

## The Immigrant

*It was time for a change.*

That's how Papa always used to respond when *What brought you here?* didn't imply the supermarket or bakery, with a terseness to his tone and stiffness to his shoulders that refused further questions. (He much rather preferred *Where'd you come from?* because he could give vague directions to our neighbourhood. Most people were too flustered by his deliberate misunderstanding and no one wanted to embarrass him by correcting the mistake.) Afterwards, Papa would only answer with swift motions of his head or in single words, impatient to return to Auntie's apartment, where his *otherness* wasn't met with a slight tilt of the head or unconscious narrowing of the eyes.

From the way he tells the stories and my own mature understanding now, it's obvious that Papa kept expecting something *terrible* to happen during the first two years we lived with Auntie and Uncle—for people to fling insults, to tell us to *go back home* because we didn't belong, to destroy every shiny promise and ideal image my Papa had believed in when he decided to take up Auntie's proposal and leave behind Mamie and my younger sister. Papa became so nervous in public during those two years, even though he knew more than enough English. The anxiety and agitation quickly sharpened his accent, turning the rhythm of his speech into something almost magical as it rose and fell in a way I still can't imitate. He was so easily embarrassed by the very thing I listen to in awe, and ashamed that he couldn't change it as easily as his clothing or his name.

*It was time for a change* became a refuge for Papa because it was simpler than the truth: that he had uprooted his family and chosen to abandon the routine and familiarity that had dictated his life until the moment we stepped onto foreign soil—because he had decided, against any regrets or uncertainties still lingering at the back of his mind, that *this* had to be better than the alternative.

One story has stuck out all these years where a woman suffered a heart attack at the bakery and as everyone either stood frozen or scrambled for a phone, Papa—who had once upon a time trained as a doctor—promptly asked if anyone had aspirin and began administering CPR once the woman passed out. When he tells the story, he always stresses how *silent* the room had been, everyone's eyes on the man who usually drank his coffee in the corner with the newspaper as he tried saving the life of a woman he didn't even know.

She survived. And every time she sees Papa, she buys him a coffee.

We're throwing a party today. I was surprised when Mamie suggested it and shocked when Papa agreed without hesitation. So it's June sixteenth and my cousins are currently watching TV while the adults, an assortment of family and friends garnered along the way, chat over piled plates of food.

June sixteenth. I've heard it *said* so often that putting it into tangible words, the letters lined up alongside each other, has me torn between wanting to scratch it out or fill the entire page with it.

It has been exactly ten years since we first arrived here, my father holding me against his shoulder even though I was already almost too old to be carried because he didn't want to lose me in the bustle of travellers. And nearly six and a half years since Mamie came, my not-so-little sister stubbornly clutching her hand and my old favourite stuffed lion.

Papa has recently taken to telling people about how long we've been here, even though it had once been so difficult for him to think that these people of different colours, languages, and cultures—well, that they would do exactly none of the things he had once feared. Although he and Mamie occasionally reminisce on what they've left behind, we've become permanent fixtures in this country, in what has been my home for the better part of my life.

June sixteenth. The date suddenly seems so insignificant to encompass everything we have experienced, an arbitrary date onto which we have piled all of our accomplishments and fears and nostalgias and *what ifs*.

*It was time for a change* might still be Papa's favourite answer to people's curiosity, but now he usually says it with a smile.