2

Beginnings

My jaw was sore from smiling so much. In the first few weeks of work, I stood in the school courtyard wearing a perma-freeze grin and greeting the students as they arrived. Their reactions to me varied: some were puzzled, some were shy, a few laughed, and one little boy had taken to hitting my arms with his tangerine-sized fists to see if I was real.

"Your classes won't start until week three," Helen the English panel chair had told me as she showed me around the school—cafeteria, staff office, English Room. "The class teachers need to teach the routines for the first few weeks. You can greet the students in the morning."

They trailed in through the gates, filling the courtyard with the chatter of first-day jitters. A row of parents pressed their faces against the bars of the fence that surrounded the school. I stood in the midst of the children, and most of their heads didn't reach past my elbows. Two teachers walked by, looking frazzled. They glanced at me, then whispered to each other. I felt like a goldfish getting used to a new bowl of water. A group of little girls stared at me and burst into a fit of giggles. I smiled and waved at them.

Jordan Valley Primary School was in a 'local' area in Kowloon Bay. Dozens of public housing estates surrounded it like a palisade. Most of the young students who lived there had not yet ventured to the parts of Hong Kong that are swarming with Western expatriates. Despite living in a famously international city, my blue-green eyes and light brown hair

were unusual to the kids. The youngest ones were not afraid to stare. On my second day, a waist-high girl walked in my direction, fiddling with the bright red string holding her nametag. When she saw me, she jumped, turned as red as her nametag, and darted the other way.

"This is the NET Teacher, Miss Young. Say good morning," Helen told the kids.

"Good morning, Miss Young," they would whisper. They twisted their fingers in light blue uniform dresses and put their hands in the pockets of creased walking shorts.

"How old are you? Say it to Miss Young. How old are you?"

"I am seven years old." They'd look at their feet, then at Helen, and then glance up at me through fine black eyelashes before quickly looking back at their shoes.

The children parted around me like ducklings when I walked through the courtyard. Helen coaxed more greetings out of them, more rote responses. She had a mother's smile, a Sunday School teacher's voice. "Lily, say good morning to Miss Young."

One brave boy came up to speak to me by himself on the third day. He was carrying a clipboard and his shorts were hiked up high on his waist. "Good morning, Miss Young!" he said.

"Good morning." I smiled as he looked at me through glasses perched on the bridge of his nose.

"My name is Anthony. I am an English Ambassador. My English is very good." Each word was clipped and carefully separated.

"Hello Anthony. Your English is very good indeed," I said, matching his formal tone.

"I would like to practice my English with you. It is nice to meet you."

"That's a good idea. It's nice to meet you, too." Anthony smiled at me and wandered off. He spoke to me regularly after that, eager for the chance to practice his English. I was glad to have a friend.

Each morning before the bell rang the students assembled in perfect lines. They bowed to the principal, the teachers, and each other, and listened quietly to the morning announcements. Over 500 six-to-twelve-year-olds stood as still as terra-cotta statues. After the announcements finished, the teachers led their classes toward the stairs. As the kids filed past me, still in their perfect lines, I continued to wave and smile determinedly. By my fourth day the children's double takes were being replaced with tentative waves and shy smiles.

When the last line of bobbing heads and heavy backpacks reached the steps, I rode the elevator up to the teachers' office on the fifth floor. Every once in a while the local teachers would pop into the office, but no one spoke to me, and only a few smiled. They stammered and blushed when I said hello.

I was the only foreigner at the school. My official title was the NET Teacher (Native English-speaking Teacher). The Hong Kong Education Bureau paid for one native English-speaking teacher in every public school in the region. It was largely up to the schools to decide how they wanted to make use of their NET. In my case, they didn't give me very much work to do, especially at the start. It was my job to stand and deliver my American smile and my American "good morning".

The last NET teacher at this school, an older British man, had stayed for only two months. I still hadn't learned the full story, but I gathered he could not adjust to the new environment. No one would give me a straight answer about why he left so quickly. Was the school that bad? All I knew was that the teachers and students had gotten used to not having a NET.

As the local teachers began their classes, there were weeks before I'd need to teach. I felt detached. This was an exciting opportunity to experience a new culture; it was also a job and I wanted to do it well. Yet nearly every word that made its way to my ears was incomprehensible,

every laugh from across the room, a mystery. I was an oddity and an aberration, listening to the Cantonese clamor around me.

"Is there anything I should be doing to prepare?" I had asked Helen on the phone before I left the US. "Do you have a book list that I should read ahead of time, or maybe a textbook I should look at?"

"No, no. Just take a rest during the summer. No need to prepare."

"So, I'll have time to write lesson plans when I get there?"

"Oh yes, no need to worry," she had said.

As I rearranged files on my computer and flipped through a stack of picture books, I thought about the paper trail that brought me there. As a textbook overachiever in high school, I studied hard, got involved in extracurricular activities, and held all the right leadership positions to do what I wanted with my life (my plan: go to a liberal arts college that had pretty, tree-lined drives and become a book editor). My parents were supportive, but they didn't have to push me because I was pushing myself. I was my very own tiger mother.

When I got into my ideal college on the East Coast, Colgate University in New York, I continued my pattern of hard work and overachievement. My semester in London was the only time I didn't also have a job while taking a full load of classes (I kept busy gallivanting around with Ben). After college, while I was trying to figure out a way to get back to him while still making my student loan payments, I spent a year teaching at a charter school in my hometown and devoted every waking hour to grading papers and writing student evaluations. As I plotted my move to Hong Kong, I read about the city and what to expect, haunting expat forums and grilling Ben about Chinese work culture. Hong Kong was fast-paced, even frantic. Diligence was in the air and the water. Surely, I should fit right in.

Instead, I was adrift in a job with low expectations, facing an unconventional kind of culture shock. I hadn't had this much time on my hands since 8th grade. I wasn't sure what to do.

I walked over to check on the spacious English Room, which had been decorated before my arrival. When I passed the windows of the other classrooms, the students lifted their heads from their textbooks and watched me, whispering to each other until their teachers shouted at them.

Our school building was new, but as I stood outside my classroom I was puzzled to see a big construction site next door to us that was slowly morphing into another primary school. Helen sat her desk when I returned to the staffroom. She was far more comfortable speaking to me than the rest of the teachers. I peeked over the top of the cubicle wall. "Why are they building a new school right next door?" I asked.

"This area is growing. There is lots of new housing being built here."

"Will we be collaborating with that school?" I imagined a NET teacher best friend next door, already picturing us walking home together after school.

"No. We will be competitors. We want to attract the good students in this area." She looked somewhat apologetic.

"Oh..." I decided to change the subject. "Do people usually have big families in Hong Kong?"

"I have four sisters," she told me. "One lives in USA and one lives in UK. The others live in Hong Kong."

Unlike Mainland China, Hong Kong has never had a one-child policy, but I was surprised. "Is that common?" I asked. I came from a big family myself (two boys and seven girls) and I was used to being an anomaly. I thought we had a big family back when there were just four of us.

"Not so many any more because it is very expensive."

"Why do they need so much new housing then?"

"Many people are coming over from Mainland China. Many of our students' parents come from there," she said. "It is cheap government housing here." She gestured to the row of identical apartment blocks standing guard outside the window.

This was the first I heard about a trend that was changing Hong Kong almost beyond recognition. After 156 years as a British colony, Hong Kong belonged to China again. Since the Handover in 1997, many members of the vast population of China had decided that this was where they wanted to pursue a better life. They were pouring into Hong Kong to take up jobs, both professional and menial, and to spend their newly acquired wealth. Those who were not already part of the mushrooming nouveau riche worked themselves to the bone to find their fortune in Hong Kong.

"So do the parents at our school speak English? Do they teach English in China like they do here?" I asked Helen.

"Only about twenty percent learned English in secondary school, and most of them do not feel comfortable with speaking," she said. "Less than half of the parents were born in Hong Kong." This explained why I wouldn't have to participate in parent-teacher conferences. Helen told me that since many of our students were the children of Mainland Chinese, they faced the usual adaptive challenges of immigrant children, even though Hong Kong was once again part of China and still 95% Chinese. It was an uphill battle to learn English and sometimes also Cantonese, the dialect of Chinese spoken in Hong Kong. I could relate. However, these kids had a chance that their parents did not have. Hong Kong for them was a place to reinvent yourself. Unlike in the struggling United States, anything seemed possible.

I was there for the opportunities too, but I struggled to find my place, feeling guilty that I wasn't doing more. The teachers rushed to their classes around me, already busy with marking and prep. It felt odd doing so little in this vibrant, frantic city. I was out of step, not at all sure that I'd made the right decision to stay, even though it seemed like my only option. Perhaps I should have gone home to America…

As the days passed at the school, the kids still stared and I towered awkwardly over my co-workers in the elevator. I tried striking up a

conversation with another teacher who was also new, Mr. Liu. He was an attractive, clean-cut young man, the only teacher who was as tall as me. "Is this your first year teaching?"

"No. I have been a teacher for ten years," he said shortly. He hadn't spoken to me since.

In the sultry heat of the afternoons, I'd trudge along the pavement beneath 30-floor apartment blocks, looking for lunch, thinking about Ben. I tried to picture him swearing he'd never leave me alone again, no matter what it did to his career prospects. But no. He was on the other side of the world, getting used to a new job of his own.

One afternoon, an old Chinese man broke my self-pitying reverie. As I walked past, he said, "Hello, where are you from?"

"The US," I replied, surprised at being addressed.

"Ah yes. Which state in the US?" He was taller than me, and he wore a nicely pressed white shirt and a safari hat. He seemed bemused to encounter a white lady here beneath the projects.

"Arizona."

"Ah yes, my daughter lives in Seattle, and it's not often that I get to talk with people in English. Are you in Hong Kong for a job?"

I didn't generally make a habit of telling strange men on the street all about myself, but I instinctively trusted this grandfatherly gentleman. Besides, I needed someone to talk to. Squinting into his kind face, I told my new Chinese friend a little bit about myself. He was a retired physics teacher who had also been the principal of a secondary school for many years. We chatted as toddlers skipped past in minuscule preschool uniforms and old women fanned themselves and watched us from the nearby benches. He thanked me for the conversation. "Next time I will speak to you in Chinese," he said.

I went on my way, thinking about the old man's words. It reminded me of another time a stranger had spoken to me in a foreign city. My first

move abroad had set in motion the runaway train of events that brought me to Hong Kong, and to Ben.

In the fall of my junior year of college, I moved to London to study for a semester. Mostly due to an obsession with British literature, I'd always felt drawn to England, but this was the first time I had been there. As I was dragging my overstuffed suitcase, laptop, and fencing equipment bag down the street from the train station, a woman in a rumpled sweater called out, "You ought to get yourself a bloke to help you carry those!" Her words turned out to be prophetic.

I lived with four friends in a beautiful old flat in Bloomsbury, right around the corner from where Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe and Virginia Woolf used to live. I loved everything about the city. As a long time anglophile, it was a romance that was bound to happen. London was dynamic and relevant, but you could see 2,000 years' worth of history just by walking down the street. I loved the little blue signs that indicated where famous literary and historical people used to dwell, the accents and languages pouring from people on the streets, the bridges showing a dozen different panoramas on the Thames. I was on a serious high already, and then I walked into that fencing club and met a Eurasian law student with a strong jaw, stand-on-end black hair, and subtle freckles.

Ben and I took it slow and enjoyed each other's company before we started dating. He took the time to get through my reserved exterior. In fact, I don't think we talked about anything except fencing for the first month. He told me later he wasn't sure he'd be able to break past my shell and figure out what I was really like. I already desperately hoped that he liked me, but I was determined not to make too much of his friendliness. I tried to play it cool. He took me to some eclectic bars and a friend's house party, not realizing I was as uninterested in partying as he was. He convinced me to go to Switzerland with the fencing team and

contrived to sit next to me on the plane. Finally, one chilly London night, he decided to be direct.

Earlier in the evening we'd had dinner in Chinatown. We'd been seated at a large round table with a group of Chinese women. Ben told me later he could understand every word of their Cantonese, and it had been difficult to talk comfortably. I'd retreated inward, getting quieter than normal, and Ben grew frustrated. He tried to interrupt the tension by suggesting we go on an adventure to find the Freemasons' headquarters. Then he took me to a chic bar whose interior had been designed by a friend of his, a woman who also came from Hong Kong. We sat on low couches with our knees not quite touching. It was crowded and noisy. The conversation waned, and I worried that we had finally exhausted our usual topic: fencing. Maybe our relationship, whatever it was, had run its course. A silence stretched between us, battered by the chatter and the music. Finally, he leaned forward and looked into my eyes. "I feel like this could go one of two ways," he said. "We've had a nice time hanging out, but I can't tell if you want any more than that. I don't really like dating games where no one can just be honest about how they feel."

"I don't want to play games either." I couldn't look away from his face.

"If you don't like me, we can just say we've had a good time so far and leave it at that." There was a clarity and an intensity in his hazel eyes that made me uncomfortable, but I felt like I could step into that discomfort and be completely myself.

"I do like you. I've been having a good time."

"Do you want to get to know me," he said, "and just be honest about how things are going—if they keep going?"

I did.

He took my hands and ran his fingers along the inside of my wrists, creating a riot in my stomach that matched the throb of the music. We put our heads together and talked for hours—the awkwardness shattered.

I don't remember what we said, but it was like we'd broken through a barrier, a shield of politeness and reserve that I'd developed as a shy child. It was a barrier that usually took years for friends to get through, but Ben was on the other side of it already, and it felt completely natural.

Ben had moved to England for boarding school when he was thirteen. With his mixed-race face and international outlook, he was out of place among the English, even after living there for ten years, but he did not quite fit in with the Chinese either. Like many Hong Kong-raised Brits, Ben had always felt a sense of unbelonging. Hong Kong was transient, especially for international families like his. If you were from there it was easy to feel like you came from nowhere. This was particularly true of the child of one expatriate Brit and one local Chinese woman. Ben knew what it was like to be an outsider. When I arrived on the scene, an American abroad who had always felt out of place in the USA, we clicked.

Perhaps I was naïve, and treated it as part of the study abroad experience, but it was exciting to compare our different cultures as we got to know each other. Some of the differences were unexpected. We bought cooking ingredients one evening and lugged them back to his place in a black London cab. I thought it would be a time to flirt and have fun, but Ben approached the food with shocking concentration, his thick eyebrows pulled low. Every combination had to be perfect, every dish had to be tested multiple times. It was the only time he was quiet and I was the one saying, "Don't be so serious!" He blew out a long, heavy breath when I said, "It's just food!" It was my first indication of the importance of food to a Hong Kong person. The rest of the time, Ben led the banter. He could talk to anyone about anything, meeting them where they were most comfortable, inviting their confidences, winning their admiration—and mine.

What girl wouldn't be swept away by a fairytale English romance? He took me ice-skating in a refurbished palace on a hilltop and fencing at a

private club in an 18th-century building. I took him swing dancing in a famous old jazz bar and told him about my aspirations, my bookish passions. We bought a pizza and climbed over the locked gates of Regent's Park to eat it in the moonlight. (It sounds romantic, but actually, when Ben climbed back over the gate he ripped an eight-inch gash in the crotch of his jeans. He could barely hold the flaps of denim together and I could barely hold in my laughter as we made our way back to his place.) We watched the stars from Primrose Hill. We took the train south and hiked for miles along the English coast, exploring the bluffs and the downs and the lonely lighthouses. Looking back, those first months sound like the montage section of a chick flick, complete with scenes of us kissing under an umbrella on a rainy street corner.

The only catch to the whole lovely affair was, of course, that I was going back to America.

I returned to the school, walking past an old woman burning paper on the sidewalk. Bits of ash drifted over the street, swirling in the wake of the passing taxis.