



REAL



AMERICANS

a novel



RACHEL



KHONG

author of
GOODBYE, VITAMIN

Also by Rachel Khong

Goodbye, Vitamin

REAL
AMERICANS



A Novel

Rachel Khong



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Acknowledgments

A Note About the Author

For my family

Like you I was raised in the institution of dreaming.

—CAMERON AWKWARD-RICH

BEIJING, 1966

SHE ISN'T AFRAID, but he is. They stand, in the darkness, before a glass case of old things. A Ming dynasty inkstone. A chrysanthemum carved from horn. A Song painting stamped with ruby-red collector's seals. And on a silk pillow, so slight it could be missed: an ancient lotus seed with a legend behind it.

The story goes like this: One night, long ago, a dragon emerged from the sky and dropped this seed into the emperor's open hand. His advisors huddled near to examine it. *What fortune!* they remarked. This seed would grant the emperor his greatest wish. Unfortunately, he died that night, while contemplating his options. He might have asked for immortality.

She takes a hammer from her knapsack. With all her strength, she strikes the glass. It makes a beautifully clear sound as it shatters. Quickly, the two get to work, securing the relics. It is an attempt to spare them from the Red Guards' destruction—an act of protest, small, against a movement she's no match for.

The seed is unspectacular, so old it resembles a stone. Yet she's aware it contains an entire future: roots, stems, leaves, blooms, to seeds once more—encoded, like she is. Her heart pumps blood, her lungs take in air, she sleeps, wakes, eats, excretes. Will her life be long or short? What has she chosen, she wonders, and what has chosen her? She likes the fragrance of gardenias, but not the scent of lipstick. She doesn't mind the rain. She is in love, which feels, to her, at once easy and hard, elemental and ungraspable—like vanishing and eternity at the same time. She wants to ask of every person she meets: Is it this way for you?

“Hurry,” her companion says.

A door slams, loudly. Someone is here. The footsteps draw closer. They flee.

Outside, she opens her fist. On her bleeding palm rests a stolen seed. The story is fiction. And yet: Why shouldn't the wish be hers?

PART ONE



Lily

CHAPTER 1

1999

MY ALARM RANG AT seven and I pressed snooze as usual. The second time I awoke, it was still seven. This happened occasionally, these blips in my existence. I got blank stares whenever I tried explaining them, so I didn't anymore. The feeling I had was that time wouldn't move. A second would refuse to pass as it usually did, and I would find myself trapped in a moment—unable to progress beyond a minute or two.

My bathroom mirror, flecked white with toothpaste, reflected me to myself. Lines from the pillow were pressed into my cheek. I ran my fingers over the indentations. The toothpaste flecks gave the effect of being in a shaken snow globe.

In the kitchen, the same drain flies circled the sink, unless they were new ones—the former ones' progeny. Debbie never washed her dishes, and her lipstick-rimmed mug sat balanced on the edge of the sink, like a dare to raise the issue. Warily, I ate a piece of toast with blueberry jam. The toast crunched as it always had. Some jam got on my cheek, and in swiping it from my face I removed some blush. Now there was a void in my coloring. I would have to redo the makeup, but it relieved me to see that the regular laws of physics continued to apply.

Outside, I regarded my surroundings with suspicion, as though they were a dream I might wake up from. Like everyone, I had recently watched *The Matrix*. Would it be so bad to discover that life until now, or some

portion of it, had been illusory—an advanced society’s highly realistic simulation? It might actually be a relief.

Downstairs, Mrs. Chin restocked the key chains of her souvenir shop. She was arguing with Mr. Peng, who owned the salon next door. Seeing me, they paused their quarrel.

“Lei hou, Lily,” Mrs. Chin said with a wave, pronouncing it *lee lee*. She’d taught me exactly three words of Cantonese: *Lei hou ma?* How are you?

“Lei hou ma!” I called back. “I’m okay,” I added, in English.

Mrs. Chin’s hair, newly permed, shimmered with auburn highlights—Mr. Peng’s handiwork. From a plastic bag with a happy face on it, she pulled out a bun. The yeast smelled sweet. Did I want one? I shook my head. Not today.

—

The bell on the café door gave its meek ring. I ordered my regular latte—the latte I shouldn’t have been buying, because I didn’t make any money. I sat to drink it. A dark-haired man held a bagel to a child’s small mouth, waiting for the child to accept a bite. I followed his gaze to the New York City street, where nothing appeared out of the ordinary: people, pigeons, bags of trash. Holding the bagel steady, the father’s mind traveled elsewhere. It was a look I remembered my mother wearing when I was a child—one I resented. How dare she think of anything but me?

The father and child began to speak in another language I couldn’t make out. Then the man turned, suddenly, catching me in my stare. I dropped my gaze, feeling my ears redden.

There were the regular café sounds: the low rumble of milk being steamed, the crinkling of paper bags when pastries were slid in. A man in his fifties, a Wall Street type, ate a cookie noisily and peered at his pager.

I returned to the register to order the coffee I brought to my boss every day. It was a dark roast stirred with two pink packets of Sweet’N Low,

made paler with half-and-half, until it was “the color of Halle Berry,” he’d instructed proudly on my first day, as if that wasn’t a terrible thing to say.

On the four blocks to the office I dodged tourists wearing backpacks and bucket hats, holding red bags from the discount designer store. They moved slowly, their faces stupid with awe. I walked fast, with purpose, gripping the cup of coffee, which burned through its cardboard sleeve, proud to be inured to a cityscape that instilled marvel in everyone else. When I entered the immense glass building, I did so with a sense of importance and authority: I *worked* here. I was an unpaid intern, but still.

—

Our building was new, a futuristic marvel of glass and steel that curved slightly upward. The elevator was a point of pride. It took me to the twentieth floor within minutes, where I handed Jerry his coffee, which he accepted in his sausagey pink fingers without a word. The flesh on his ring finger bulged around his wedding ring, the way trees grew around old signs or objects. I remembered a photo from the magazine, from somewhere in the Pacific Northwest—a tree growing bark over a boy’s bicycle, as though swallowing it. The boy who’d owned the bicycle was an old man by now. Jerry nodded, to indicate the coffee was to his liking.

I spent the next four hours brightening images. When Jerry left early, as he did every evening, I opened Usenet. I had never posted before, so I created a username: *TimelessinNY*. I typed out my question: *Does anyone ever feel like time gets stuck? I have these moments when time won’t move. A minute lasts forever.* Awaiting responses, I searched for “jobs for art history major.” Curator, docent, teacher. It was difficult to picture myself as any of those things. I would be graduating in the spring, and what I wished for was some clear way forward—some passion, like my parents had, that would give my life meaning. I had not inherited their gift for science or, sometimes it seemed, for anything at all.

Before I left for the day, I checked the message board for replies. There were none.



At the company's holiday party, the tree was false and towering. The Santa was Latino, his red velvet suit emblazoned with the company's logo. A boy band's Christmas album played too loudly. Our larger parent company had rented out a floor of a hotel in Chelsea, lined with windows, giving us a 360-degree view of Manhattan. With money they weren't paying me, I thought. Before leaving for the party, I'd noticed a run in my only pair of black stockings. I drew a line on my calf in Sharpie, a trick my freshman-year dorm-mate had taught me, to make the stocking appear intact.

I picked up a triangle of toast, black beads of caviar clumped on it. The city offered wealth to us in glimpses: Even a college student could eat caviar, or drink wine from crystal. We'd be reminded that we weren't—rich, that is—the moment we returned to our minuscule apartments, where we slept in loft beds and shared closet-sized bathrooms. Even the put-together people—the people who dressed exquisitely, expensively—I had come to learn, didn't necessarily inhabit livable places. Often they dug their elegant clothing from piles on chairs that were their only furniture.

I'd have to be vigilant if I wanted more caviar. Media employees mobbed the stressed young server holding the silver tray. I wondered what this party was doing for their morale. It was obvious who worked in fashion, food, celebrity gossip. My own coworkers wore skin-baring dresses—we'd seen little skin all winter—and ladled punch out of a fountain that frothed uncontrollably.

My fellow interns lingered as a pack by the hors d'oeuvres, finding strength in numbers. Seeing me, they waved, beckoning me over. Most, like me, went to NYU; a few went to Columbia or SUNY. All of them were drinking the alcoholic punch, though many were underage. This went uncommented on, because it was implicit: This was our salary. The other

interns were uniformly blond, round breasted, affable. It was plain to see that Jerry, who had done the hiring, had a type. I was the anomaly.

I picked up a shrimp and swiped it through cocktail sauce. It was cold and tasted only faintly of the sea. Shrimp cocktail involved a disorienting amount of chewing, and there was always a moment, eating it, when I thought, *Too much flesh*. But I had this amnesia about the shrimp-cocktail-eating experience: I forgot how I felt until I was in the act of eating my next one.

I scanned the room for a trash can, not noticing Jerry approach. I'd have preferred to avoid him tonight, but now it was too late. Beside him stood a man, tall and golden haired, who looked to be in his twenties.

"Lily, this is my nephew," Jerry announced, with some pride.

Jerry had cocktail sauce at the edge of his mouth, crusted like blood.

"And this is Lily," he said to the nephew.

He slapped the nephew on his back. I held up the shrimp tail and shrugged at the nephew, like, *Sorry, wish I could, but I can't shake your hand at the moment*.

"She's Korean," my boss added.

I wondered why he said that—with such confidence, and as though it would be of interest. I felt instantly weary.

"Chinese," I clarified to the nephew, once my boss was gone.

Jerry migrated to the flock of blond interns, where one by one they brightened at him, as though he were a god. He had the power to transform any of us from unpaid to paid interns, so, in a way, he was. In the past he'd also introduced me as Thai. We worked in travel, but he couldn't manage to keep it straight.

"Sorry," the nephew said. "That was weird."

He was distractingly hot—athletic but not vacant, a muscular nerd. Unlike the other men at the party, media types wearing T-shirts that were loose around their collars, he looked at home in his suit, which was fitted. He didn't appear as though he'd borrowed it for this occasion. He was definitively not my type. Muscles intimidated me. I deliberated how much more to drink. I inched toward the punch fountain and he followed.

“I’m Matthew,” he introduced himself, scratching the back of his neck, which I couldn’t help but admire. “What do you do here?”

“I’m an intern,” I said, filling a glass with punch. “In the art department. Mostly I search for stock photographs. Or collect invoices from photographers.”

I pressed my hand to my punch glass. Cold. I moved it to my neck. Hot. It was likely I was not dreaming; it was likely this was reality. I’d been wary in the wake of the morning.

A gaggle of gossip magazine staffers glanced over at us, interested in the handsome nephew’s movements.

“What’d you work on today?”

Matthew appeared genuinely curious, as though he wanted to continue the conversation, which surprised me. I was used to people looking around for someone more interesting once I told them what my position was.

I’d processed invoices. I’d verified hotel features—comparing photos to their stated amenities. I’d also researched potential photographers for an article about millennium projects—architecture and celebrations meant to commemorate the year 2000. The Millennium Wheel, for example: a Ferris wheel being built in London, designed by a husband-and-wife team.

“It’s big, right?” Matthew asked.

“The world’s tallest,” I confirmed.

The music stopped abruptly. We quieted with the crowd.

“Good evening, everyone,” came a voice over the speakers.

We turned our attention to the stage. The raffle was beginning, announced the energetic hired emcee. We had each been given tickets at the beginning of the party, and I dug mine out of my purse.

“Three, eight, five, six...,” read the emcee. I heard sighs of disappointment.

Of course I won nothing. I wasn’t a lucky person. I’d never defied odds. Even my being born a Chinese woman had been likeliest, of all possible humans. My cubicle-mate, Amy, screamed with glee. She ran to the stage to collect her prize: a shrink-wrapped Discman in a box. Again I thought of the cost of the Discman, the salary I was not receiving.

The emcee read out another number: “Three, eight, seven, seven.” More groans of disappointment. Again, not me. Matthew was staring at his ticket.

“I think that’s me,” he said.

He made his way up to the stage and collected a forty-inch plasma TV. He returned to my side and stood it up next to us, and shrugged, as though this sort of thing happened regularly. The emcee continued to read off winning numbers, and Matthew leaned toward me.

“Do you want it?”

“Are you kidding?”

“I’ve got a TV. I don’t actually know what I’d do with this.”

“Wow,” I said, disbelieving. “I mean...”

“Why don’t you take it and see how you like it? And if you don’t, you could sell it. It’s a nice TV. You could get a few grand for it, at least.”

“This is crazy,” I said, “but okay.”

“Do you need help getting it home?”

I looked at him.

“I’m not coming on to you,” he added quickly. “It’s just...no offense, but this party isn’t that amazing.”

This was a true thing: This party was not that amazing.

“Well, sure,” I said. “Why not. Hang on.”

I ran to the snack table, wrapped some cookies in a napkin for the road, and put them in my coat pocket. Matthew picked the TV up easily, and outside, I held my arm out to hail a cab. One pulled up. The driver was grinning both in his ID card and in real life. In the cab we held the TV awkwardly across our laps, unable to move, not speaking.

In front of my apartment he unbuttoned his dress shirt and handed it, along with his coat and tie, shiny and blue, to me. Holding the TV, wearing only his white undershirt, his muscles bulged, modestly, as he carried it up my three flights of stairs. Debbie was in Nebraska for the holidays.

While I moved books off the table that would serve as the console, he found the cable jack and electrical outlet. He lifted the TV onto the table,

with an elegance that surprised me, and pressed the on button. The weatherman appeared. I gasped.

“God, thanks,” I said, handing his shirt back to him. “This is incredible. Never has a stranger given me a television.”

“It’s not like I’m nothing to you. You make it sound like I came in from off the street.”

“You’re not nothing,” I agreed. “We had a conversation. It was...five minutes?”

“Maybe even ten.”

“Maybe even ten!”

“It’s perfect there,” he said, buttoning his shirt.

I tried to make out his tone—sarcastic? The screen was laughably enormous in my tiny apartment.

“Wait,” I said, and fished the cookies out of my coat. They were Danish butter cookies, the kind that came in a blue tin, nestled into cupcake papers. “A reward.” The cookies were crumbs now. He poured them into his mouth all at once, which I liked.

He didn’t say anything for a moment, dissolving the cookies with his saliva. I admired his eyes, which were an intense blue, more like ice than water, so light they were nearly transparent. My own eyes struck me as common, in comparison. They were brown, and moderately cool, as all eyes were. But a certain type of eyes made you think: *Those can’t possibly be real. A human body made those?* Matthew’s were in that category. He was beautiful, I’d observed all night, but suddenly it hit me with force, like wind, and I regretted that he would soon be gone.

“Do you want my number?” I blurted, surprising myself.

He said nothing for a second, and it was the longest second of my life. I’d said the wrong thing, I realized, mortified. He’d said he wasn’t coming on to me, and now I was coming on to him. He turned away from me and located what he needed: He tore off a corner of an empty cereal box from my recycling bin. He handed it to me, and I wrote my number down.