries over to address him.

She opens the door a tiny bit, positioning herself so that only her eyes are visible through the crack. Her father taps his wrist impatiently.

“Mama needs your help. Lots of dishes to wash.”

“Cannot.”

“Got no time for dilly-dally! Come down.”

“No.” She tries to push the door closed, but her father is stronger. The door swings open, carrying Jia-li’s body with it. She stumbles backwards, her feet slipping on the wooden floor. Her father enters, making a sound in his throat as though he is about to yell. When he sees her, the noise abruptly peters off. Jia-li follows his gaze around the room, swallowing hard when he spots the fluffy black piles lying in and around the rubbish bin.

“Where are the cutters?” he asks. Wordlessly, she walks over to the mirror and picks them up from where they fell on the floor. Her father takes them from her hands, slipping his fingers through the handles, and grasps her shoulder. As he reaches out, with the scissors open and pointed towards her, she braces herself, tensing her thighs in case something makes impact and she has to run. The cold iron hovers near her face, but does not make contact with her skin. Soon, she hears the gentle clipping of the scissors at the nape of her neck, the blades tugging gently at her hair as her father begins trimming them into order.

The snipping falls into a regular rhythm. Jia-li closes her eyes. Her father has never done anything like this for her. She wonders if he understands how she feels, or alternatively, if her rash actions will cause her parents to prevent her from ever going to university. However, there is no anger in his motions. She tries to block her thoughts out of her consciousness, waiting until her father is done.

“Still not very good. But better than before.”

He turns away, picking stray hairs off the blades of the scissors. Cautiously, Jia-li examines herself in the mirror. To even out the jagged pieces, her father has trimmed her hair to be only several centimeters long, much shorter than what she had originally wanted. The cut does indeed emphasize the broadness of her face, and there are some patches where the hair clumps and sticks out like the pin feathers of a newly hatched bird. With her brother’s clothes on, she barely looks like a girl at all. She bites down on the insides of her lip and squares her

jaw, keeping her eyes concentrated on her reflection. It takes all her effort to prevent herself from smiling.

“Tell Ma you couldn’t stand the weight. Rainy season so hot.” His voice is drawn tight. Jia-li lowers her head, sensing that he wants to say something else. Instead of speaking, however, he fetches the broom and dustpan from the corner of the room. Jia-li scrambles onto her feet, but he angles the broom away from her whenever she tries to reach for it. Helplessly, she watches as he collects her fallen hair into a neat pile. As the silence wears on she grows uneasy again. Finally, he deposits the pile in the rubbish bin and speaks.

“You are smart girl,” he begins. “But you talk too long with that *pondan*. Stop, *hah?* No good for you.”

Her name is Zara. Jia-li thinks this, but does not say it. Though he didn’t look at her when he spoke, her father’s voice sounded sad, and she does not want to risk upsetting him any more than he already is. She nods, keeping her eyes averted to the ground. Her father pats her stubbly head, resting his hand on it for a few seconds.

“Will tell *Siu di* to do dishes. Stay here until dinner.”

He walks out of the room. Jia-li shuts the door behind him. The cheongsam is still lying in a crumpled heap next to her dresser, and she quickly shakes it out and puts it back into the trunk. A sense of relief comes over her as she closes the lid, hiding the cheongsam and the rest of the dresses from view. It will still be terrible, wearing her itchy and short uniform skirt to school and putting on dresses during special occasions. But at least her hair is lighter, and even though she is still at unease with her body, she feels better. Now, she thinks she understands what Zara had meant by *change*, and what she needs to do about it.

The next afternoon is particularly wet, and the gray color of the sky threatens rain. The fabric of Jia-li’s skirt clings to her sweaty legs as she ducks into the *kopitiam*. At least her hair is no longer a burden. It has turned out to be a lot easier during classes, as she no longer has to sweep it out of her eyes.

Her mother hates her new haircut. She forced Jia-li to pin little sparkling butterfly clips into her hair before leaving for school, perhaps in some flashy attempt to de-emphasize the broadness of her face. Jia-li took the clips out as soon as she reached the school bus. Her

classmates gave her contemptuous side glances throughout the day, but she no longer cares. Once she gets into University and leaves Malaysia, she can dress in whatever clothing she wants, be whoever she wants, and won't have to worry about what anybody says.

Though the *kopitiam* is full of people, it is surprisingly quiet. The television is on, set to a Hindi soap opera, but the wailing of the runny-eyed lead actress has been muted. Her mother is furiously frying an unusually large batch of *kway teow*, and does not even look up as Jia-li passes. Next to her wok are ten red and white china plates, the ones reserved for special instances. Something is going on.

“*Jia-li!*” Her father snaps his fingers from behind the counter, beckoning her over. She slings her bag off her shoulder, tossing it to the back of the room, and hurries over. Emptying a bottle of water into a glass, he places it onto an overloaded tray and shoves it at her.

“Got party. First *kopi* goes to the short-leg-long-jaw in the grey suit.”

“*Kopi?* But it's after –”

“–*Aiya!* Just serve *lah!*” He rushes to froth another *kopi*. Jia-li carefully adjusts the tray to spread the weight out on her arms, scanning the room. A group of businessmen are clustered at one of the large tables in the back, which has been draped over with a red tablecloth.

A young woman wearing a short blue dress brushes past Jia-li, bumping her elbow. The tray sways, causing some liquid from the drinks to splash onto Jia-li's uniform.

“*Shit!*” Jia-li sets the tray down on an empty table and grabs a paper towel nearby, scrubbing at the front of her polo. The woman pauses, turning her head to see what happened. Her eyes meet Jia-li's. Instead of apologizing, however, she frowns, staring at Jia-li for a few moments, and then turns away, tossing her long hair over her shoulder and quickening her pace. She approaches the businessmen, settling down next to a middle-aged man wearing a gray suit and pink tie.

Jia-li blinks. The man turns towards Jia-li's general direction, laughing at something his companions have said. His eyes crinkle as he laughs, and she can see – or maybe she imagines – the traces of sparkling eyeshadow.

“*Zara?*”

The businessman does not hear her, for he slings an arm around the woman's shoulder and continues laughing. He says something in response to the joke. Jia-li cannot make out exactly what it is, but she recognizes the British accent.

Somewhere across the room, one of her parents hisses at her to *kah meh*, hurry up and serve before the ice melts and the *kopi* grows cold. Reluctantly, she forces herself to carry the tray over. All the businessmen are sitting, but she picks out the short-leg-long-jaw her father had mentioned and begins setting down beverages in order. Man-who-looks-like-Zara has ordered *kopi*, freshly made this time. She picks up the saucer, willing herself not to tremble. As she makes the arch from tray to table, however, her wrist weakens. A small puddle of *kopi* splashes onto the table. Despite being several feet away from the spill, the woman in the blue dress makes a clucking sound, pulling back as though she has been burned.

“Clumsy girl! Richard, watch your sleeve!”

Man-who-looks-like-Zara has already pulled a package of tissue from his pocket, using a piece to mop up the spill. When he finishes, he deposits the saturated paper onto the side of Jia-li's tray and looks up at her. Confusion, and then recognition, registers on his face.

“*Aiya!* It's you! You look different.” Man-who-looks-like-Zara uses a damp hand to ruffle Jia-li's hair. “This is one of the proprietor's girls,” he explains to all of the men at the table. “Good child. Her family makes very good *kway teow* in this part of town.”

“She looks like boy-one,” one of the men observes.

Man-who-looks-like-Zara laughs. “Got a haircut since the last time I saw her. I must have terrible influence on the youth.”

“*Zah-lah* so funny you! Always making jokes!” The men collectively laugh and slap their hands down on the tables, causing the drinks to tremble. Somewhere in the distance, thunder rumbles, followed by the rapid patter of heavy rain.

Man-who-looks-like-Zara raises his voice above the thunder, says something about investing in a new performance venue, but Jia-li doesn't linger to hear the rest. She goes back to her place at the family table and waits for her mother to finish plating the *kway teow*. From time to time she pinches the flesh of her wrist and watches it turn white, then red as she releases it.

“Jia-li.” Her father places a hand on her shoulder. His voice is concerned, but as Jia-li searches his face she does not sense any traces of sympathy. He has not recognized Zara.

“Go study and rest. *Siu di* can help for now.”

Her younger brother passes by, balancing condiment dishes of soy sauce and fried anchovies on his arms. He has plastered his hair with product and changed into a crisp shirt. “Isn’t this great? Customer pre-paid everything by card.” Flashing her an excited grin, he waltzes over to the tables, setting out the condiments nicely and asking each and every one of the businessmen if they needed anything else. Jia-li turns away, fetching her schoolbag. From the corner of her eye, she spots the businessmen’s tab lying next to the card machine. The receipt has been signed by a Mr. Richard Koh.

She retreats to the back room, but instead of going up the stairs, she weaves through the boxes of drink shipments and unlocks the back door leading to the alleyway behind her house. The smell of gutter and wet mud diffuses into the room. Taking off her shoes, she lowers herself onto the smooth concrete doorstep, letting the rain splash across her bare feet. For some reason she doesn’t care anymore that her uniform might get wet, or that her mother will yell at her for ruining it and that she will have to stop drinking Fanta for a month or so in order to pay for it.

A lump begins to form within her throat. She smears her arm across her eyes, wiping away the bits of wetness forming at the corners, and drags her schoolbag towards her. She does not feel like doing homework, but needs to keep herself distracted. The copy of *Great Expectations* is still at the bottom of her bag where she hid it this morning. Instead of throwing it away with the rest of her younger brother’s homework, she kept the book and began reading it during lunchtime.

Some of the rain splashes onto the book, and she uses her hand to swiftly brush the droplets away. The paper cover has a stylized black-and-white depiction of the main character, Pip. She has read as far as the part where he inherits money and goes to London, and on the bus ride home she had been dreaming about the same thing somehow happening to her.

Using her big toe as a stylus, she writes the Mandarin characters of her name in the thin layer of mud coating the concrete doorstep outside. *Jia-li*. Then, very slowly, carefully, she toes the name *Pip* next to it. She re-reads the two names, toying with the way they sound in her head, and imagines herself in the same tailored suit and hat. *Jia-li. Pip. Jia-li. Pip.*

Zara.

Zara was not a woman. He was a man playing dress-up, and she was still Jia-li. Why had she thought she could be anything but a girl named Jia-li? She smears the ball of her foot across the names, scrubbing them into the ground until she feels the sting of raw skin against sand.

Glossary of Malay/Hokkien words

Aiya – often exclaimed when someone is frustrated or upset.

Di chi – second-born sister

Ha mi? – what?

Jiak – eat

Kee mai – Go buy

Koko – eldest brother

Kopitiam – “kopi” means coffee, “tiam” means shop and “kopitiam” means coffee shop

Kway Teow – flat rice noodles. The story refers in particular to *char kway teow*, which is a noodle dish fried with shrimp, egg and bean sprouts (amongst other ingredients)

Pai lang –bad person/people

Pondan - A derogatory term for transvestite

Ringgit – currency of Malaysia.

Sate – Skewered grilled meat traditionally served with peanut sauce

Sedap – tasty

Siu di – younger brother