

# ANNIVERSARY DAY

Emma Wilson

I woke up to an unclear, yellow sky. The smell of sizzling bacon and hissing tomatoes wafted through the air. *This can't be real.* I thought to myself. Our mornings typically began with a piercing alarm, thudding footsteps, and tired groans, clattering bowls and spoons, and the sound of watery rice (congee) plopping into bowls. I shuffled into the kitchen in my patched-up pyjamas. Mum's figure seemed to melt from drooping shoulders and greying hair to a sad shadow, cast against the peeling, oil-stained kitchen wallpaper. I approached her carefully, afraid that her brittle frame would crumble to pieces. The callouses on her hands were as inflamed as the glowing cinders beneath the wok. Straggles of hair fell over her dry face.

"*Gooda morni*", she said with a weary smile, the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes tied into bundles. I giggled at her valiant attempt at pronouncing English.

The bacon packaging on the benchtop read "Premium New Zealand bacon- ¥40". I winced as I thought about how much determination it must've taken her to buy this. The weeping tomato plants on the verandah must've provided the tomatoes, which were now turning a little too brown. She shifted her dull eyes to the extractor fan. I peeped out to see hordes of children skipping rope and kicking shuttlecocks.

"Mum, the fire!" I said as the wispy flames of the coal briquette stove licked at the corner of her blackened sleeve. In a spur of panic, she dunked her sleeve in a bowl of water nearby.

Breakfast was cooked. We gathered around the small, chipped table. Our hands were wrapped together in thanks for the food.

"Emma, Isabella, Lily, let's enjoy this rare treat, after all, it's Lily's fifth birthday!"

Again, that weary smile. Isabella and I gasped in the realization of our sister's birthday; we seldomly celebrated them, you see. Mum returned to frowning again as the chopsticks eagerly pounced on the steamy, juicy slices of bacon. The contents disappeared into ravenous little tummies.

Mum explained why there were torrents of children playing on the street, wedged between the two rows of apartments. We were to join them in a march to the local square in celebration of the 65th anniversary of the People's Republic of China reform.

Isabella and Lily were overjoyed- they frolicked about the room, bumping into furniture and the floorboards joined in a creaking chorus. I (the eldest), yelled at them to stop and release their excitement outside, as they might disturb old Mrs and Mr Yang downstairs;

although Mrs Yang was a right old woman, always squeezing her round nose and plump body into other people's business.

Isabella tip-toed into mum's room, scavenged through the meagre contents of her drawers, and adorned herself with the brightest trinkets she could find. I tickled her armpits while dressing her which caused her to giggle helplessly.

It was a cold autumn day and our breath was visible indoors. Isabella huffed in my face, the fatty smell of bacon curled up my nostrils and I pretended to recoil in disgust, making her giggle even more.

Clothes were yanked over our exposed bodies and wardrobes turned inside out in search of our best clothes. The clothes themselves were dusted. Isabella wore a hand-me-down undergarment, an undersized khaki jacket, and a pair of thin corduroy pants over her bed pants.

"You look like a boy, ha-ha!" Lily pointed at her. Mum slapped Lily's finger down and Lily threw her arm up and down before letting it hang limp.

I wore white stockings, an old maroon winter dress that belonged to one of my cousins, and pink strap-on shoes coming apart at the soles. I threw my favourite bright yellow winter coat over the top, unaware of the stark, unpleasant colour combination I'd created. Mum gave me her hand-stitched shoulder bag which I pulled across the chest, feeling all grown-up.

"All set to go!", she said, patting down the collar of Isabella's khaki jacket, and landing a soft kiss on her pursed lips. We raced each other down the steps to the base of the apartment, where the "old people's" bicycles and mopeds lay neglected.

Lily suddenly paused. I asked what the matter was. She looked up, her eyes watery reflections of the vast lurid yellow sky and delicate streaks of cirrus clouds, which were swimming like a school of giant sky fish. Then she looked down and quickly wiped a tear from the corner of her eye with a dirty sleeve. That turquoise cardigan, so small it wouldn't button up and the sleeves reached no further than her elbow, embarrassed her. She stretched the fabric once more before leaping out of the shady stairwell and into the crowd of children.

I tightened my grip on their hands, trying not to lose them but lost them as the torrents of children swallowed them up. On the sides of the street, ambling here and there, were tricycle-drawn carts and stalls, and their owners shouted advertisements at people spilling into the street from all directions.

Once we got to the square, the children darted to the various areas of entertainment. They were entranced by the cotton candy, singing, and ice skating in the pop-up rink. Children laughed furiously at the clown who was juggling, unicycling, and squeezing his squeaky red

nose. We looked on with wonderment, but Lily asked me: “can we buy some cotton candy to share?” and I had to say no. Three hours passed before we left the square.

“Look what I was given!” Lily cried, “let’s show mum!” Isabella chimed in.

We raced back home and up to the third floor, to the familiar door with the good fortune “fú” sticker on it. Mum’s “fisheye”-lens eye appeared at the peep-hole. I lifted Isabella up for a look; she laughed as always, finding that sight amusing. The key fidgeted in the door for a while before it clanged open and the two younglings burst in.

Lily ran straight into mum and showed her the bread and dripping a man on the side of the road had given her. Her excitement, however, was met with a pair of melancholic eyes, a tear began an uneven journey down its familiar path, etched into her brown skin.

“Thanks, Lily,” she hugged her and stroked her hair, but I could tell that the bread and dripping, combined with the man’s gesture of pity, reminded her of her childhood, and the cycle of poorness and charity she was unable to escape from.

I wanted to tell her we love her and she was a brave woman for single-handedly bringing us up, but I didn’t. I went to bed that night with a smouldering sunset outside my window and with many thoughts swimming through my head. I dreamt of mum standing on the verandah with her raven hair flowing. Her eyes were faucets dripping tears, they rode their own little magic carpets of air, and froze into amethyst crystals superimposed against the dark sky, before falling down into an endless abyss.