

# LAU SIEW MEI

Author of the critically acclaimed *Playing Madame Mao*



# THE LAST IMMIGRANT



A NOVEL

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## PROLOGUE

Cats are nothing if not trouble, yet the Prophet had a cat and enjoined his followers to be kind to animals. A cat wandered the streets, marking people with its hypnotic blue eyes. The cat belonged to Ismael. *Ismael.*

Born prematurely at Kandang Kerbau Hospital in Singapore, he was cradled to his mother's breast when the name came to her. And while his father went through a catalogue of possibilities—"Abdul, Ahmad, Ali," he recited solemnly—she looked down at the tiny puckered old man's face, and inspiration came to her lips: "His name is Ismael." She tasted the sound and liked it.

She could not say how she knew that was his name but with it, she placed upon the baby the whole burden of its religious and historical significance; after all, Ismael was the first child God named prior to birth. There were others, later: Jesus, John; but he was the first. There is significance in that. Haven't the history of the Middle East and its perennial squabbles been linked to his name or rather the way he was treated? The Man-planned, Man-created solution to nothingness or barrenness; surely, it is where the blame can be assigned? But just as surely, Ismael's mother had no thought of what she had laid upon him when she named him.

"Ismael?" said his father and then in haste, as he saw a wrinkle forming in the mother's brow, "Good. Good name, nothing better."

He coughed and secretly mulled over other possibilities. What about taking his father's name? But looking at his baby lying quietly in his wife's contented arms, he knew it was not an option. So, after a jerky start, Ismael grew into a small, skinny boy with a thin layer of skin covering bony arms and legs, and then into a small, plump man with a walrus moustache and jelly-like paunch on a body less used to vigorous exertion, more readily given to sitting.

And sitting or standing, Ismael in his naivety or passivity was an outsider. Was Ismael not an aberration in the scheme of things? As a boy, he recited the Koran with his father while nightly his mother put the sign of the cross on his brow. He grew up not knowing whether Jesus died on the cross or had his place switched with Judas before being taken up to heaven.

He never really found out.

Judas died?

Died on the cross.

Story secret told. "*The Gospel of Barnabas*," his father said. A promise made not to tell his mother. "She doesn't understand such things."

Ismael understood secrets. He also kept the secret of his mother's stories of the resurrection.

He thought of his energetic birdlike mother who haunted the kitchen and shopping malls, into which she lured him with delicacies and promises of presents.

*Herstory* was repeated, tales of childhood and grown-up years, as he perched on a kitchen stool eating or as he stormed through endless serried ranks of shops clutching her hand.

His tall, skinny father hovered uncertainly in his own home, seeming to exist in awkward corners, surrounded by books, enthralling

Ismael with poetry words and abstract problems to which there were no solutions.

He knew his father had not been happy with his name but had given up trying to rename him. His father had told him the story of his birth. He liked hearing it and wanted his father to repeat it.

\*

Ismael's psalm is of the wandering man, the song of the lost, the outcast, the wild one born to a slave woman, the child wrought out of man's will, not God's.

The boy, thirsting in the desert, whistled upon the wind, and the dry sound went out and was scattered upon the millions of dust grains.

"Rise up," his mother was told as she wept for what seemed the end of her son.

"I will make him a great nation," declared God.

Hagar's eyes were opened and she saw a well of water. The boy drank from the bottle she held to his cracked lips, and so lived to become a man in the Wilderness of Paran. He was destined to be a prophet...

A prophet! But when has a prophet ever come out of Brisbane?

## PART ONE

“The public servant must be broad-shouldered and stout-hearted. His burden is heavy and his way is long. For humaneness is the burden he has taken on himself; is it not true that it is a heavy one to bear?”

**CONFUCIUS**

“I reject, in conscience, the idea that Australia should or ever can become a multiracial society and survive.”

**ARTHUR CALWELL, AUSTRALIA'S FIRST IMMIGRATION MINISTER, LEADER OF THE LABOUR PARTY FROM 1960-1967 AND SUPPORTER OF THE WHITE AUSTRALIA POLICY**





## CHAPTER 1

Ismael's unusual pilgrimage took him from Singapore to the States and then to Brisbane.

"So where are all the people?" Ismael's father complained when he stood in the garden outside the house. In their fear of separation from potential grandchildren, Ismael's parents had followed him to Queensland, Australia, where he had chosen to migrate after his marriage.

Ismael's father was more than a little uneasy as he looked up and down their suburban street and saw no one. Not one single person. This was so unlike what he was accustomed to—there wasn't even a car moving—but Ismael's mother was pleased that her neighbours were practically invisible.

"What people you want? If we don't see them, they don't see us. No one spying."

Gossip, tongues that moved quicksilver in hell mouths, malice...all these she resented. "Making trouble," she called it. She hoped to leave all of that behind in Singapore: Singapore, where Ismael had been born.

While Ismael's mother could raise her voice and be loud and chirpy within her home, she was relatively sombre outside it and Ismael did not know of what exactly she was afraid. The way she spoke of it, one would think that gossip, temporarily lost in the ocean crossing, might well be like a lizard that had lost its tail but would one day make its appearance again.

\*

Ten years since his parents passed away, he still missed them. He and his American-born wife, Natalie Mary Chan-Williams, had moved after his parents' deaths to a neighbouring suburb.

The street they lived on was called Fish Lane. Down both sides of the street, which ended in a cul-de-sac, houses were neatly planted, six altogether. Each had a U-shaped plot of land in front and a U-shaped back garden. Without gate or fencing, the front yard of each was laid open to any intruders: none, it seemed, was expected. The houses were designed for a safe, comfortable world. It was a quiet neighbourhood.

When Ismael's parents first moved to Brisbane and his father had ventured for walks in his neighbourhood, someone had reported to the police that a "threatening foreigner" was stalking their streets.

Fish Lane veered off the end of Merchant Street. A rather misleading sign at the top of Merchant Street read "No Through Road", which tended to repel drivers searching for it. It was also not clearly marked on the Brisbane city referdex. This made it hard for first-time visitors to find.

At the start of the street that sloped downwards was No. 1 and in it resided a woman from Turkey, whom Ismael knew as Mira, and her unmarried son, Yusuf, who looked about 16 but who she assured everyone was 30 years old. No one saw the father and so assumed that he was dead or had abandoned his wife and son. She worked odd hours as a cleaner in a hospital and was seldom seen.

On the same side was No. 3 where Anna, Darren and Darren's mother lived. Anna, slightly built with shoulder-length black hair and a small, white triangular face, walked like a ghost, shunning attention. Ismael

was unsure of her heritage. Her husband looked like an Anglo-Australian although he had mentioned to Nat, some time ago, that he had Russian blood in his ancestry. That would be from his mother, Marina.

No. 5 came next and that was where Ismael lived with his wife, Nat, and daughter, Sara. Bill and Marge were retirees and lived in No. 4 across the road from Darren and Anna, but Bill had died and left Marge a widow. They had come to Brisbane many years ago from the country, the Atherton Tablelands up north, where their families were sugar cane farmers.

In No. 2, on an incline, which caused the house to stand at a higher point than the rest, lived a Malaysian Chinese woman who grew her own vegetables, with a name Nat had only vaguely registered ("Sounds like Waiting"). Nat had talked to her but Ismael had merely uttered pleasantries. Waiting had a young daughter, the youngest person on the street. In No. 6, opposite Ismael's home, was Cephas' house.

*Fish Lane*, thought Ismael as he stepped onto it, *is ageing*. Tree roots cracked the asphalt. The wayside trees had grown so large they formed an umbrella under which was a greenish gloom. It was a haunt of cats. Most were strays, scruffy and battle-worn with scratches under the eyes, but among them, you had the privileged cats with the well-groomed fur and rounded bellies, some with collars, some without, so you had no way of knowing who fed them.

One cat who saw the street as her particular territory was Imelda. She had been given her name because her paws looked like pretty black shoes and reminded Nat of the wife of a former Philippine president. Imelda, however, was Siamese. She was affectionate though contrary in her affections, clever and mischievous. She liked to settle in the shadows and watch the movements of birds and people.

The inhabitants of Fish Lane were occasionally awakened by sudden squalls of catfights at times when all should be asleep. The strays that descended onto the street unleashed unearthly yowls, ululating through the rows of houses in the cul-de-sac. And Ismael, listening to them as he lay in bed, understood; for they, like him, longed for acceptance, no, more than that, appreciation, and somewhere to belong.

With Bill's death, Fish Lane had become a street of dead or absent husbands, missing fathers who had gone AWOL; a street of widows, abandoned wives, forlorn women—with the exceptions of Ismael's household consisting of himself, a wife, a daughter, a cat and several goldfish; Cephas' blue bachelor house; and not forgetting Darren with his Russian mother and ghostly wife.

Ismael crossed the street to rap at the door to No. 6. It was his wont to drop in for a chat in the late afternoon or early evening. No one came to the door. He tried the handle and pushed the door inward. Cephas often left the door unlocked at this hour so Ismael could make his way in. Sometimes he would be baking in the kitchen so the house would be warm and the smell of freshly baking cake or biscuits would assail his lungs.

“Cephas,” he called; then again, a bit louder.

\*

The cats might well point the way towards home; they beckoned with sound much as a streetlight showed the path to one's door.

Ismael's father once said his face was like a lamppost, “so narrow, so thin, then there is the light shining in your eyes”; he would cup his large hands over Ismael's cheeks and pretend he was hanging on.

“Watch. Watch now,” his father said, pointing out their favourite scene in a movie. He held the hand of Ismael's mother as they sat upon the sofa. Ismael watched Gene Kelly dancing around the lamppost on the small TV screen. The lamppost was a marker. A signpost for security and happiness. It captured a period in Ismael's childhood. In that one moment, he was perfectly happy.

As a boy, Ismael's skin had been translucent, so the blue-green veins were visible and the outlines of his bones stood out. He bruised easily. His father was adept at making things and one day, Ismael came home with large bruises on his knees and shins to find that his father had made him a colourful hand puppet with a long nose. Holding it, he forgot his battle wounds.

“It talks,” his father said, slipping his hand inside the puppet. “Listen.” He bent the puppet's head towards Ismael's ear.

Ismael listened and he thought he could almost hear a tiny voice. “What is he saying?”

His father put his ear beside the puppet. “He says he comes from somewhere far away. Maybe Iran.”

His father had a talent for speaking through his hand, i.e., through the hand puppet. That was often how they had a conversation. Ismael would lean against his father's shirt and watch the puppet while pressing his ear to his father's heartbeat, which thumped hollowly in his chest.

He still had the hand puppet tucked away under his socks in a drawer.

\*

Ismael half-stumbled as he crossed the threshold. Imelda followed him inside, getting under his feet, rubbing herself against his legs. He could

smell something welcoming from the kitchen. Ismael automatically went that way but his wife was peeling carrots and did not move towards him. Imelda was now mewling at her feet.

Ismael had married his mother. Not literally, but Nat and his mother shared certain characteristics, like their small build, bony shoulder blades and messy dark hair. He remembered the occasion that had prompted him to propose. They had gone to a movie in town and then walked by a river. He had looked at the girl beside him, at her smooth hair and skin, her paisley skirt floating around her ankles and her small feet in huge red clogs. Nat liked to wear clogs in her university days in the United States, where Ismael had gone for his studies. The clogs made a loud clacking noise as she moved about.

"I'm tired," she said after a while and sat down on a bench. He stood next to her, looking silently at the expanse of sparkling water, and he heard a thud. He looked down. One of her clogs had fallen off her foot.

He looked at her foot, the shape of it and her toes. She had painted toenails. They were black in colour. He bent to pick up her clog and found himself with one knee on the ground. From that position, it was easy to propose, almost inevitable. He looked up at her as he fit her clog back onto her foot and the words came naturally out of his mouth.

\*

Ismael came back to the house, earlier than Nat expected. She looked up to see his apple shape looming in the doorway of the kitchen. "Dinner'll be ready soon."

He was staring at her. He opened his mouth to say something then closed it. He sniffed the air. Probably Irish stew. He paused a moment,

gazing at nothing in particular then wandered off to watch the six o'clock news on TV.

He saw it then on the TV screen.

The recent arrivals.

As yet another boatload of asylum seekers from whatever country they were from—Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, China, it didn't matter, they were all olive-skinned, Muslim and terrorists (Buddhists? Didn't that rhyme with the last word in that last sentence?)—sailed into the waters of Oz Land, the media went into a frenzy beating their tom-toms and shooting fireworks into the air.

The emperor banged on his chest and all the officials of Fortress Australia followed suit, "We will decide who comes into this country, how they come and how they leave."

Of course, the leaving part was what they were after, just as the equally determined boatload of contagion was desirous of landing. Ismael really did not know why. Why come when you are not wanted?

Sometimes while talking to his colleagues in Fortress Australia, he had a sense of their ganging up together when threatened. No one wanted the intruders' foreign cultures and values. No one wanted the strange customs of their homelands. No one knew precisely how these people differed from the humans living in Oz but surely, everyone knew that when foreign germs invaded one's body, one had to fight. Just like all those countries around the globe that were fighting to repel foreigners who insisted on bringing their foreign values in the shape of democracy.

Ismael saw Oz as his home but the way some people went on, he knew they lumped him in the category of foreigner. "When are you going home?" a new colleague once asked, and Ismael was about to say,

“At six,” when she added, “To your country,” and he realised the woman was asking when he was returning to Singapore.

Didn't they know how short-sighted some of the official ravings were? All they did was alienate him and others like him. At any sign of dissent, immigrants, legal or otherwise, were reminded of their status as second-class citizens and told that if they didn't like things here, they should leave. It seemed to him that almost every time a boat arrived, controversy followed. Just then, on TV, seeing those people reminded him of— Ismael's forehead began to throb. He looked around for the little bottle of lavender oil Nat used for headaches. He could hear her voice from the kitchen, which led off the living room through an open archway. Waves of sound came and went, half-penetrating his consciousness.

“Marge's complained about Imelda scratching her car. I didn't want to be rude but she did go on. Anyway, dinner's ready.”

Nat came out of the kitchen with two heaped plates, which she placed onto the dining table. “Just us today. Sara won't be eating at home. She's out with her friends.”

Ismael got to his feet, feeling dazed. They ate in an alcove at one end of the living room. An ear-rending screech ending in an ominous hum jerked Ismael to the window. Looking out, he saw Imelda, her tail in the air, facing a small black cat Ismael took to be a stray. The stray was in their front yard and Imelda was guarding her territory.

“Let her be,” Nat said peering out from his side. “She'll vanquish that intruder and come back in.” She went back to the table. But before Ismael turned away, one of his neighbours—Anna—darted into the yard and grabbed the small cat. She retreated towards her own house. Imelda, looking triumphant, stalked back indoors.

Ismael patted her head but she ignored him and went to her water bowl to drink. Ismael sat down to his meal. He didn't know his neighbours kept a cat. He hoped there wouldn't be a repeat of tonight's incident. Imelda might hurt the little one or suffer some scratches herself.

He ate his dinner then rose slowly, his head ached, his legs ached and he wanted nothing more than to go to bed. Evening like a temptress had drawn a grey veil across the face of the sky, and inside the house, only the electric lights fought the intruding night.

Then his wife's face blurred and as he held the back of his chair for support, he saw, with the same amount of conviction as he saw Nat, a boy with his eyes black as the unstirred depths of the sea and just as wide, with skin a greenish tinge like a touch of seaweed.

What it all came down to in Ismael's befuddled mind was that in an instant his world was changed. He knew his world changed all the time but some changes come in tiny steps so when it happens it is barely discernible from what has gone before, while others fall on you all at once.

Nat was asking, “Are you okay?”

He blinked. How much time had passed? “Did something happen?” he asked.

“Something? No. You just stood there like you'd gone to sleep. You had this awful look on your face then you sat down like an automaton.”

“Oh,” Ismael said weakly. He could not control his body.

“What's wrong?” he heard his wife asking. “Iz?”

Ismael told her.

On entering No. 6, he had a sense of emptiness. He wondered where his friend could be. No one had answered his call. He stepped deeper into the house. Blue walls surrounded him like a promise of eternity and then he found Cephas.

“I found him, Nat.” Ismael’s shoulders shook. “He was lying on the floor. He’s dead.”

“Did you call for an ambulance?” Nat cried.

“He was dead. What’s the point?” Ismael shivered.

Nat rose. “I’ll go over. You stay here.”

She ran out of the house. She was gone for what seemed to Ismael only a few minutes but was probably more. She looked ill and her lips were tight. “I called the ambulance. And dialled the first number on his speed dial. He has a sister in Brisbane. She’ll come over.”

Ismael took her hand, which was cold and unresponsive. She would have had a shock seeing the dead body, just as he had.

“You’d better take it easy,” Nat continued. “You could take tomorrow off work. You were quite close to Cephas.”

*Cephas*, thought Ismael. *How close had he been, really? How well had he known him?* The strange thing was it was not Cephas he had just seen.

\*

Cephas’ incredibly blue living room leapt up to greet him as it always did—it was like stepping into the sky; it took him a while every time to adjust to all that blueness.

“Cephas,” he called and then again like an echo.

He wandered into each room looking for his friend. In the room Cephas had used to counsel his clients, the room he termed The Nest, Ismael found his friend lying amidst blue and vomit-splattered cushions. He was unnaturally pale and still.

Time carved itself into his mind. Ismael sat in Cephas’ living room,

without moving. At one point, he heard a loud miaow, and getting up, saw down a corridor Imelda framed in the open front doorway.

“Scat, you silly cat!” he said, but Imelda lifted eerie blue eyes up to his. Hands trembling, Ismael touched her and let her be. Her warmth was comforting. Imelda miaowed and pulled away.

It might have been a treacherous thought but it came nevertheless: *Did Cephas plan for me to find him? He knew I was coming over. He said nothing to warn me.*

Ismael stared down at his plate of now cold meat and potatoes and moved his fork about.

“You don’t have to finish that,” Nat said, wearily. “I put too much on your plate. I’ll bring you a cup of tea.”

Ismael went to sit on the sofa in the living room. He wondered idly if a *living room* was alive or was able to inject life into those who sat there. His hand touched a book on the side table. *The History of Emperor Wenxuan*, Cephas’ book, which he had lent him recently but which Ismael had still not read; now he could not return it.

Nat came out of the kitchen with a plastic tray in her hands and placed it on the coffee table.

“No one dies unless God wills,” Ismael said to her. He was quoting the Koran.

Nat stared at him. “I think you should let go and cry.”

She poured a cup of tea from the silver teapot and put it in front of him. She shoved a plate of dried medjool dates towards him. Ismael took a sip. Lapsang souchong. It was strong and smoky. Waves of comfort coursed through his body. He picked up a date.

A caterwauling arose in the street. It sounded like a catfight. *Possibly a comfort of cats*, he thought wryly. Nat looked tired. There were heavy

dark rings weighing down her eyes. They made him think of the heavy earrings worn by some tribes. He realised with a little shock that he had not looked closely at his wife in a while.

“Thank you,” he said, feeling slightly ashamed. “Thanks for being so strong.”

Nat’s lips twisted slightly into a smile.

“The term of every life is fixed,” Ismael murmured. That was also in the Koran. So why did Cephas take matters into his own hands?

He asked this aloud. A pause ensued.

He knew he was upsetting her though she did not show it.

“I wonder how long the term of my life is,” Nat finally said.

Ismael drank his tea and did not reply. Nat’s question had sounded rhetorical. She sighed and moved to where Ismael sat on the sofa and put an arm over his shoulder.

“Better to let it out,” she urged. “If you don’t cry, it’ll eat up your insides.”

But Ismael’s tears poured out of his body as sweat. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine Cephas as he was, not with the empty face and shrunken body as he had last seen him.

They sat in that position for a few minutes. “I’ve had enough. I might go to bed,” Ismael muttered to Nat.

He took his cup and saucer to the kitchen and washed up. Imelda trotted in and decided in that contrary way of hers, to make up for her previous unfriendliness. She twined herself around his ankles.

He looked out the kitchen window to the dark, empty street. His neighbours seemed to have collectively vanished. Not even the cats were there. He dried his hands on a fluffy white dishtowel hanging on a rail. The image of the boy flashed into his mind. Salim! Then it was gone.

“Goodnight,” he called as he crossed the living room. Nat was drawing the heavy curtains to screen out the street. An ambulance pulled up opposite. Before the curtains closed, he caught a glimpse of people stepping onto Cephas’ lawn.

Imelda was commanding the sofa. His life was plagued by that cat.

Nat replied, “G’night,” and curled up in an armchair to watch TV. He looked at the stern curve of her wan profile for a moment then went to the bedroom.

He could hear the sounds from the TV so lying down, he put his arm over his ear.

When Nat came up later, Ismael was still awake. She tugged at the quilt and settling herself, turned her head towards him.

“Not sleeping?”

“No,” he said, unnecessarily.

“The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, ‘A person with outward courage dares to die. A person with inward courage dares to live.’” She paused. He heard anger behind the words.

“I’m not thinking about Cephas,” he said. “I’m thinking about death in general.”

“You think about death to avoid living,” Nat said in an accusing sort of way. She pushed her pillow around to find the most comfortable spot.

“Wrong. I think about death so I can know how to live,” Ismael retorted. Nat could not understand. “I almost died as a child.”

“You? How?”

He had to face her.

“Why haven’t you told me this before, huh?”

“I almost drowned,” he said. “We were on the river and there was an evil spirit.”

No, he had not meant to bring this up. His mouth had lost its connection to his brain. "Let's not talk about it now. It is late. I'll tell you some other time."

Ismael turned over before she could object and gave the appearance of falling asleep but his mind could not rest. Cephas...no, why had Salim appeared this evening? He had buried all thought of him for so long. The image of his face came with clarity.

Ismael lay on his side with his eyes open. He saw, as if it were still day and the room still lit, a school housed in a wooden building with peeling paint and hard benches, a large room dusty with chalk, childish drawings stuck on a wall, hens clucking outside and he, amongst a group of children, raising his hand. Amongst the faces, one face. One accursed face.



## CHAPTER 2

Ismael had not wanted to go on the trip. His grandmother was from a different world, a long ago time, and apart from caresses he had reluctantly accepted and food he had willingly devoured, he had not had much to do with her.

She had been born in Sarawak during the reign of one of the three white rajahs of the Brooke family. He did not know which one.

He knew she did not worship either Allah or Jesus but believed instead in spirits and demons of various kinds and placed her faith in shamans who dealt in magic and bomohs who possessed the arts of healing.

He was around 14. His mother had come to the door of his bedroom. She stood there not saying anything and he could tell something momentous was going to happen to him.

"You know Grandma would like to see you. She's been all alone for a while now," she said.

He was cutting his toenails so he focussed on clipping it neatly. He glanced at her then stared at his toes.

"You'll like the change," she said.

When she said that, Ismael knew he was meant to go regardless of how he felt and that he had no say.

His grandparents had returned to Sarawak many years ago after living, working and raising their children in Singapore. Ismael's grand-



father had some notion of dying where he was born. It was some ten years later before he did.

He and his sister were in school so his mother travelled with his aunt to be with him before he died. Her siblings were scattered. One with her in Singapore, one had gone to Kuala Lumpur, one in Penang, one in the United States and one in Canada. Ismael, his sister and his father had gone up for the funeral but stayed only a short while.

He did not need to ask to know his mother wanted him away from home. It was so she and his dad could carry on quarrelling without him around. Their relationship had deteriorated into a series of recriminations and loneliness. Ismael was the only one still home as his sister had gone off to university overseas and lived on campus, coming home on her longer holidays.

He thought his mother could at least tell him how long he would be gone but she answered in a vague way.

“So when am I going?” he asked in a voice that suggested he knew it had been settled.

“Next week. Don’t take too many books. Your bag will be heavy. Okay?”

He nodded because it was expected.

“Good boy. Another thing. Your dad’s friend will be on the plane. Some business he has. And I want you to take this to your grandma.”

“What is it?”

Stillness lent her body the quality of a doll. She was half-hiding a packet in her hand. “This. Give it to her. Be careful.”

Ismael took it gingerly. “What’s it?”

“A charm,” she said reluctantly. “She gave it to me when I married. ‘A marriage charm,’ she said. She can have it back. We don’t need it. I

didn’t want it in the first place but it was my wedding day and I didn’t want to fuss.” Her face looked sad.

Ismael packed his bags, choosing a number of books and summer clothes. He decided he would try to read *The Blind Owl*, one of the books his dad talked about. He sat on his bed clutching a photo of his parents, his sister and himself posing outside an Indonesian restaurant on Boat Quay on his sister’s last holiday home. His head drooped. The beak of *The Blind Owl* opened and closed to swallow his last glimpse of it.

\*

Ismael’s mother kept his memories of his grandparents fresh in his mind by digging out old photos to show him from time to time. Photos of him in his grandmother’s arms as a baby, then as a child playing, a little bigger. Visits they had made to Malaysia.

His grandmother’s face added a few wrinkles as the photos progressed, and softened with age. Her bones were lovely so without the padding of youth, she grew better looking as she got older. Her hair kept its style in the photos. It was long but he had not seen it loose. A bun controlled it and an enamelled comb perched regally on the bun.

She was as familiar to him as his mother who resembled her so when she hurried towards him at the airport, smiling with the gaps showing in her teeth, he called out to her.

“Come, boy,” she said at last after showering him with hugs and kisses. “How was the plane? How about your mum and dad? Good?”

He said goodbye to his dad’s friend, who having business in the region had accompanied him on the plane, and followed his grandmother’s flower-patterned brown sarong kebaya. He thought she moved

like a boat through water, her small feet encased in a pair of delicate beaded slippers.

Ismael looked down at his own semi-white canvas Bata shoes and lifting one foot, he rubbed his shoe against his calf. His shoes were scuffed from misuse and mistreatment. He hoped his grandmother would not notice.

His parents had overlooked such things recently. He doubted they would have seen the hole in his shorts that he wore to school one day.

The clouds in the sky could not keep the afternoon sun from beating furiously down upon his head and he licked the sweat from his upper lip. He felt he was being tugged along behind his grandmother like flotsam in her wake.

“Nenek, stop. How’re we getting home?” he asked crossly.

Ismael’s grandfather had driven an ancient rattling car but he had never known his grandmother to drive it.

“Take teksi,” she said. “Don’t dilly-dally.”

“Why? Can we take a bullock cart?”

“No, no,” she scolded. She looked around and waved. As though by magic, a mud-splattered taxi drew up in front of them. It would have been a lot more fun if they’d ridden a bullock cart. He climbed in beside the driver.

“You go where?”

“Kampong Ayam.”

“Can take you but out of my way.” He shifted his feet and spat. “Take longer. They control the roads.”

Who were *they*? Ismael wondered.

“I give you a bit more,” his grandmother said, indicating her capacious handbag.

The driver started his engine in response. “Not many passengers go there. I hear the jungle got hantu. Someone die inside.”

“Many people die, everywhere.” His grandmother snorted dismissively.

The driver fell silent but bouncing over the occasional pothole in the rough road, past the feathery beckoning leaves of banana and oil palm plantations, eventually broke his reticence. He started sniggering.

“Aiya, what’s so funny?” Ismael’s grandmother asked.

The driver said, wheezing from his remembered and yet unshared joke, “Yesterday I drive American tourist from airport and on the way, he says, ‘What a beautiful rainforest!’”

Ismael did not understand.

The driver gestured with his hand out the window, “He’s talking about oil palms. Crazy man. *Oil palms!*”

He thumped the wheel. Ismael laughed along with him.

“How he know, lah?” his grandmother said severely as the car wobbled. “Better you keep your eyes on the road.”

The driver stopped laughing. Ismael slid a glance at his profile. He thought the man looked harsh, despite his round moon face. His skin was pockmarked and when he wasn’t talking, his mouth turned down naturally.

So Ismael settled to look at the oil palms and the occasional corrugated-iron house, roof aslant, amidst verdant vegetation that took little notice of the road sliding subversively like a worm deep into the actual rainforest all the way to his grandmother’s kampong.

He curled his toes inside his shoes and wondered what his parents were doing.

The kampong was a village of attap houses on stilts with some of the inhabitants sitting on the wooden steps leading up to their homes.

Chickens pecked in a free-range manner, in the midst of swaying coconut palm fronds, which reminded Ismael of barefoot dancing girls in hula skirts. There was a promise of a river in the distance, a jungle of dark trees kept at bay. Ismael half-hoped to see a hantu.

The taxi stopped. The driver lifted out the bags, collected his fare from Ismael's grandmother and spat on the ground three times to ward off evil spirits. "Have good time, be good boy, don't go into jungle," he said loudly. He shoved his body back into his taxi, did a U-turn, waved and drove off leaving Ismael with that slightly panicky feeling he sometimes had when he knew he couldn't go back.

He picked up his bags. Since the death of her husband, Ismael's grandmother lived alone, if living in a kampong could ever be that. Some of the villagers wandering about called out cheerfully. "Ai, your grandson needs fattening up. I bring some of my kuehs," one woman cried.

He saw some children playing soccer barefoot. They stopped to stare at him.

"Later, later, he needs his rest," his grandmother said, steering Ismael down a path towards her home. His grandmother's house seemed to have shrunk. He thought this was entirely possible as wood did shrink and expand depending on the weather. They mounted the ladder of wooden steps to the front door.

"Boy, you sleep in here," his grandmother said. His room led off from the main living area. It had a window with a wooden shutter that had been left open so cool air could pass through. Coconut palms waved to him when he looked out.

"Come when you ready," she said, leaving him. He took in his surroundings. There was a single bed, where a thin mattress lay on top of

narrow planks, covered by a colourful patchwork blanket to keep him warm. A small cupboard with drawers for his clothes stood in a corner.

Ismael sat down on the bed. He had the feeling his grandmother's wooden house was alive. On its four legs or stilts, it was ready to run, if only he could figure out the spell or the words to say. Wooden beams that looked ancient girded Ismael's room, how old they actually were he did not know, but they exuded a comforting sense of serenity as though years of happiness of the inhabitants had soaked into the wood. Ismael was glad to be indoors. The roof of closely woven palm leaves made it cool inside.

He sat for a moment doing nothing, just thinking. Then he lifted his suitcase onto the bed and scabbled through his clothing. He had taken out and arranged the last item when his grandmother called out, "Come and makan. Time to eat."

"Here. Mum said to give this to you." He handed her the charm.

"Can I sit on the top step, Nenek?" He accepted the bowl of food she offered him. She laughed and sighed as she held the charm. "Sit where you like to sit, okay by Granny."

So Ismael perched on the top step of the entrance with the bowl in his lap to spoon up his granny's rich chicken stew mouthful by delicious mouthful.

"They are just like chicken legs," he said, after staring at all the neighbouring houses balancing on thin stilts upon the soil. Most of the kampongs in Singapore were gone. Ismael lived in a terrace house with his parents and had never lived in a kampong until now. He decided he liked it. He chewed a bone contentedly. Underneath the floorboards of his grandmother's house, chickens pecked and scratched the earth then darted out into the sunlight with a flapping of wings.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lau Siew Mei was born and raised in Singapore, and is now based in Australia. She is the author of two previous novels, *Playing Madame Mao* and *The Dispeller of Worries*, and a children's illustrated middle-grade book, *Yin's Magic Dragon*. Her short stories have been broadcast on the BBC World Service and ABC Radio National, and published in Australia, USA, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore and the UK. She has been shortlisted for the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and Best Emerging Queensland Author in the QLD Premier's Literary Awards, commended in the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction in the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, awarded Australia Council and Arts Queensland literary grants, a Varuna Residential Writers' Fellowship and an Asialink Literature Residency in Malaysia. *The Last Immigrant* is her third novel.



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