

*Nine.*

On the way up Elsa could count the steps cut into the rock. She could look at the hibiscus flowers unfolding in the morning sun, or the oblong tiles that ran in an olive-green border each side of the hospital doors. At the top she turned round as she had been told, ready to go back down again, and that was when the whole of the western district, a straggle of three and four-storey buildings running along the waterside, started to swing around in front of her. She tried to fix her gaze on something certain and unmoving, like the strip of sea that was Victoria Harbour, or the two small islands out in the water, but they refused to stay still, and her hand shook as she ran it down the rail.

She breathed in and out, counting slowly. People had told her it would take her a year to settle in Hong Kong, but she'd had to make do with nine months. She'd started to feel sick the day they'd arrived. Everything had made her nauseous – the smell of petrol on the ferries that zigzagged across the mile-wide stretch of water between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, the champagne teas they served at the Peninsula Hotel on the other side, and the fancy dinners that she went to with Tommy at the Jockey Club.

*One, two, three.*

'How are you getting on?' a nurse called down from the top, impatiently. They were busy. The third-class ward was full of Chinese women who seemed to know already how to give birth. Elsa had seen some of them walking away down Pok Fu Lam Road, holding a baby in one arm and a light bag with the other. She was starting to feel like a nuisance. It had been three days now. The nurses told her to keep moving, that's what would get the baby to shift, and she did as she was told, but nothing was happening. Tommy had been to see her and gone back to the office again.

'You need to relax,' the nurse had said. 'You're going to have a terrible labour if you don't relax.'

No one had said it would be like this. The women at the Peninsula had laughed and told her to think of England and remember that it would all be over before too long. She'd looked at them, not making sense of what they were saying, not able to believe that time was pressing in on her swollen frame, moving her forward to a point when she would turn from one person into two, and there would be no going back.

Ever since she'd arrived in Hong Kong they'd kept up a stream of advice, these over-friendly women – *and of course, you can get an amah as well as a cook; remember to turn the blinds down at midday, it's not too bad now but it's going to get unbearable before long; the other thing you'll need is really good, strong mosquito nets* – but none of them had told her she would be standing on the steps of the Queen Mary feeling

alone and afraid, wanting her mother.

*Four, five, six.*

The pain came again. She let out a sharp breath, trying to control it, but it pushed its way up inside and overwhelmed her, so that she reached out for the rail again and cried out.

'Who has left her here like this?'

She heard a man's voice at the edges of her consciousness. Although it sounded angry, she was thankful for it. She tried to lift her head, but she stumbled forward. All she could see was the corner of a white coat and sensible shoes, good English brogues, and she felt reassured.

'How long has she been like this?' he said.

'Not long.' It was the nurse's voice, defensive. 'Baby's not moving. We had to keep her on her feet.'

Elsa felt herself being lifted onto a stretcher and the corridors of the hospital sliding past. She put her arms out to hold onto something, to keep everything still, but someone put them back in at her sides again. The gold hands on the nurse's watch close to her face moved inevitably forward, ticking silently, blocking everything else from view. Her apron smelled of carbolic soap.

'How old is she?' It was the man's voice again.

'It's none of your business how old I am.'

The man's face came closer to hers. He had red hair and freckles that had almost disappeared into his tanned face. His eyes were set so deep in their sockets it was difficult to see what colour they were.

'It's very much my business, Mrs...'

'Jones,' the nurse said. 'Twenty. First baby.'

The way she said it made Elsa think of another baby, and then another. She couldn't imagine herself walking around the Peak with a perambulator, with a newborn in the pram and a couple of toddlers in tow.

*Don't worry, darling,* the women had said in the Peninsula, crossing and uncrossing their legs and lighting cigarettes. *You can get someone to do that for you.*

*Seven, eight, nine.*

She wanted the stretcher to change direction, to take her back to the front door of the hospital and leave her there. She wanted this angry doctor's voice to go away and stop shouting orders. But the nurses wheeled her into the middle of a bright, bare room that hurt her eyes. They lifted her onto a bed and switched on a light above her head. She looked up and saw her face reflected in its metal frame, her features young and formless.

'I'm Dr Campbell, the man said. 'We're just giving you something for the pain.' One of his fingers caught her hair as he turned towards the table behind him.

The nurse squeezed Elsa's arm tight and put a needle in.

The doctor came back to the bed and bent over her.

'Where's your husband?'

'At the customs building,' she said.

'Connaught Road?'

His face seemed very close to hers again.

'Yes. Why?'

'I need to send someone down right away to get his signature on these forms.'

'What forms?'

'There's a new operation they've started doing, in America.'

She struggled to sit up, but he put a hand on her shoulder until she lay back down.

'Is everything all right?' she asked.

'I'm doing my best to make it all right.' His voice had lost its harsh edges, but the look on his face didn't make her feel any better. He glanced away as he held the stethoscope to her chest and listened. She stared at the outer rim of his ear, at the perfect curve of skin and cartilage. When he looked straight at her again everything balanced out, the oversized ears, long nose and deep-cut cheekbones. She wondered if he could hear the baby's heartbeat flickering under her skin, like a trapped moth beating its wings senselessly as it tried to get out.

A hot line burned its way across her chest. They told her not to look down so she looked up, and saw everything reflected in the metal edge of the light. She saw the doctor pick up a knife and a sliver of red racing across her stomach. She saw his gloved fingers pulling the flesh back. She watched as a head attached to four small frog legs was lifted out.

She waited, and wondered what she was waiting for.

'You'll need a trousseau,' Nannon had said, when Elsa had told her she was getting married and going to Hong Kong. 'And there's the heat to consider. Let's have a think.'

She leaned over the glass counter. She picked up a smooth piece of tailor's chalk and set to writing notes to herself on the back of a satin offcut.

That was Nannon all over. Whatever the occasion – a wedding, baptism, or homecoming – she would look it up in one of her books, and write out a list. Once she'd finished she would leave them lying around, only to find them later, abandoned under the sewing machine, or next to the till. She'd read them through, perplexed, saying, 'Whatever was that all about? What on earth would I have been making with tulle *and* bengaline?' as if the mysteries of her past self were too fragmented for her even to begin to stitch them back together. Finally she lowered her eyebrows, the furrows on her forehead disappeared, and she immersed herself in the certainties of the present again.

'How hot is it out there, anyway? In summer, I mean?'

'Very?' Elsa shrugged her shoulders. 'I'm not sure.' She thought of all the things she didn't know yet about Hong Kong.

Nannon pulled open the shallow drawers under the counter. She brought out copies of fashion magazines and a dog-eared manual on etiquette. Elsa used to flinch when Nannon looked things up in that book, licking her index finger and riffling through the pages until she landed on the one she wanted. The next stage would be Elsa in her petticoat and Nannon with a mouthful of pins, until whatever it was – Elsa's school uniform, or a dress for her first dinner dance – was sewn together and ironed out and hung up.

This time was no exception. No matter that Elsa was getting married before her, and going to the other side of the world. Growing up at last. Nannon was going to see Elsa right, she said. Do them both proud.

She started on one of her lists, and Elsa waited, knowing better than to interrupt. The shop smelled of Nannon, the way she smelled first thing in the morning when she'd splashed her face with lavender water and combed her hair out and put it up in a bun on the top of her head. She smelled of camphor and roses and freshly baked biscuits.

'The average bride will also need three to four house dresses,' – Nannon's forehead wrinkled up again as she read aloud from the book – 'two or three tea aprons, and one large apron for kitchen work. The bride who expects to entertain women friends extensively and who moves in an extravagant set should also have a tea gown or lounging pajamas.'

'Lounging pajamas it is, then,' she said, setting her chalk down on the counter decisively. 'Whatever they might be.' She sniffed, reaching for her tape measure.

Elsa didn't wear the pajamas, or the aprons. In Hong Kong everyone had a cook for lunch and went out for dinner. The aprons hung on the back of the kitchen door. Nannon had made them out of one of their mother's old dresses, one of Elsa's favourites, a pale blue gingham, serviceable and summery, intended Elsa knew to remind her of their mother without recalling the dark, frozen memory of losing her.

When Elsa, trying to distract herself, told her Hong Kong friends that at home men dressed up for New Year in sheets and ribbons and carried a horse's skull from house to house, as a kind of prank played on neighbours to add to the evening's entertainment, they forgot their manners and let out huge belly laughs. 'Yes, they call it the Mari Lwyd, the horse,' Elsa said, getting quite carried away, enjoying her audience, and they tittered again, and she realised they weren't laughing with her, and she stopped talking.

And she remembered that when her mother was ill no one had told her what was happening, at first. She sat in the kitchen excited because it was New Year's Eve, listening to Megan, the girl who came in to help with the washing and scrubbing, talking about the Mari Lwyd.

'Is it a real horse?' Elsa asked. 'Or a ghost?'

Megan laughed, stirring a pot on the range.

'Neither. It's men dressed up, it is. They put a big white sheet over their heads and one of them carries a horse's skull hung with ribbons all

colours, and when you open the door they want to give you a fright. Just for fun.'

Megan had been too cheerful, far more cheerful than usual. Usually she had a face like a mangle, their father said, but on that day she'd been making an effort to appear lively, perhaps under orders. Everything in the kitchen was too cosy and warm. In Elsa's memory every surface shines: the table, the row of pans hanging over the range, the little coffee pot from Mexico that Elsa loves so much. And their mother, lying back in bed upstairs, her cheeks flushed and her hair out around her on the pillow, making her look young, not like someone about to die.

But still Elsa had no idea. Her father had been home for longer than usual, it was true, so she'd had time to get used to him again, to the English words that he scattered like seeds through the tilled rows of his Welsh, and to wonder what it meant, some of it, that was too quick for her. All she knew was that their mother was out of sorts, and that she was in bed.

And then, in her memory of it at least, Megan is gone, and her father is gone and she is sitting alone in the kitchen, listening to the *cawl* bubble in its pot. There is a knock at the back door and she rushes to open it, looking forward to the fun and the surprise and the pretty ribbons, and calling *Mammy, Mammy, everyone, come and see, what fun*, and then the door is open and the dressed-up horse looks like a real dead horse, his teeth gnashing in his skull and she is terrified and screams and screams and her father is crying out harshly upstairs in a voice she has never heard before, and Nannon, too tall and thin, comes downstairs and puts her finger to her lips and takes Elsa to see their mother lying still with her eyes open and the windows shut and their father with his back turned away from them. Her mother's face was flat on the pillow, and her lips had ridden up a little back off her teeth, showing a perfect row of white pearls with serrated edges.

That was the last time anyone called at Gwelfor on New Year's Eve. Nannon made up their black dresses from one of her fashion magazines with Elsa at her side, passing her the pins and thread, neither of them saying a word. Although Elsa was only nine, she understood well enough. How could Nannon even begin to prick the surface of their loss? There was no manual for that.

Elsa listened to the rhythmic turn of the fan above the light. She looked at the top of the doctor's head, as he moved over to a small side table with a glaring spotlight above it. She turned to see what was going on, but the nurses told her not to.

In the room next door a baby yowled. Cars passed occasionally on the road below that led to Repulse Bay. Footsteps hurried along corridors with polished linoleum floors.

The fan hanging from the ceiling cut through the air a few more times, and then stopped. Someone had switched it off. The doctor and

two nurses were standing over at the small table, looking into a towel spread out under the light, like a half-opened package. No one was saying anything.

She counted without breathing. She hadn't expected this.

*Seven, eight, nine.*

Silence.

When her mother had died, Elsa had spent days sitting at the kitchen table. She'd read books, practised her looped handwriting and looked at the food that Nannon made. Sometimes she fell asleep there, elbows pushed out and her head resting on her forearms, so that her face felt creased and uncomfortable when she woke up. Nannon understood, and said nothing. She took the food away and left Elsa to sit at the table. Their mother had called herself a proper New Quay woman (although she had always smiled when she said 'proper': *Let the men travel to Peru, or round Cape Horn, or to Australia and back*, she said); her four-cornered world was this Pembroke table, with a drawer in its side for cutlery, and flaps that could be folded away. It wasn't a kitchen table, not really, it was too delicate and portable for that, but their mother had made it hers. She kept the flaps propped open and used it to pluck chickens, roll out pastry, make apple jelly, and to do the accounts. When they needed to eat she took a fresh tablecloth out and unfolded it and flicked it open so that its corners flew up into the air before landing on the table, and Elsa used to set out the cutlery, big pieces of silver with heavy handles. If there was ironing to be done, her mother put an old blanket over it while the iron heated up on the range behind her. When their father came home (once, maybe twice a year, like other 'proper' New Quay men, except that sometimes the proper New Quay men didn't come back at all, not if they contracted yellow fever in Mauritius or malaria in Africa), it was on this table that his presents were tumbled out for them to pore over: wooden elephants from Kenya the size of Elsa's dolls, with tusks made of real bone, Japanese tea sets, music boxes with lacquered tops.

After the funeral the kitchen table became Elsa's centre of gravity too. While Nannon went for long walks, collecting wild flowers to take up to their mother's grave, Elsa ran her hands over the scored surface of the table, reading its bleached cracks like the lifelines on a handprint that became more difficult to distinguish as time went on, but never disappeared entirely.

When she came to Hong Kong with Tommy, she wanted to bring the table with her, to get it shipped over with the rest of her things, and Tommy said yes, anything she wanted she could have and that he would arrange it, but in the end she was afraid of something happening to it, and she left it behind with Nannon. It would have been too big for their apartment, anyway. The kitchen here had a formica table that rippled like marble, but Elsa couldn't sit at it now, in any case, because Wang was having his lunch.

She sat on the terrace watching the skiffs down in the harbour. Everything seemed very small from up here. The spacious grounds of

their apartment were studded with trees which muffled the sounds that rose up to the Peak from the city below. She had found it suffocating when they first moved here – she was used to New Quay's terraces of houses set close to each other with no room for trees, unless the gardens behind had been levelled into the hill. She liked seeing and hearing the sea up close. But she was glad to be hidden away here now; she didn't much care about their smart address, but she could stay away from the whist drives and parties and shows, and wait for the empty feeling inside her to recede.

But it didn't. Every day she felt more lethargic. Every time she moved, she felt the weight of herself as a single human unit, and the echo of something that wasn't there. It was easier to stay still.

'We can have another one as soon as you like,' Tommy whispered to her in bed at night, but she pulled away.

He tried other tactics, like asking Wang to sort out the nursery, turn it back into her dressing room while she was downtown having her hair done, but they had all ended badly.

'Meet me for lunch?' he'd said, before Wang drove him down to the customs building that morning.

She'd shaken her head.

When the doorbell went, Elsa didn't get up to answer it. She didn't want to talk to the neighbours. Passing the time of day was something she preferred to do alone now, each breath taking her further away from that moment when they'd lifted the baby out and found that he was dead.

The nurses hadn't wanted to let her see him, but Oscar Campbell had.

He'd looked tiny, and agitated, as if he'd been crying for a long time but no one had come to him. His fists were tightly curled together. She'd reached out and put her hand on his cheek. It was still warm; white mucus covered his features in a sticky web. His eyes were shut.

She knew Tommy was cross with the doctor for letting her see him.

'What purpose did you think it would serve?' she'd heard him saying.

'I did what I thought was best.'

'And what makes you think this was for the best?'

'She can draw a line under it now.'

She could see why Tommy was angry, though. It had drawn a line between them too. She had seen their baby and he hadn't. She could dwell on things if she wanted to. She'd given him a name, although nobody else knew about it, even Tommy, and sometimes she whispered to herself as if she were talking to him. *Come along Harry, time for your nap, or Time for your bath, or Let's go out for a walk now, Harry*. She could sit for a whole morning and reassemble him in her imagination. She could think of what she would have been doing first thing, when he would have had his feeds, or a clean nappy, or been carried up and down the verandah. If she sat here and walked her way through the day in her imagination, it was almost as good as him being there.

Tommy soon put a stop to that, though.

‘Wang says you haven’t moved all day.’

‘Wang isn’t my nurse, he’s my driver.’

‘He says you haven’t eaten anything either.’

The doorbell went again. Tommy said that drivers didn’t need to hear, but Elsa wished that Wang wasn’t quite so deaf. She was tired of shouting instructions at him. When she opened the front door there was a Chinese woman standing in the hall. Her eyes looked large in her face, and her hair was plaited elaborately and pinned up around her head.

‘Miss?’ she said.

‘What is it?’

‘You wanted to see me?’

Elsa looked at her, shaking her head.

‘We have an appointment,’ the woman ventured. ‘Wang said you have a vacancy, and I was told to come today.’

Trying to remember her way back to a time before the baby was like walking down from the Peak on the one winding road in the dark, getting lost under the candlenut trees.

‘Your services are no longer required.’

‘What?’

‘There is no baby, all right?’ Elsa raised her voice. ‘So you can go back down to wherever you came from and leave me alone.’

She slammed the door and went out onto the terrace. It was a clear day, despite the heat, and she could see over to the other side of Kowloon, where the buildings stopped and a row of hills stood up straight behind. The water in the harbour changed colour through the day, pale and hazy at first, a deep blue by the afternoon, and then a milky yellow just before sunset. If the weather was good and they had a free evening ahead of them, Tommy sometimes got Wang to drive them over the Peak and along the coast a little way. As twilight fell, they would often sit and watch the fishermen set to work. Two junks with a net suspended between them sailed in one direction, and a small *sampan* carrying kerosene lamps made for the gap between them. The light attracted the fish, Tommy said, and they went straight into the nets. She wanted to go for a spin that way now, with Wang driving quickly through the villages where people would look at her in the car as she passed, and not know anything of her pain, and she could look back at them through the glass, and feel nothing.

She went to the kitchen.

‘Ah Wang?’

Wang looked up, startled.

The formica table had been moved against the wall. He was sitting on the bamboo mat in the centre of the room. The woman who’d come to call was sitting with him. She held a patterned china cup between her fingers and sipped, delicately. There was a sweet smell in the air.

‘Excuse us, please,’ he said.

‘No, it’s fine. Don’t get up.’

‘This is my cousin, Lam,’ he said. ‘The captain asked her to come... anyway.’

‘I understand,’ she said. She looked at the woman sitting cross-legged on the floor. She felt embarrassed, standing over them like this, but didn’t want to sit down, either.

‘Please accept my apologies. I was very rude to you earlier,’ she said to the woman.

‘I’m sorry,’ the woman said. ‘You lost your baby.’

It was the first time someone had said it to her, made it real.

‘Captain Jones thought I could help. Keep you company until you want to go out again.’

‘I’d like that. Please, finish your tea and then we can talk in the living room.’

‘Yes, Miss.’ Lam lifted her teacup again.

Elsa went back to the living room and onto the verandah. She stood in the glare of the sunlight, and let it burn her skin. She looked at the poinsettia flowers glowing red against the blue glaze of their pots, and breathed in the cool smell of the tree shade on the hill behind. While she was waiting for Lam to come and sit with her, she read Nannon’s letter again. They arrived once a week, on the dot. She stared at the neat handwriting, blowsy in places. *Rain again this morning, and cool. You’d never say it was June. The rapeseed is out though, big bold stripes of it across the fields, thick as butter.*

Francesca Rhydderch, *The Rice Paper Diaries* Seren, 2013