



THE GREAT RECLAMATION

A NOVEL

RACHEL HENG

ALSO BY RACHEL HENG

Suicide Club

The
Great Reclamation



RACHEL HENG

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For my mother

We do not lay undue stress on the past. We do not see nation-building and modernization as primarily an exercise in reuniting the present generation with a past generation and its values and glories.

S. RAJARATNAM, SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE SIXTH ASIAN ADVERTISING CONGRESS AT THE SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL, JULY 1, 1968

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PART I

A Small Island



Chapter One

Decades later, the kampong would trace it all back to this very hour, waves draining the light from this slim, hungry moon. Decades later, they would wonder what could have been had the Lees simply turned back, had some sickness come upon the father manning the outboard motor, or some screaming fit befallen the youngest, forcing them to abandon the day's work and steer their small wooden craft home. Decades later, they would wonder if any difference could have been made at all.

Or would past still coalesce into present: The uncle dying the way he did, an outcast burned to blackened bone in a house some said was never his anyway. The kampong still destroyed, not swallowed whole by the waves in accordance with some angry god's decree, as the villagers had always feared, but taken to pieces and sold for parts by the inhabitants themselves. If the little boy, the sweetest, most sensitive boy in the kampong, would nevertheless have become a man who so easily bent the future to his will.

Perhaps he would have; perhaps this had nothing to do with the hour, the boat, the sea, and everything to do with the boy. But these questions could only be asked after the wars had been fought and the nation born and the sea—once thought of as dependable, eternal—stopped with ton upon ton of sand. These questions would not occur to anyone until the events had fully passed them by, until there was nothing to be done, all were fossils, all was calcified history.

For now, though, the year was still 1941, the territory of Singapore still governed by the Ang Mohs as it had been for the past century, and the boy, very little, very afraid, still crouched in the back of his father's fishing boat.



Lee Ah Boon was seven, already a year late, as Hia liked to remind him. Hia, now nine, had taken *his* first trip on his sixth birthday. But while Hia at six had been a boy with plump, tanned arms and strong calves like springs that could propel him over the low wooden fence at the perimeter of the kampong, Ah Boon at seven was still cave-chested, with the scrawny limbs and delicate hands of a girl. Despite as much time spent in the sun as his brother, Ah Boon's skin retained its milky pallor, as fine as the white flesh of an expensive fish steamed to perfection. Hence his nickname.

“Bawal!”

At the sound of his brother's voice, Ah Boon sprang away from the boat's side. In the weak moonlight the sea around them appeared as viscous black oil, roiling gently in the breeze. He shuddered to think what could be waiting beneath its pleated surface.

“Scared, ah, Bawal?”

Hia clambered toward Ah Boon, stepping over the ropes and nets that littered the floor of the small boat. He moved with a careless, threatening ease, like the foot-long monitor lizards that scuttled through the tall grass around the kampong. Hia grabbed Ah Boon's shoulders, turning his torso out toward the sea.

“Wah, so brave!”

Hia pushed his brother suddenly, as if to tip him out of the boat. The sea lurched up toward Ah Boon's face and he clawed at the side, letting out a small whimper.

“You know,” Hia said. “Pa never tell you everything about your first trip out. He never tell you about the night swim, hor?”

Hia went on to say that it was a tradition that every fisherman's son went through on his first trip. That soon, Pa would stop the boat in the middle of the empty sea and tell Ah Boon to get out into the water.

All around them pulsed the ocean. And up above, blank and starless, was the unending sky. A cloud scraped the thin moon; the darkness deepened.

Ah Boon thought of the fish. Bright-eyed creatures with silver bodies of pure, spasming muscle. For the past year it had been his terrible job to help sort them, still alive in the nets when his father came home. Horrified by gasping, desperate mouths and manic shiny eyes, he had run away crying at first, but the jeers of his brother and the stern, clicking tongue of his father eventually reconciled him to his task.

Thus Ah Boon had learned to present a blank face, to control his expression even when he stepped by accident on a slimy, stingless jellyfish on the beach and the wet alive matter oozed between his toes. He had perfected the containment of his distaste for the unruly water that so dominated the life around him, felt in the pit of his belly like a cold glass marble he'd accidentally swallowed. But what Hia was suggesting now—to plunge his small self into the wide black sea—this he could not bear.

“Don't want” was all he said.

“Don't want?” Hia cried, almost gleefully. “You got no choice! You must swim away, far, far away, until you hear us call you back. It's the tradition. You know what is tradition?”

Tradition was the glue that bound everyone else so naturally, but failed, somehow, to adhere to Ah Boon. Sweeping his grandmother's weeded grave as cicadas screamed like demons in the bushes; visiting the crowded houses of neighbors during the New Year to have his scrawny frame prodded and commented upon; the assumption that he would one day, like his father, be a fisherman. Tradition was the stick against which he was constantly measured, against which, time and time again, he came up short.

“Tradition means: Pa did it, I did it, no choice, you must do also.” Hia grinned, his teeth flashing white in the dark.

The arches of Ah Boon's feet tensed up as they always did when he was nervous. He bit his lip. He would not cry.

The boat began to slow.

“Oh, here we go,” Hia said. “Ready, Boon? Ready for your long, cold, swim in the dark?”

The engine fell silent, and all Ah Boon could hear was the thrum of the waves. They were louder now, as if crashing onto something. It was so dark. He could almost feel the cold water closing in, the sting of salt in his eyes, the burn at the back of his nose. Movement in the water around him; something invisible and large, or small, it didn't matter. What mattered was that it would touch him. Brush him with its slimy skin when he least expected it, on the sole of a foot, on a cheek, the back of his neck. There was no way to know.

The boat had come to a stop. Ah Boon felt his father stand up from where he was sitting behind them, next to the engine. Any time now Pa would tell him to get up, stop crying, and get into the water. Ah Boon squeezed his eyes shut. He felt Pa's hand on the top of his head. But instead of running his fingers through his hair affectionately as he often did, Pa simply left it resting there.

No one said anything. The boat was rocking gently, and still there was that noise of the crashing waves, louder than they should have been.

"How can?" Pa said. He spoke quietly, as if afraid to disturb the air.

"Don't know," Hia said. "Did we go a different way?"

"Can't be. We always go the same way."

Ah Boon opened his eyes. Neither Pa nor Hia was looking at him. Instead, they were staring at something ahead of the boat, some enormous shape.

It was an island. There was a shoreline, not unlike the one they lived by, rocky in some parts, sandy in others. That was the reason for the sound of the waves; they were in the harbor of this landmass. Unlike the flat shore they lived on, however, this island rose up from the sea, a giant humpbacked monster. Ah Boon had never seen cliffs that high.

The tide was drawing them closer now, rocking the boat gently toward the shore. Ah Boon turned to look at Pa and Hia. Hia's mouth was open, and his thick bottom lip glistened, a dew-soaked slug. His already large nostrils flared, like the gills of a fish gasping on land. Pa's face was the opposite; everything was closed, mouth pinched, eyebrows pulled tight.

From their faces, Ah Boon knew something was wrong. They were both very still, as if afraid of waking the looming shape before them.

But Ah Boon himself felt no fear, only prickling curiosity along with a strange, soft ache. He wished it were day so he could see the shape of the land before him. He wanted to know if its haunches were covered with rocks or trees, if seagulls dotted its shores, whether the ground was sand or mud. If the cliffs gave way to jungle, if there were trails left by animals or people that one could follow. A faint breeze lifted the little hairs on Ah Boon's arm. There was an odd quality to the air now; it seemed to vibrate, as if the island itself were humming.



Pa had plied these waters for more than twenty years, a good half of his life. He knew every square kilometer of the coast his kampong was built on, could recognize every swirling, glittering gyre of seaweed and trash, every glossy, jutting rock, the ones favored by seabirds singing their adamant songs, the ones shunned for whatever reason. Certainly he would be familiar with any islands, had there been any in this area, and he knew categorically that there were not.

How, then, to explain this, here, now? Was it a mirage? But the waves proved otherwise—Pa could tell from the rocking of his boat how far they were from land, and its movement tallied with what he was seeing. For a moment Pa had the mad thought of driving the boat straight into the shore, to see if it would go right through.

“Can we go there?” Ah Boon said, as if reading his mind.

Pa shook himself. “Don’t be silly, Boon. We don’t know anything about this—this place.”

He meant to say they didn’t know if the harbor was deep or shallow, whether sharp rocks lay beneath, and so on, logical reasons why they ought not to go there, but the words stuck in his throat. A slow dread began to take hold of him. Pa was not a superstitious man, and yet.

“How come we never see this before, Pa?” Hia asked.

Pa was silent. Finally, he turned away from the island. “Come, go home now.”

“But we haven’t put the nets out yet,” Hia protested.

“We will put them out on the way back,” Pa said.

“On the way back got no fish. Why we don’t put the nets out here? Here close enough to the usual place, right?”

The older boy’s voice was insistent but respectful. He knew not to appear to be questioning his father’s authority. Still, Pa’s frown deepened. He did not want to have to explain himself.

“We catch something that’s not a fish here, then how?” Ah Boon said.

Pa’s hand was swift, cuffing Ah Boon’s right ear in one hard blow. The boy’s head bounced to the side, and he brought his arms up to shield himself. But no further blows fell; Pa regretted it as soon as he’d lifted his arm.

“Don’t talk nonsense,” Pa said.

But a part of him feared the very thing that Ah Boon had voiced. Who knew what lurked in the waters of an impossible island?

“Come, go home,” he repeated firmly.



Ah Boon’s ear was still smarting from Pa’s slap when the wind picked up, a violent howl sweeping across the waves. Again the air seemed to hum. He had the feeling that they were being watched from the darkness. Not by people, or even animals. Inexplicably he was certain they were being watched by the island itself.

Pa pulled the cord that started the engine, and its mechanical roar ripped through the quiet. Ah Boon felt the island flinch at the noise, as if the shore were shying away. But this time he kept his mouth shut.

Pa turned the boat around. Both Ah Boon and Hia scrambled to face the back of the boat, so they could watch the island as they sped away. Despite

their traveling at top speed, the looming mass didn't seem to be growing smaller, only larger. It seemed to be chasing them. He wondered if Hia felt the same, and turned to look at his brother.

But Hia wasn't looking at the island anymore. He was lowering the nets at Pa's instruction.

"Come, Bawal, try to be useful," Hia said, handing Ah Boon a corner of a net and showing him where to anchor it on the boat's side.

So Ah Boon turned his attention away from the island. The tasks were straightforward; he was to hold one rope here, tie two knots there, keep an eye on the drift of the net to make sure it didn't get caught in the rudder. They absorbed him momentarily, and for the first time, the life of a fisherman seemed less terrifying, reduced to the simple maneuvering of a net as the wind rushed across one's cheeks. Ah Boon gave himself over to the work at hand.

It was only when Hia asked Pa whom he planned to tell that Ah Boon looked back again. The island was tiny now, visible only if you knew where to look. He squinted at the bump in the distance, watching as it shrank smaller, smaller, and then disappeared. Only the horizon remained.