

THE GODS  
WILL HEAR  
US



*"A beautiful debut"*  
—JANET FITCH

a novel



jinny koh



EVENTUALLY

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The Gods Will Hear Us Eventually  
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# THE GODS WILL HEAR US

a novel



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# EVENTUALLY

*For Renyi, Ariel & Esther  
my abiding light on this side of heaven*

Hope is the thing with feathers—  
that perches in the soul—  
and sings the tunes without the words—  
and never stops at all.

—Emily Dickinson

## ● Prologue

NAI NAI SWORE she once knew a girl who had a tree growing from her head.

“I saw it with my own eyes. It was small, like a shrub, and on its branch hung one fat mangosteen.”

Waving a palm fan in a slow and deliberate manner, Nai Nai looked regal as she reclined on the bed, her head propped up with two stiff pillows. The sweltering night was so hot that even the lizards that scurried along the common corridor sought coolness among potted plants, their wriggly tails disappearing behind the leaves. Crickets chirped in chorus, their dull buzz climbing higher and faster as if to beat the rising heat. Anna’s cotton singlet clung to her sticky back as she snuggled close to her grandmother, inhaling the familiar sweet scent of baby powder mixed with creamy Hazeline Snow. She loved this time of the night, when the rest of the family had retired to their bedrooms after dinner, leaving her alone with Nai Nai and her tales from the kampong, where people lived under zinc-roofs in wooden houses built on stilts, bathed with water drawn from wells, and raised chickens and ducks in their backyards. Anna had never experienced any of those things. The only buildings she knew were made of

concrete; the water she drank flowed straight from the tap. But as much as the stories were fascinating—like how Nai Nai, together with her neighbours, had caught a three-metre long snake slithering across her front yard and then boiled it in a pot of soup—Anna had come to realise that many of them were mere myths and superstitions. If Nai Nai had spoken about this tree-growing business a couple of years ago, Anna might have believed her. But Anna was almost 7. A big girl now. So she said, “Don’t bluff me, Nai Nai. Trees grow on the ground. Not on people’s heads.”

Nai Nai laughed and sat up with a grunt, her head of short curls pressed flat on one side. “Aiyoh! Listen to yourself! You think you know everything, huh? Accidents happen, you know. Why do you think Old Chan has that big bump at the back of his head?”

Anna folded her arms, a shadow of uncertainty passed over her eyes. Old Chan was the fruit seller at the market who had a “tumour”. That was what her sister said. Could she be wrong?

“You see, my friend here, she loved mangosteens,” Nai Nai went on, watching Anna with a smile playing at the corner of her lips. “Must have them every day or else she cannot sleep. Then one time, she ate too fast and swallowed a seed. Before she knew it, her hair turned into roots, and shoots and leaves sprouted—”

“Like this?” Anna lifted her short hair up in the air, giggling as she imagined a tangle of scraggly roots hanging down her ears like thick ropes.

“Orh! You think it’s funny!” Nai Nai pinched Anna’s chubby cheek with a light hand. “Well, just like you, everyone at the kampong laughed at her. They tore the leaves, cut the

twigs, and threw stones at her whenever she walked by. In the end, her parents were so upset by the ruckus that they packed her clothes and sent her away.”

Anna dropped her smile. Parents don’t leave their children. Not like that. “I don’t believe you, Nai Nai.”

“Well, up to you, but you better be careful the next time you eat fruit. You never know what will happen.” Before Anna could retort, Nai Nai prodded her along with the palm fan. “Now go on, time to sleep. You have school tomorrow.”

Anna squeezed her grandmother tight and then switched off the light. As she left the room, she glanced at Nai Nai’s willowy figure on the bed, her body shifting with the gentle rustle of leaves. Surely the girl with the mangosteen tree was just a myth, yet something about that story unsettled Anna, and it was only later that year did she fully grasp her grandmother’s words.

When she learnt that even myths can have a kernel of truth.