

THE TRAVELLING LIBRARY CHRONICLES OF MAIZEY LEE

THE ROAD TO BANGKOK



ERNI SALLEH

“The Travelling Library Chronicles of Maizey Lee will take you on a journey you are not likely to forget. With unlikely friends and even unexpected enemies, this twisty and fun adventure is bound to resonate with every reader. I cannot wait to see where Maizey and her family will take us next!”

—George Jreije, author of the *Shad Hadid* series

“A fun and delightful story about courage and dealing with change. After reading this book, you’ll wish you were seeing the world in a travelling book van!”

—Vivian Teo, author of the *My BFF Is an Alien* series

To my mother, from whom Maizey's adventurous, intelligent and loving streak comes.

And to all of us who belong to two halves of different worlds. I see you.

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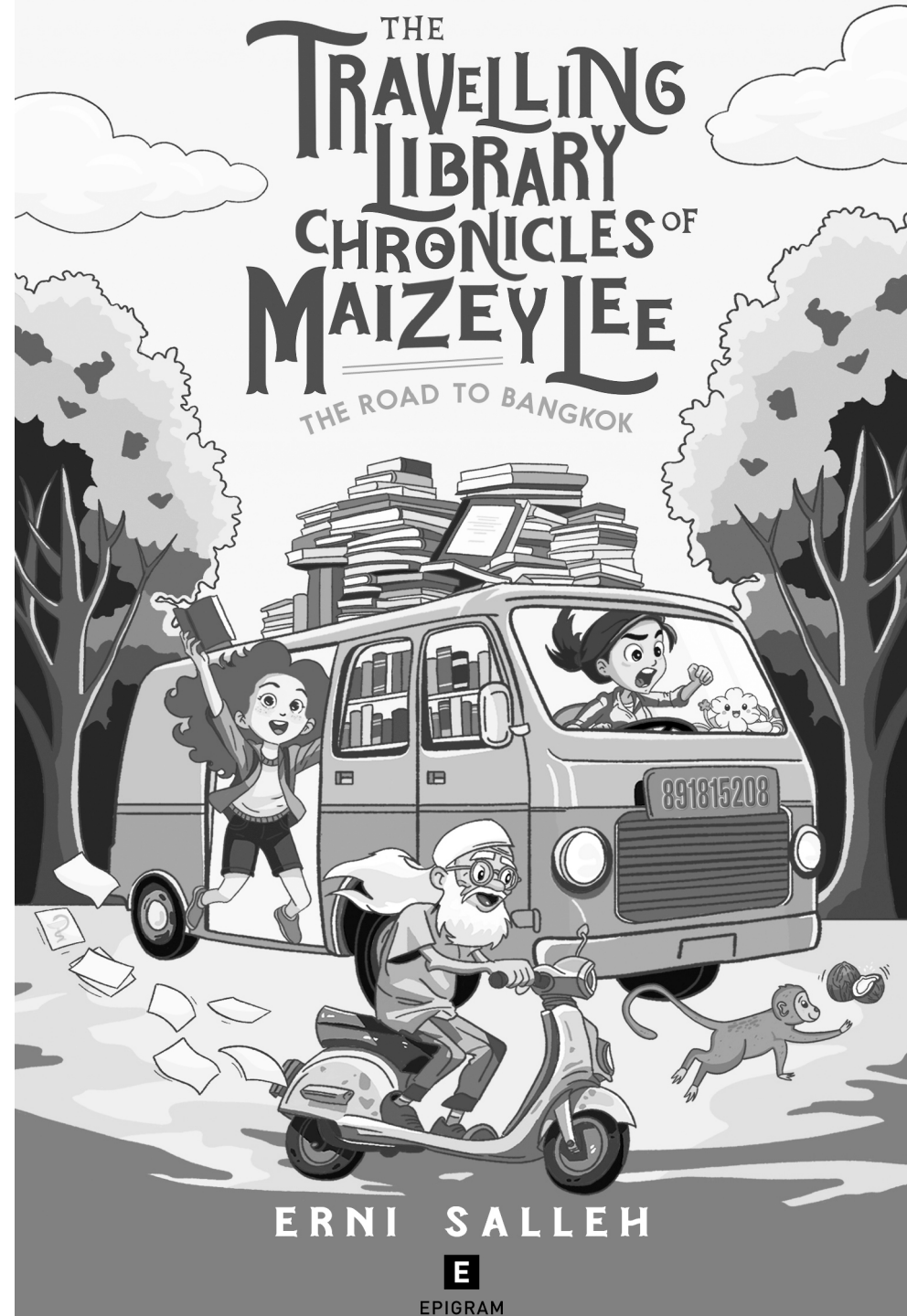
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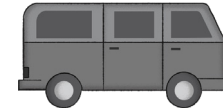


*Imagination is more important than knowledge.
Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.*

*–Albert Einstein, “What Life Means to Einstein: An Interview”,
The Saturday Evening Post, 26 October 1929*

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Chapter 1

Leaving Home

It's hard to know how to start my story. Is it this exact moment when I'm staring at a grease pattern on the wall? Because I'm convinced it looks like a plant cell. And cells are *literally* the start of any living thing, which means the start of life, which means the start of me. See the odd circle in that rectangular shape? That's the nucleus. It's the powerhouse of living things. Or so my Dadi says. He's a botanist and he knows LOADS of cool things. I even have a newspaper article to prove it:

<i>PANIC AMIDST GLOBAL IMAGINATION LOSS</i>	Scientists grapple to find a cure. The LABS reassures the public that everyone under 35 is immune.
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Avid readers, creatives and artists around the world have recently woken up to suddenly find all traces of their Imagination gone.

Imagination happens when the human mind forms new images with minimal help from what people have seen, heard, smelled, tasted or felt before. Imagination loss has resulted in a lack of ability to form such images.

There has been speculation that reading, watching or listening to art will stimulate Imagination, but this has led to an increase in the theft of books from libraries and book retailers.

Global biopharmaceutical company, the Loimology and Bioscience Syndicate (LABS) emphasises that there is no evidence to show that this is effective in preserving or prolonging Imagination among younger adults aged 18–34.

“ *I used to love having my coffee in the morning and looking at the birds in the sky, wondering what fascinating adventures they’ve been on. Now all I can think about are flight patterns, velocity and bird life expectancy. This is a nightmare!* ”

—Member of the public, aged 58.

The LABS urges the public to remain calm and refrain from panic-buying books, art, music or other works of culture as their leading researchers work to find a cure.

Over the last 12 months, as scientists grapple with this worldwide mystery, one particular Welsh biologist from the LABS, Dr J. F. Lee, might have discovered the answer. He claims that his research will not only restore Imagination to the world, but also increase its output.

Unfortunately, Dr Lee and his entire team have mysteriously vanished during a fire at his laboratory earlier this week.

A LABS spokesperson says that investigations are underway. The company reassures the public that despite this setback they are working hard to find a solution to this Imagination crisis.

That’s him at the bottom of the page. He’s got ginger hair and lots of freckles but you can’t really see that in a black-and-white photo. You’re probably wondering why I’m carrying this six-month old article with me. Well... it’s because we’re on the run—sorta.

I mean, that’s the only explanation I have as to why Ibu quit her job, sold our HDB flat in Singapore and took me out of school. Why would she do that? What if Dadi comes home and can’t find us? It’s all so confusing. And the *worst* part is? We are going to Wales.

“That’s like really, *really* far away, isn’t it?” I ask as I zip up my backpack. There’s an A3-sized world map I printed from the school computer, but it doesn’t really tell you how far anything is. “Is that like taking the bus from Jurong to JB, then repeating another 10 times?” We went to Johor Bahru on a family trip once, and it took aaaaaages.

Ibu neither confirms nor corrects my calculations.

“It will be such an adventure. Your paternal grandparents can’t wait to meet you. But first, we’re going

to pay my father a visit. I know you don't remember him, but he's hard not to like." Ibu pulls both my suitcases towards hers and carefully places the single potted plant we brought along on the floor. I don't know what species it is. It's the first time I've ever been left alone with it. Dadi usually locks it in his office but I swear it's been *looking* at me. "We'll stay with him in Malaysia for a while, while we spruce up this van."

Suitcases. Malaysia. Van. Are we going on a vacation, you ask?

I wish it were that simple. You see, after the fire at Dadi's lab, Ibu started panicking (even though the newspapers said not to) and decided that travelling across the entire Asian continent to Wales was a good idea. And not on an airplane like *normal* people, but in a van, selling children's books to whoever wants them. I think she secretly doesn't want to turn 35 years old next year. I don't want her to either, because that's when Ibu will lose ALL her Imagination. Movies and TV probably won't be the same ever again. That's what some of my friends in school say.

Our first destination: Bangkok. Ibu says that it is one of UNESCO's World Book Capitals. As Franz Kafka (who's Ibu's favourite author in the world) always says, "Many a book is like a key to unknown chambers within the castle of one's own self." Ibu translated it from the original German which is super hard. All I can remember is that "castle" is "schloss" in German, but it also means "lock". See, told you—hard.

Ibu says that I have to imagine that my brain is as big and complicated as a castle. I don't know about you, but I've never been inside a castle before. To be honest, they sound kinda scary. In all the fairy tales that Dadi and I love to read, they're always full of secret passages and abandoned rooms hiding a dragon, or worse, an evil sorcerer. But I think that's why Ibu likes Kafka. She says that he writes about the frightening world around him even if he doesn't always understand it. And according to him, when we read books, we can explore all the hidden places that usually scare us. And who knows? Maybe reading will unlock the part of the brain where Imagination is hiding.

Which is why, if there is one place where Ibu can save her Imagination, a World Book Capital is the place to go. Sounds great, right? Maybe—if you're okay with leaving your entire life behind and becoming a nomad, travelling from place to place all the time and never going home.

Don't get me wrong, I love books. And imagine telling everyone at school about all the new countries I've been to and people I've met. I won't just be cool, I'll be the GOAT. (That's got nothing to do with the animal, by the way. I keep telling Ibu that it means "Greatest of All Time", but she thinks I'm being silly.)

But then, what is the point of being the GOAT without anyone to share it with? According to Ibu's plan: there will be NO more school, which means NO MORE FRIENDS.

I feel for my flip phone in my shorts pocket. Ibu initially didn't approve of tweens having one but ever since Dadi's disappearance in the fire, I have to take it with me wherever I go. But now that we are in Malaysia, I can no longer call or text any of my friends. Not even my BFF Kayla. The last message I got was a string of OMGs, and, "When are you coming back?" when I told her the bad news. That was yesterday. The first day back at school.

Yup, Maizey Lee is officially extending her June holidays—permanently.

Then there is the Primary School Leaving Examination, also known as PSLE. Ibu said something about home-schooling, but I don't have a good feeling about it. Every 12-year-old in Singapore has to take this exam before entering secondary school. What if I miss it next year? I don't want to repeat Primary Five and be left behind by all my friends. I'll be that person no one wants in their team when we play games during PE.

My life is *over*.

So yes, back to the grease on the walls. The present. Here I am, squatting in the corner of yet another workshop across the Causeway—our seventh—squashed between four suitcases. Yup, that's all our belongings in there. Two for Ibu and two for me. An entire 11 years of my life crammed into two portable bags on wheels.

I wiggle my toes. My feet ache from all the walking. And the smell of this place is making my stomach do all sorts of backflips. Ibu, on the other hand, seems immune

to all the crazy things happening at the moment.

She's got her arms crossed over her chest as she shakes her head at the vehicle owner, before flinging her hands in the air like a chimpanzee. (That's not an insult in the slightest: chimps are literally the most intelligent animals, just above dolphins. I mean, why else would the kung fu club at school dedicate a whole physical education class to teach us about the Monkey King?) Her opponent looks equally unwilling to back down, stomping his feet occasionally. I spy a deep frown on his forehead.

"Hurry up, Ibu," I whisper into my knees, as I draw them closer to my face. This whole place stinks of petrol. And those large whirring machines keep spitting out sparks every few minutes. Each time I look at them, they look even bigger...and closer. I shut my eyes and cover my ears to block everything out. I just want to go home.

"Maizey!"

Ibu's shrill voice suddenly pierces through the noise. I look up and see her waving keys at me excitedly, gesturing for me to approach a shiny grey van. I look left and right to make sure it is safe before running towards her.

"What do you think? Our very own 20-seater Sprinter van. It's barely five years old, so she's got loads of mileage to spare." Ibu claps her palms together as she says this, sandwiching the keys between her fingers.

I'm not sure how a van can *sprint*, but I know what mileage means. That's how far the vehicle has travelled in its entire life. Which only reminds me of our endless road trip. URGH. I feel queasy all over again.

“I’m going to miss all my friends,” I whisper, as I gaze longingly at our luggage. “They just made me vice-president of the STEAM club.”

STEAM—that stands for science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics. The “A” was added because Ibu had an argument with my school principal that science is not all about numbers and facts. Creativity is important for growth too, she says.

Not that it makes much of a difference now that I’m excommunicado.

I clutch my stomach and bend forward to ease the discomfort. Ibu rights me back up and rubs a warm hand down my back.

“Maizaitun Efa Ceridwen Lee, we’ve been through this already.”

I know what you’re thinking. My name is *really* long, not to mention a complete tongue-twister. But it’s because I’m half Malay, half Welsh. Yup, you read that right, Lee isn’t just a Chinese surname. Dadi says it comes from an old English word, “lēah”, which means meadow or forest clearing. Sometimes it’s hard explaining to people what all my names mean, and worse, how to pronounce them. I’ve given up introducing myself as Ceridwen because everyone makes fun and asks, “Carried, when?” even though that’s not how you say it. It’s supposed to be “keh-ri-dwen”. If only they knew Ceridwen was an amazing sorceress in Welsh legends.

Most people think of sheep, dragons and hobbits when they imagine Wales, though Dadi insists not

everyone is short. I’m proof of that. I look up at Ibu; she is still reeling over the fact that I grew 30 centimetres over the last year (my head already reaches her shoulder, and she is *very* tall). Dadi didn’t deny the stuff about sheep or dragons, though.

“Are you listening to me?” She lowers herself slightly so that we are eye to eye. “We had to leave Singapore. There’s nothing left for us there. And I promise you, where we’re going, there’s going to be so much learning and so much fun. You’re going to make lots of new friends and see all kinds of animals. I bet you’ll love journaling the fauna we see on this trip. It’s going to be good for both of us.”

Just fauna, without the flora. Like in flora and fauna.

She looks sad when she says this. She’s been looking sad a lot since the fire. So I don’t tell her that I know she isn’t telling the whole truth. She didn’t say “flora” because it reminds her—us—of Dadi. I pick up Dadi’s prized possession, the potted plant with a pair of orange-yellow flowers, and cradle it in my arms.

“Ibu, will you let me take care of Da—I mean, this plant? We learned all about plants in Primary Four. I’ll make sure to water and feed it all the proper nutrients, I promise.” I don’t tell her that I want to do it because I miss Dadi.

“I don’t know Maizey. That plant is very important. I have to make sure we protect it. I’m not sure if you’re ready for that kind of responsibility. You’re not old enough.”

“But Ibu, I *am* ready. I wouldn’t have been voted vice-president of the STEAM club if everyone didn’t think I was responsible. Plus, if I’m old enough to leave school, I’m *definitely* old enough to take care of a plant.” I stomp one foot down (not in the tantrum kind of way, in the I’m-making-a-point way).

Ibu sighs.

“Alright. But only on a trial basis until I am convinced. I’m still going to keep an eye on you.” She kisses my forehead. “Come on, we should get to your Atuk’s before it gets dark.”

I have never met my grandfather, or at least I don’t remember, as I was very young the last time I saw him. Am I excited to meet him? I’m not sure. How would you feel about a stranger who is also *not* a stranger?

“Can I tell him about spores?”

Ibu’s upper lip twitches. “Err... Maybe not straight away. You’ll say hello, salam and kiss his hand and talk about, uh, school, if you like.”

I nod but I don’t understand. If I’m talking about school, then *obviously* spores are an important topic. I’m still trying to think of what to say as we stash our suitcases under the seats and Ibu starts the van.

“Have you got your travel bands? Squeezy thingies?”

“Always.” I raise my hands up, showing her both my wrists. They’re bands to help with motion sickness. “I have the red ball here in case I get anxious and another one in my bag. Backup.”

“Good. Now, buckle up.”

Two clicks, one for Ibu, one for me.

Ibu gets into her driving prep ritual: spectacles on, the case in the glove compartment, mirrors checked and adjusted, lights and wipers switched on and off, and finally, a timid little press on the horn with the base of her palm. And as always, she turns to me, mouthing, “We don’t want to scare people.”

I don’t tell her that I am feeling a little scared myself. After all, we are so far away from home.



My grandfather lives by himself in a single-storey bungalow within the village, so it takes us only 15 minutes using the GPS to reach him from the workshop. The sky is dark when we arrive, but there he is, standing by the gates in a white kandura with a torchlight in hand, his long wavy hair loose over his shoulders. I know he’s wearing the ankle-length tunic because it’s prayer time, but eek! He looks like a ghost. I grip my armrest, digging myself back into the seat. Ibu brings the van to a stop once we are through the gates. She unbuckles, then switches off the lights and engine.

She gets off. I stay still.

From the side mirror, I can see my grandfather approaching. I sense his presence, hear the heavy grip over the passenger seat door—

“Maizaitun, my beautiful grandchild. You are so grown up now.” He looks kind. His mouth stretches into

a toothless grin. He offers me a hand, but I don't take it. Yes, I know what Ibu said about kissing his hand and doing the salam. In Islam, children must show respect to older people this way. Instead, I search for Ibu in the limited visibility of the night.

"It's okay, honey. Come on down." I whip my head to the back of the van at the sound of her voice. She is unloading the luggage. "Ayah, why don't you come and help me with these?"

Atuk gives another warm smile. Then he disappears. The coast is clear. I inch the passenger door open and creep out, prized potted plant in hand. My eyes are immediately drawn to the light coming from Atuk's torchlight and I watch as he heaves the big suitcases off the van like they weigh nothing. I always imagined Atuk to be old and sickly, but he is not. When he finally notices me, he winks and picks up two of our suitcases at the same time.

"This way to my humble home, ladies." He marches ahead. No rolling the luggage wheels for him.

We follow Atuk with our remaining suitcases in tow. He leads us inside, through the living room and towards the guest room where he has prepared two single beds for us. Ibu lines up our luggage neatly against the wall.

"Thank you, Ayah, for letting us stay here," she says. "Ayah" is one of the Malay words for father, just like "Dadi" in Welsh.

"I'm glad you came, Liliana. You know I've missed you both so much."

Liliana is Ibu's name, but she prefers to be called Lily. Like how my name is Maizaitun but Ibu calls me Maizey. Atuk wanders over to the windows then squats down to set up some coil-like objects. A second later, he lights the ends with his pocket lighter and the room starts to smoke. I've heard of these. They're mosquito repellents.

"Did you know that mosquitos would be terrible at the Olympics?" I tell Atuk. "If all insects were in a race, mosquitos would be one of the slowest."

Atuk blinks, then flashes me that toothy grin again. "You two must be so exhausted. Are you hungry? Shall I make you something to eat? Or maybe you want to just shower and sleep? Tomorrow is going to be a busy day, after all."

I look over to Ibu for the answer this time but she's giving me her signature thin-lipped look which Dadi told me is a sign of irritation. But I didn't even talk about spores!

"Sleep?" I squeak, in the quietest voice possible.

"That's fine," Atuk pats the top of my head as he exits the room. "See you tomorrow, then."

The door clicks behind him. Finally, we're alone.

"You can let go of your breath now."

I stare open mouthed at Ibu. How did she know?

"I don't think he got my Olympic mosquito fact." I make a face.

Ibu smiles a little. "You must remember that he is 60. He probably woke up on that fateful day a year and a half ago without his Imagination. We best be

understanding.” Then she sighs. “But, the fact still remains that he is a lovely man.”

“So why don’t we visit him more often? Doesn’t he get lonely living here by himself?” He wasn’t at Nenek’s funeral either. “Is he...also sad?” As soon as I hear Ibu’s breathing hitch, I know immediately that I should not have reminded her about my grandmother. “I’m sor—”

“No, don’t be.” Ibu puts a hand on my shoulder as she turns to face me. “I think Atuk will grieve in his own way. We’ve not been in contact much because he and Nenek were...” she pauses, her eyes looking up at the ceiling in that usual way she does when trying to find the right word. “Separated. Before you were born.”

I know what she is talking about: divorce. One of my classmate’s parents are divorced. She told us about the two birthdays, two New Years, two different homes. Sounds stressful. But of course, I don’t tell Ibu that.

I frown. There’s a strange feeling in my chest, and my mind zooms from suspicion to confusion to my favourite song worming its way into my head. Divorce must feel like when the person you love isn’t around anymore. It hurts. But you’re not supposed to talk about it. Ibu *still* doesn’t talk about the fire and losing Dadi.

“Why’d you want to come here, then?”

Ibu pulls me into a hug. “Because we’re family. And family’s got to stick together.”

Our hug lasts a whole cycle of the song which I am still humming to myself when she points to the beds. One has a pink blanket while the other has a yellow one.

I sneak a glance at Ibu. I love pink but I don’t want her to think I’m still a little girl. It’s so stupid how people buy you gifts and everything is in pink just because you’re a *girl*, and then suddenly in Primary Four, all your friends think pink is super lame. *I* think girls can like any colour they want. My favourite colour just happens to be pink.

“This is mine,” I finally decide, putting Dadi’s plant next to my pink bed.

Ibu plops herself onto the edge of the bed with the yellow blanket. “You’re going to need them even if it’s not cold at night,” she says, as she adjusts the blanket. “The mosquitos here are vicious.”

Ibu then raises her hands to her nose and pretends they’re a proboscis. Then she chases me around the room until we are both a giggling heap on top of my bed. Her arms are supposed to look like the long feeding tube on the head of mosquitos, but they’re swinging around like an elephant trunk.

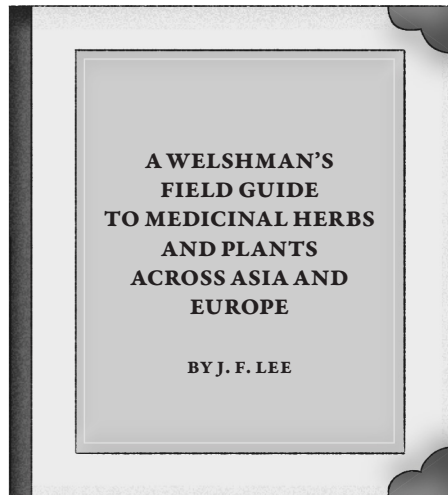
“No, Ibu, stop it!” I bat away her tickling hands. “We’re going to attract the actual mosquitos, if we keep this up.” All this laughing is producing serious carbon dioxide, which mosquitos love. I read that in a book. Books teach you everything. “You know how bad it gets when they bite me.”

I pull my sleeve up to my elbows. Already, there are three reddish bumps on my pinkish skin. I put my arm next to Ibu’s freckleless one. That’s not fair, she didn’t even get ONE bite. Bet it’s because I’m all sweaty.

My face is all red too. Urgh, this is why children are mosquito magnets.

“Well, being older has its advantages, after all,” teases Ibu, as she grabs her towel. She isn’t even panting from all that running. “Feel free to sleep tight. And don’t let the mosquitos bite.”

As if I’ll let that happen. As soon as Ibu excuses herself to have a shower, I tiptoe to my suitcase and pop the locks with extreme care. I pull out a thick book from under my pile of clothes.



I slipped it in at the last minute when Ibu was not looking, as she didn’t allow me to pack anything bulky. But there is no way I can go through this trip without Dadi’s beloved journal of herbs. It’s my last memory of him.

If there’s anything useful to ward off mosquitos apart

from toxic repellent, it’s going to be in here. I remember Dadi mentioning something about a plant that starts with the letter “c”. Cactus? Carrot? Nah, it’s got to be something disgusting.

Maybe celery? *Eww*. That must be the reason why Dadi never gets mosquito bites. He loves that stuff. I turn to the index to look for celery and speed read it like Dadi taught me. You do this by moving your fingers back and forth quickly across the page. Sounds childish, I know. But Dadi swears by it. *And...it's not celery.*

I continue flipping the pages and land on what Dadi has labelled “out-of-bounds”. Apart from the name of the plant (Cureall), the page is covered by a large Post-it note that reads:



Automatically, my head turns to look behind my shoulder. One more time on the other side. Okay, the coast is clear. Phew! With more caution than the time I tried to peel a plaster off a live blister, I inch the sticky parts of the Post-it up a millimetre at a time. I am not

making that mistake again. Nothing in this book can be damaged. I close my eyes and count to 10 in four languages (English, Malay, Mandarin, Welsh—in that order). There, all calmed down.

“Alright, Cureall, let’s see what you’re all about.” First to appear under the Post-it is a sketch of a plant that looks suspiciously familiar. My eyes zero in on the potted plant next to my bed. “NO WAY!”

No wonder Dadi is precious about this plant. He even waters it using an eye dropper. I saw him when I sneaked into his office one time. And don’t get me started on him singing to it. My parents can be *soooo* weird.

Today is the first time I’ve ever been left in the same room with the Cureall. I feel a weird urge to smile at it. It makes me think of Dadi. I wonder if plants miss people too, the same way I’m missing Dadi right now.

Below the drawing is a small description that sounds *really* complicated. Underneath it are messy scribbles of numbers and letters. TTCACTAGTGAAGCT.

“I know that!” At least that’s one thing I can understand on this page. In school, we learned a little about DNA, which is short for deoxyribonucleic acid. I have to say that three times to get it right. It’s a total tongue-twister. It sounds fancy, but Dadi says to think of them like four coloured Lego blocks that form a spiral ladder shape. These blocks can combine to create different things that all living things need.

“*AHEM.*”

Did you hear that? I look over to the flowering plant

once more. I swear it is coming from the Cureall.

“Can Cureall keep mosquitos at bay?” I read on, despite going a little cross-eyed at all the numbers and odd symbols everywhere. When I finally land on actual words, my heart sinks.

NOT for public presentation.

Dadi has underlined the word “not” so hard and so many times, I can actually see a raised bump on the reverse side. Okay, point taken. But surely, I can at least tell Ibu, right? Or maybe even Atuk?

“AHEM! Excuse me, over here?”

Okay, I am *not* imagining it. A plant—the Cureall—is TALKING to me. I shut the book and stuff it under my pillow. I creep towards the pot, trying to see where the sound is coming from.

“Uh, hi?”

Two thin stems flail about to get my attention. “Up here, Maizey.”

I dare myself to look up. A PAIR OF EYES ARE BLINKING AT ME.

“AHHHHH!” I fly backwards and fall on my bum. “You’re...you’re alive!”

The two flowers on top of its head wiggle about. “WHAT? Of course, I am. I’m a living thing, just like you, silly.”

I rub my eyes, unsure if this is all a dream. I must be really tired to imagine a talking plant. Ibu always says that I have a wild Imagination, but this feels so REAL. I suppose...the first thing to do is to be polite?

“It’s nice to meet you, uh...”

“Curie.”

“Like Marie Curie, the scientist?” I frown, remembering Dadi’s notes in the book. “I thought your name is Cureall?”

Curie seems to be dancing. The leaves at the bottom of the stem are swaying about. Then its stem-like arms cross over its thin body. “Well, you call yourself Maizey because it’s cool right?”

Curie *does* have a point.

“How old are you, Curie? I’m 11.” I offer a finger for a handshake. I mean, if plants have hands, that is.

“In human years, I am only three years old, but I am a mature plant after a hundred days.” Curie’s tendril-like fingers curl around my thumb. “So, I guess that makes us the same age.”

I shake it. “What does mature mean for plants?” In school, they teach us about girls getting their periods but that won’t make sense for plants.

“See these flowers up here? They’re female flowers. It means I can produce fruits and seeds...at some point.”

That means she’s a girl, like me.

“That’s totally awesome, Curie.” I smile. Yes, *at a plant*. No one is going to believe that Dadi created a talking plant. “Does my Dadi umm...talk to you too?”

“Oh, all the time. I reply to him, of course, but he cannot hear me.”

My eyes widen in surprise. But he *made* Curie. “Why not?”

I think I spot a grin on Curie’s...stem? Face? Whatever. Her mouth.

“That’s because adults can’t hear certain sounds anymore. But children, on the other hand, have much better hearing.”

That is so cool. I totally did not know that.

“But wait, why haven’t you tried talking to *me* before?” I am sure if I heard my name being called by an unusual voice inside Dadi’s office, I’d sneak in again to check—wouldn’t you?

Curie flings her tendril hands up like she’s surrendering. “You kidding? Miss I-am-always-busy-with-STEAM-club-and-running-around. You get home after your many after-school activities just in time for dinner and homework, then it’s off to bed.”

Yikes. She’s making me sound like a workaholic, like Dadi. Sometimes, he doesn’t even come out of his office for dinner.

“But...but you were *looking* at me earlier, in the workshop, weren’t you? I saw you.” I eye her suspiciously. “You could have talked to me then.”

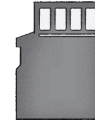
Curie then does the most unexpected thing. She leans back and laughs.

“HAHAHAHAHA!” She’s even wiping a tear from her eye. “Yeah sure, it was totally the perfect time to scare you when you’re already curled up in a corner freaking out.”

That isn’t the nicest thing to say... Is it? Maybe this is one of those times when someone says the opposite of

what they mean, in a critical or funny way. It's called sarcasm, Dadi told me.

A yawn catches me off guard and I stretch my arms above my head. I really want to talk more to Curie. Does Dadi know she can move? Surely, he could see her, right? But sleep is calling me. In fact, I may already be in a dream. Who knows? This is a question for tomorrow morning.



Chapter 2

When I Grow Up

I awake to the sounds of muffled voices, shrill drilling and the occasional grunting and loud banging, like something large is being tossed to the ground. Are we being robbed? I jump out of bed, not bothering to brush my teeth or comb my hair.

“Hey! Where are you off to?”

I turn around very slowly. The plant. She is *looking* at me. Looking, like with eyes.

“Last night wasn’t a dream?” I rub my eyes and pinch my arm just in case. “Nope, not dreaming.” I take one step closer. “Can...can adults see you?”

Curie slaps her forehead—or whatever the space above her eyes is called. “I’m not a ghost. Of course they can see me. All they need to do is look directly at me,” she declares, wiggling her eyebrows. “What their eyes

refuse to believe, however, is that they're seeing me *move* without an external stimulus."

I know what that means. "Like how some plants move towards the sunlight, or when touch-me-nots close their leaves when you poke them."

"That's right, smarty pants. Now, take me with you." Stick arms reach for me. "I can fit into your pocket."

"What? Are you crazy? Ibu will bite my head off if she finds out. I've literally *just* got permission to look after you. You're Dadi's prized plant. She'll flip if anything happens to you."

Curie shrugs. "Then don't get caught, silly."

When it's obvious that I refuse to budge, Curie crosses her arms over her thin stem body. "Are you saying you'd rather leave me here all alone? In a room full of mosquitos?"

Way to make me feel bad!

I empty out the sweets and tissues from my front shorts pocket. If we're getting robbed, at least I'll have a friend. "You **MUST** promise to be quiet and hide if you see the adults."

"You're not going to tell them about me?"

I'm *still* trying to understand how a plant can talk. "No, Ibu will think I'm making up excuses to go back to Singapore. Or think I'm crazy and take you away."

Curie frowns. "I thought you *wanted* to go back to Singapore."

"Not by making her think I'm a liar. Now come on," I point to my emptied pocket.

Curie hops out of the pot and slides right into my pocket. "Just don't squash me or you'll be sorry."

"Shh!" I put a finger on my lips as we sneak out of the room. There are strange voices coming from the front porch.

"There! What are they doing? Those men, they're tearing up Ibu's van." I gasp. Panic shoots through my body. Ibu spent a lot of money on that van. I know I should rush out and stop them but my feet are frozen to the floor.

Just then, I feel Curie wiggle about in my pocket. I am about to tell her to keep still when I spy Atuk coming from the side of the house. He is carrying two buckets of paint and what looks like a toolbox.

"Good morning, Maizaitun. What are you doing hiding behind the door?" He puts down his equipment and walks over to me.

"Who are those men?" I ask, pointing towards the van. "And what are they doing to Ibu's van?"

"Oh, they're my neighbour's sons. I'm sorry, we must have woken you up with all this noise. They're just helping us strip the interior." He smiles as he opens the door and motions me outside.

I don't know what to say. Atuk is like a giant. I have to tilt my head *all* the way back to look up at him. So instead, I look down at his blackened hands.

He must have seen me looking because he wipes them down his coveralls casually. "Nothing a bit of water won't wash out. Let's go find your Ibu, shall we?"

I totter after him, weaving through the maze of chairs chucked all over the grassy porch and the lumps of discarded wooden planks, wires and carpeting materials. It's like an obstacle course. When we finally get to the van, Atuk announces, "I think now is a good time for your break, guys. Shall we get something to eat?"

A head peeks out from under the van. It's Ibu. Her cheeks are covered in the same black soot and grime like Atuk's hands.

"Ayah—oh, hi honey, I didn't see you there—can you get me two plain prata and an iced Milo, please? Maizey, you can have anything you want, just ask Atuk, okay?" She slides back under the van and resumes whatever it is Ibu does with repairs. Just like Atuk, she too is wearing a pair of coveralls, sleeves rolled up, and her hair tied in a ponytail. Sometimes, I secretly think that Ibu's like Violet Baudelaire—you know, the eldest Baudelaire sibling from the *The Series of Unfortunate Events*? Did you know, it's "bodlair", roll the last "r", not "bo-de-la-ree"? Ibu's corrected my French pronunciation many times.

"Life is so much better when you can build your own dream house," she says.

See what I mean? Totally something Violet the innovator would say.

Except I don't know if I believe her. News flash: we don't have a house anymore. And the only thing close to what I thought would be our home is now as hollow as an empty toilet roll. Sure, the roll is great for arts and

crafts and making all sorts of models, but on its own, not so much.

"Ready for an adventure?" Atuk offers his hands. That toothy smile appears again.

I look at Atuk suspiciously. Aren't adventures by definition the product of Imagination? I hold on to his hand—only because we are about to venture out into an unknown place and I do not want to get lost. It's got nothing to do with feeling a little scared.

I debate whether to tell Atuk about spores. I know he is family, but he is still a stranger. And if you want to make a stranger your friend, you need to say something. "Break the ice," as all form teachers say on the first day of school. Of course, you also don't hold hands with strangers, but I am because Atuk is family. It's all so confusing.

"Everything okay?"

No, is what I want to say. But Atuk has a permanent smile on his face, the nice kind, not the creepy kind that clowns have. And he smells of minyak attar, the flower oil Muslims use because it does not contain alcohol. Old people smells. Kind people smells. Nenek smelled like that too.

So I nod instead and focus on his hands. They're rough and feel very much like Ibu's. Comforting.

As soon as we arrive at the market, I feel Atuk's grip tighten. My shoulder is pulled back ever so gently.

"Be careful."

There is SO much to see. Metal carts line one side

of the street, makeshift tables and chairs in the middle. And on the other side, vegetables and meat sellers have their stuff on display on long wooden tables. People are shouting everywhere—over tables, over each other, over stray cats. Then, the replies bounce back. Under flying prata and pulled teh tarik and sizzling snacks.

You know the pasar malam, or the night market, we have back in Singapore? With the fancy rainbow bagels and bubblegum-flavoured bubble tea? This is the pagi version, the morning one. It's 10 times less fancy, and 10 times more chaotic. I love it.

I push Curie a little deeper into my pocket. "Don't fall out. I don't want to lose you," I whisper.

"Here, try this." Atuk hands me a small plastic bowl. I eye the brown liquid with its green worm-like jellies in it. "It's chendol. You'll like it. It's got coconut milk and gula melaka."

I know what chendol is, but this looks different from the ones back home. Nevertheless, I take a sniff, then sip very, *very* carefully. "Oh! It's delicious!"

"Oh, so she speaks," he teases. Raising his spare hand up, I see plastic bags full of food and drinks. "Come, let's head back. We should fill our bellies before starting hard work."

When did he buy all that? I took my eyes off him for *one* second.

We don't hold hands on the walk home, as Atuk has his hands full, holding bags of breakfast while also drinking tea out of a plastic bag in his right hand. I don't

know how he's doing that without scalding his tongue. I always make sure to blow on my hot Milo until it has cooled down. I walk up ahead, balancing on the stone kerb on the side of the road, feeling Atuk's eagle eyes zeroing on my back.

I wait for him to catch up, taking another taste of the sweet concoction and offering some to Atuk. "Are you an architect, too, like Ibu?"

He laughs, shaking his head. "I sure didn't go to a fancy university in Switzerland. But if anyone asks, your mother learnt everything from me." He clamps the straw between his lips for a sip of tea. "She started drawing full house plans when she was about eight and then graduated to fixing and redirecting pipes and wires by 12. I'm so proud of her."

I contemplate this new information. Is that why Ibu knows a bit of French, German and Italian? My social studies teacher says that in Switzerland, those are the three national languages. Just like Mandarin, Malay and Tamil in Singapore.

"Do you still design houses?"

Atuk slows down. He pulls the straw away from his lips. "A few years ago, the answer would be an absolute yes. But now..." He shakes his head slowly, as though he doesn't want to think about it. "What about you, Maizaitun? What do you want to be when you grow up?" he asks.

I feel sad for Atuk. He must really miss having Imagination. Then, gingerly, I say, "Atuk, nobody calls

me that. Ibu calls me—”

“I know what she calls you, but I’m not calling you corn.”

He grins knowingly. I pause mid-eye-roll at his corny joke. Maize, corn, get it?

“Besides, your grandmother named you, didn’t she? ‘Zaitun’ is an Arabic word for olive. It’s a symbol for peace and healing. Did she want you to be a doctor?”

How’d he know that? I eye Atuk warily, wondering if he has secretly been keeping tabs on me over the years.

“I do like the idea of healing people...but I think I want to be a scientist like Dadi.” My cheeks feel slightly heated by this confession. I’ve never told anyone about this before, not even Ibu. “I’ve been studying bryophytes.” *Finally!*

“Bur-ow-what?” Atuk stops walking. I can see him trying to play with the sound of the word in his mouth. But instead of making fun of it, he flashes me a look of amazement. “You’re definitely your father’s girl, aren’t you. Tell me more about them.”

I launch straight into STEAM club mode. “They’re a group of plant species that reproduce via spores instead of flowers or seeds—kinda like mosses. Most people overlook them but they’re really important for our ecosystem. My favourite thing about them is that they recycle nutrients in the soil. They are like the world’s first Earth Ranger.”

Atuk gives me a contemplative look. “You know what? You should definitely start a journal of all the

interesting plants you see on your trip. Who knows? You might even be the first to discover a new species.”

Just like Dadi? I like that idea very much. Atuk proudly tells me that he has grown fruit trees in the garden at the back of his house.

“See if you can spot the rambutan, papaya and mango trees when we’re back,” he suggests. I can’t wait.

“Your Atuk is nice,” Curie says.

I peek down at her, and we exchange nods. And by the time we reach his house, I think I can learn to really like Atuk too.

When we enter the gate, I see that Ibu has set up a mat on the grass along the porch driveway and is waving at us. She has cups, plates and cutlery ready.

“What do you say we have a picnic here? We’re under the rambutan trees, so it’s pretty shaded.” She pats the empty spot next to her. I look up, spying the bunches of red, hairy fruits amidst the leaves. Ha! One down.

Atuk gestures to our little set-up as he settles comfortably on the mat. “Ah, this sure brings back memories of helping my father harvest fruits for the market. Have you ever plucked rambutans, Maizaitun?” When I shake my head, he brings his hands together in a loud clap. “That’s definitely on the list then.”

The three of us sit cross-legged on the mat and start munching on our fluffy prata, or roti canai as they call it in Malaysia. I dip mine in the curry and take a sip of iced Milo. So chocolatey. Ibu finishes first, and as soon as she is done washing her hands, she settles back down

with a large file, opening it up for us to see. Inside are a few of her drawings and plans for the interior of the van.

“Ayah, have a look at this,” she says, handing out one of the drawings to Atuk. “I think this is the best layout in terms of space and functionality.”

Even if I don’t know the long words Ibu uses, I can usually figure it out. Dadi has this trick where you break words down to a simpler form. So “functionality” comes from “function”, which refers to the uses of something or someone.

“But I am having some concerns about the piping and wiring for the kitchen top and toilet. Also, I am unsure whether to have a permanent or foldable bed.”

My eyes widen. Did she say “toilet”? I look over to the van with its high roof and broad base. Is our waste going to get flushed down the road? And what’s this about sleeping inside? I drop the prata I am eating onto my plate, but Ibu and Atuk don’t notice. They’re still chatting excitedly.

“We’re *living* inside the van?” The words rush out. “I thought we were building a library on wheels.”

All this while, I assumed the journey to Wales would be a straight line and back, only stopping at villages and towns along the way to sell books.

Ibu’s jaw tightens, as if my question shocks her. “Yes, we are still doing that Maizey. See the rear of the van here? I designed it such that the bookshelves can be pulled out from under the bunk—”

But I am not listening anymore. I tear through the

front door and lock myself in the bedroom. Only pausing to scoop Curie out of my pocket and put her back in the pot, I pull the pink blanket over my whole body as I curl on the bed, knees up under my chin. Now it all makes sense. Ibu selling our flat, packing everything important and throwing away everything else.

“We are *never* going home,” I whisper.

Ibu’s footsteps pause right outside the bedroom door. Three rapid knocks. “Maizey, I’m so sorry, honey. I thought I had explained everything.” She tries opening the door, but I’ve locked it. *Too bad*, I think. “Can you unlock the door please?”

I keep silent. I scrunch up my face in hurt and anger. Another three rapid knocks. “Open up, Maizey.”

“You should let her in.” Curie hops close.

“No!” I yell, more at Ibu than Curie. “You told me we were going on a road trip but you *never* said we were leaving forever! You didn’t even ask me if I wanted to leave Singapore. You just packed all our things and made me come here with you,” I sob into the pillow. “I miss Dadi. I want to be around his things. And now we are never going back? You’re so selfish.”

Never in my life have I ever raised my voice to my parents, but I don’t care right now. That hurt and anger from earlier is twisting around in my stomach and merging with something else...something like anxiety. It started since the fire and has been getting worse and worse every day. I dig desperately under my pillow for my emergency squeeze ball. I count one-two, one-two as

I squeeze it in my hand.

I hear scraping sounds outside the door, followed by a thud. Ibu must be sitting against the door. “Why don’t we talk? You can ask me about anything you want. And I promise, I will answer truthfully.”

I pull the blanket away from my face. “Promise?”

“Yes.”

I crawl to the door and sit down, pressing my ear against the wood.

“Why did you sell the HDB? Dadi loves it. *I* love it. It is our home.” The last word trembles on my lips. “What...what’ll happen when he comes back and we’re not there and all our stuff is gone? How will he know where to find us?”

Ibu clears her throat. “I don’t know if anyone can come back from a fire like that, honey.” I can hear her voice trembling too. “And I only have a year left before my Imagination runs out. Is it wrong to want to spend that time with my only daughter?”

My cheeks are wet and my eyes are blurry.

“We didn’t need to leave our home to do that. All my memories of Dadi are there.”

“Oh, Maizey honey, that’s not true. Our memories stay in our hearts and we carry them with us, all the time. This library is a way of preserving our memory of him.”

Wiping tears with my sleeves, I fumble for the lock and open the door. Ibu is right there and takes me in her arms.

“I’m sorry,” I whimper against her chest.

She folds me into a hug. “When your Dadi and I were

younger, our dream was to build a home on the road and go see the world. That was before university fees, bills and, well, you.” Ibu pushes the hair from my eyes. “When you came into our lives, we didn’t need anything else. We found our home.”

“And the library?”

“Isn’t it true that my genius daughter is an avid reader? The three of us spend more time surrounded by books than people. If this is my only chance at sharing the last bits of my Imagination with the world, then what an adventure this will be.”

I want to say nice comforting things back because that’s what grown-ups do. But all I can do is sit here confused with all these complicated feelings.

“You know, while we’re being honest with each other, I need to confess something.” Ibu scoops me up and puts me down in front of her suitcase. “I know I said not to pack anything bulky...but I just couldn’t leave this.”

Her cheeks are pink as she uncovers a small chest underneath her clothes, currently taking up a quarter of the luggage.

“It’s Dadi’s medicine box.” I cannot believe it. He is always so secretive about it. I gasp at the many small pots of dried herbs and vials of concoctions inside.

Ibu empties the chest by placing the items in order of size on the floor. Then she starts pulling the corners of the base. “I had to bring it along, because of this.” A small click and the base pops open to reveal a hidden compartment. No way!

Ibu pulls out a white envelope and a small memory card. I spy the BSI logo on both items: two rose-like flowers inside a greenhouse.

“Read it,” I urge her. So, she does.

Lily,

If you're reading this, then I presume that the worst has happened. Inside the memory card is the Cureall plant's DNA analysis, which I hope can restore Imagination to the world.

It works...but at a price. You will lose one or more of your five senses in exchange for abundant Imagination. Imagine having all the inspiration to paint but never actually seeing it; or composing the world's most beautiful music but never hearing it. Hmm, maybe I should call this “Beethoven's Dilemma”—oh, that's pretty clever.

But I digress. More tests need to be done before the Cureall can be used.

I know this is a mammoth ask of you, but I need you to hand over this memory card to my trusted associates at the Botanical Society International. The experts at the Ankara and Prague headquarters have the best scientific equipment to properly study the Cureall's properties and produce the cure. But you cannot

give the plant to them without retrieving my research from Bangkok and Chengdu. First, you will have to visit Dr Kotchapop Kittikowit at the Bangkok office, and then Dr He Wu Bin at the Chengdu office. They will know what to do. Entrusting this task to them, however, is too risky. There is no one else I can trust except you and our daughter. I know my colleagues will direct you onwards to the other BSI offices. I've had to put these measures in place to make sure my work doesn't fall into the wrong hands. Think of it like the divide-and-conquer algorithm in computer science: this huge problem can only be solved by breaking it up into smaller problems and solving them one by one until the whole thing is solved.

It's up to you now. You **MUST** seek out my BSI colleagues, if there is to be any hope of saving Imagination. Once my research is in safe hands, I implore you to finally take Maizey and the Cureall plant to my parents in Cardiff and keep them safe.

All my love,

J. F.

P.S: But nothing comes easy. Dyfal donc a dyr y garreg. Maizey may prove to be an asset.

I sneak a glance at Curie. I have soooo many questions.

“Dadi’s message is an idiom in Welsh. It means ‘tapping persistently breaks the stone’. It’s what he always says to me when I’m about to give up playing with our puzzle games,” I whisper to Curie. Puffing up my chest, I try to mimic Dadi’s deep voice, “Perseverance pays in the end, Maizey.”

But Ibu always says there is a time and place for everything. The colour in her cheeks from earlier is gone and that’s usually not a good thing.

“Are you okay?” I ask carefully. That’s what adults always say when something isn’t right.

“I don’t know, sweetie. All this just feels surreal.”

Oh, that’s one word that doesn’t make sense to me. Maybe Ibu can help me understand.

“Why?”

“I don’t know what your father is playing at, involving you—us—like this. Going on a wild-goose chase and running from some malicious science organisation is *not* how I wanted us spending my last year of Imagination. It’s supposed to be about you and me.”

“Malicious” might rhyme with “delicious” but it’s nothing like it. “Malicious” comes from the Latin word *malus*, meaning bad. Ibu is definitely referring to the LABS, which means they want to cause harm to others. But Dadi was working for them. Is that why he said to go to BSI and not the LABS?

I map out the route that Dadi is asking us to take in my head: Bangkok → Chengdu → Ankara → Prague → Cardiff.

That *is* like chasing wild geese—we’ll never find what we’re looking for. And we don’t have much time. Ibu will turn 35 in exactly a year’s time next July. Does that mean we have to reach Prague before that?

“Are we...are we in danger?” I squeak.

“I don’t know for sure.” She draws a deep breath in through her nose—I can hear it whistle—and lets it out through her mouth. “The fact that your Dadi asked us to bring his research to the BSI instead of the LABS tells me something isn’t right. Before he—” Ibu stops suddenly and blinks hard. I think her eyes look a bit wet. “Before the fire, he’d been saying he didn’t feel safe at the LABS, but he couldn’t leave because of his bond... Then the fire...” Ibu covers her face with her hands.

Dadi has a bond with the LABS because of a scholarship they gave him to finish his studies. I don’t quite understand it, but I think it means he has to work with them for at least five years or he will have to pay back loads of money to them.

“But how do we know the BSI is not like the LABS?”

“We don’t. What I know is that the LABS is a pharmaceutical giant, so profits and prestige will always come first. BSI, on the other hand, is like an organisation where anyone who is interested in botany can become members. They have research centres all over the world.”

“You mean like STEAM club?” My eyes light up.

“Yes, your Dadi was an active member and trained other botanists around the world. That’s probably where he exchanged ideas and got support for his Cureall

research,” she tells me. “But other LABS scientists can also be part of the BSI, and I’m not sure who they are. I don’t know who to trust.”

Yikes! Ibu is making it sound like those spy cartoons where the villains sometimes pretend to be the good guys. “Should we go to the police?”

I can tell Ibu wants to shrug, as her shoulders start moving up. But Ibu always has an answer. She traces one of the names in Dadi’s letter. “We need more information first. Remember what your Dadi used to say about research?”

I curl my toes. I know this.

“Check your Sources...” Ibu prompts with a tiny smile.

“Understand, do your Research and Evaluate. S-U-R-E!” My instant jubilation fizzles away when I realise what this *actually* means. “Are you saying this letter from Dadi might be fake? It sure looks like his handwriting.”

Ibu picks up the memory card and inserts it into the reader on her phone. “Anything is possible with technology these days. There’s only one way to find out.” A security message pops up, prompting a code.

We try my birthday. Incorrect. Ibu’s birthday. Incorrect.

“Another try and it’ll probably lock us out,” warns Ibu.

Curie and I exchange looks. She angles her head towards the letter and hisses, “Tell her about the secret message.”

“Uhm, Ibu, do you think that maybe Dadi’s somehow made it so that only I can break the code?” I translate the Welsh idiom in his letter. “He only says this when I’m

stuck on a puzzle. Which means he must have left me one to solve. I just know it.”

“And how are you even going to go about that?” Ibu frowns.

My eyes dart first to Curie, then to the bulge under my pillow. Should I tell her? I twiddle my thumbs.

“So, uhm, I have something to confess too.” I slide the journal out from its hiding place. “I sneaked this into my suitcase.” Ibu raises an eyebrow at me, as if she’s not equally guilty. “But maybe Dadi’s left some clues inside or something.”

She thumbs through the pages, her smile widening as she gets to the middle of the book.

“Knowing you and your father’s penchant for puzzles, I think it’s worth a try. But I don’t want to put all that pressure on you, Maizey. You’re only 11!”

But Dadi trusted me with the secret message. And I’m not just 11. I am an 11-year-old with a very good brain for puzzles. Dadi said so, *and* I have completed all the puzzle books in our home library, including the set of wooden geometric puzzles that he gave me for my birthday last year.

Ibu takes the memory card out, then clamps her palms together. She’s made a decision.

“We are going to Bangkok because it is a UNESCO World Book Capital and that’s where *I* want us to spend time together. While we’re there, we can check out the Botanical Society International office and find Kotch. If this is a fake, we’ll know for sure. If it isn’t, then Kotch

can handle it himself. And then we can go on our merry way.”

“Kotch?” Curie looks at me quizzically.

I look at the name in Dadi’s letter. “Wait, you know him?”

“Of course. Kotch is one of your father’s best students.” Ibu pauses, then smiles slowly. “If there’s anyone I can trust with this cryptic task, it would be him.”

“Does Atuk know about this?” I help Ibu put the herbs back into the chest, watching as she places the memory card in a tiny plastic pouch with her other important things.

“No, and it’s better if he doesn’t. I don’t want him to worry. He’s got quite a lot on his plate already.” She shuts the box with a “click”.

I know Ibu doesn’t mean an actual plate. It’s one of those sayings to mean that he just has too much to think about or handle.

“What about the journal? Can I keep it?” It’s currently against my chest. *Please say yes, please say yes.*

She gives me a wide smile, eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Of course, as long as you promise to take good care of it. Even if there’s no clue for the code inside, I think you’ll find this more interesting than I would. There’s all kinds of scientific names in here that you’re probably able to pronounce better than me, my future world-changer.” Ibu’s face suddenly lights up. “I think we need to get you your own journal before this trip starts.”

My mouth hangs open. That is exactly what Atuk said earlier. “Yes, please!”

Ibu pinches my cheeks lightly in that you’re-so-adorable way (even though I’m too big for that kind of thing now), and says, “I honestly think this trip will be an amazing learning journey for the both of us. We’ll come out at the end of it stronger than ever.”

I may not understand everything Ibu does. But I trust her.

“Now, just one more thing.” Ibu turns towards Curie. Yikes! Could she *actually* hear her all this while? “That Cureall plant was very important to your father and to his research. You’ve promised to be responsible for it. Can I trust you take care of it properly?”

Curie stays absolutely still, but her eyes are moving side to side, except Ibu doesn’t seem to notice. I gulp, hugging Curie’s pot closer to my chest. “I’ll make sure she never leaves my side, Ibu.”

Ibu raises at eyebrow at me, but at that moment, the door inches open slightly. Atuk pokes his head in, no longer in coveralls but in a trendy pair of jeans and a shirt.

“Alright, ladies. I know what will cheer everyone up.”

“Ayah, what are you up to?” Ibu wipes away a tear when she thinks I’m not looking.

“Shopping!” He picks me up and helps Ibu to her feet. “Get changed and I will see you outside. First stop: ice cream.”

About the Author



Erni Salleh started writing stories at the age of twelve and has never looked back. Her first novel, *The Java Enigma*, was shortlisted for the 2020 Epigram Books Fiction Prize. Originally from Singapore, Erni spent many years working as a librarian before moving to the United Kingdom. She currently works in a museum where she combines storytelling with history and public engagement. Erni finds inspiration for her stories in the diverse cultures of both her home country and Hay-on-Wye, a magical Welsh book town she regularly disappears into on her many secret literary quests.

“A fun and delightful story about courage and dealing with change. I’m rooting for Maizey Lee!”

—Vivian Teo, author of the *My BFF Is an Alien* series

Maizey’s father disappears in a mysterious fire, leaving behind secret messages only she can solve. He was on the brink of finding the cure to a worldwide calamity: grown-ups everywhere have lost their Imagination. Now, Maizey must journey from Singapore to Bangkok with her mother in a library on wheels, along with Curie the talking plant. Before long, they discover that LABS, an evil pharmaceutical company, is hot on their tails. It’s up to Maizey to save the day—and Imagination too!



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