

A year or so later, I saw my first porno ad. I was using Mom's desktop for homework, diving into the vastness of the internet once I broke through the surface of my research topic. From photosynthesis, I was led to flowers, then to the Urban Dictionary for the exact meaning of the word 'flower'.

**“The vagina, but for quirky Christian girls.”**

I knew what a vagina was, and it was no flower. At least mine wasn't. It was just a hill between my thighs that dropped off into the unknown. The uncharted. Then I recalled Mom's speech about 'blooming', and I thought maybe that was why it wasn't a flower yet. It hadn't bloomed. So, I clicked the search bar on Google Images and typed, 'woman vagina'.

Boxes upon boxes of women filled the screen, their legs spread open in angles that looked painful: feet over their heads, splits in the air, asses always propped up somehow. Their vaginas were more terrifying than my own, with manes and maws that snarled at me. Looking in, I couldn't see their ends. Some of the women's eyes stared straight at me with a sheen that made me squirm. Mascara ran down their cheeks despite no trace of sadness in their opened mouths.

One picture confused me more than the others.

A woman had her ass to the camera, her hands pulling the cheeks apart to leave her vagina gaping. A bright, pink arrow pointed right into the pit, words in comic sans reading, "Cum here. Join now." At first, I thought it was a typo; surely they meant 'come'. But that didn't make sense, either. How could a person physically go over to her and climb inside that tiny hole?

"Mila!" Mom's call from the kitchen jolted me. My palm—in a panic—swerved the mouse over to the bright red X at the top right corner of the browser and made the women disappear.

“Mila, come get your laundry!”

“Okay!” I didn’t understand why, but it felt wrong to have seen a woman so naked like that. Twisted in ways I had never seen in real life before.

*Do you know what cum means*, I wrote in a note to Eden the next day. She sat behind me and as our teacher scribbled something onto the whiteboard, I flexed my arm back and popped the small, folded paper onto her desk. I waited for her foot to double tap the leg of my chair before flexing again to take the note back.

*I think it’s an s thing*, she’d written. ‘S Things’ were what parents did to show each other love. It consisted of cuddling up naked under thick blankets and exchanging tongue kisses, which to us was disgusting. The fact that babies spawned from those acts made me nauseous.

*How is it an s thing?*

*My friend Alistair said that boys shoot it out of their downstairs.*

*Like poop?*

*No, not the back stairs. The FRONT stairs.*

I made a face. I vaguely knew what boys had for front stairs. It was some sort of sausage the color of a bread bun. A worm. Did cum shoot out of its sides? The top? It sounded gross, but I wanted to know. God knew I didn’t have the courage to look it up online; at least with a vagina I had one of my own. Besides, my imagination was terrifying enough.

*So like pee?*

*Yeah, but white I think.*

“Amilia Edwards.”

I shot up from my chair and onto my feet at the sound of my name. I palmed the note. Our teacher, Mrs. Carter, looked at me sternly with her spectacles perched on the bridge of her

nose. I began frantically reading the whiteboard, trying to guess what question she had just posed to the class.

“A trapezoid?”

An eruption of laughter; my classmates swung their feet and giggled at my stupidity. Not at having given the wrong answer, but at getting caught passing notes. Mrs. Carter was a hawk with her greying head snapping to-and-fro, her spectacles a sniper scope for shenanigans. By that point in the year, we had all mastered the art of the covert, and getting caught was like losing a game. I was hot with embarrassment. Our teacher rapped her fingers against the board, which sent a hush over the room. She marched over to me and extended her hand. I held my breath.

“The note, Amilia.”

With a trembling arm, I held the note out to her.

“See me during recess,” she said.

“Yes, Mrs. Carter.”

“Now sit down and pay attention.”

I collapsed into my chair and sunk into dread.

Things were a sin if you weren't married. It was dirty. Something not to be flippantly talked about. The act was always skipped over in class or replaced with the clinical term 'reproduction' when we went over animal biology and human anatomy. We had learned of eggs and sperm, but not of how one got to the other. The note I'd passed to Eden was proof that I had committed the cardinal sin of greed not just for knowledge, but lustful knowledge, and I felt as though God himself was punishing me.

Mom was sitting next to Mrs. Carter at her desk when I walked in. I caught the tail-end of their pleasantries as they exchanged how their classes were fairing so far that year. Sweat pooled

in my armpits and my heart continuously punched my ribs. At the sight of me, a dark shadow crossed Mrs. Carter's face, her prominent brows knitted together. Mom looked at me, not yet knowing what I was in trouble for.

"Come closer, Amilia," Mrs. Carter said.

I shuffled forward until I was a foot away from her desk.

"Why did I ask you to come in today?" she asked.

I stared at the floor. I gripped the hem of my skirt, clenching and unclenching over and over. The tops of Mrs. Carter's feet were liver-spotted and wrinkled. I replied, "I was passing notes in class."

"About?"

My head was about to explode. I couldn't say the words out loud; there was a reason why I had written them to begin with. But as they both waited for my answer, I realized I was cornered. I needed to shove the words out of myself sooner rather than later. I mumbled, "S Things."

Mom's breath clipped midway. "Why were you passing notes about that?" she asked, worry tight in her throat.

I looked up at her, avoiding Mrs. Carter's glare. My voice shrunk as I answered, "I wanted to know what 'cum' means."

Mom gasped. She turned to Mrs. Carter, communicating without words. I looked back down at the floor.

"Where did you learn that word?" Mrs. Carter asked.

"Online," I said.

"Are *those* the kinds of things you're looking up on my desktop?" Mom was on the offense, her shock devolving into anger.

“Not really,” I said.

Mrs. Carter shook her head. She told me, “You’re too young to be learning these things.”

I wanted to retaliate; say that I was ten and grown enough to understand whatever it was that adults tried to keep to themselves. But then I looked at Mom. Her face had hardened, ashamed. Like she couldn’t believe her daughter would search up such vile things when she didn’t utter a single word about them. I didn’t want to get into any more trouble than I already was. “I found it by accident. I’m sorry.” I wondered how many more times I’d have to apologize in the future for learning something I was deemed ‘too young’ for.

“Go stand in the hallway. I need to speak with your mother alone.”

“What about Eden?” I asked.

“I’ll be having a word with her mother as well.”

I nodded. As I left, I shut the door behind me and sat by the cubby shelves, crying until I tired myself out.

The next morning, Eden told me that Mrs. Carter had called her mother after school about the note but had withheld my name. As punishment, Eden had been caned by her father – one strike for every refusal to identify who she’d written the note to. I tried to apologize. I had barely eaten dinner the night before, worrying about her and feeling guilty. She stopped me before I could say anything. She was quick to say that it was alright, because she didn’t give in.

“I didn’t tell them it was you,” she said proudly.

I had spent days YouTubing ‘fine dining’, consuming video after video of vloggers who detailed their time at Michelin star restaurants, as well as self-proclaimed critics as they broke down menus. Instead of ‘salmon’, they said, “Chinook salmon, ice-fished from the Alaskan coast.” Instead of fried, meat was seared, charred, crisped, or sauteed. These restaurants served experiences rather than meals; the language that surrounded their marketing akin to that of a rollercoaster ride. And the price for a single seat? Over half of my monthly salary. I was appalled. The reminder that there were people who could drop that kind of money with a shrug made me want to scream.

Yet as angry as I was, I would be lying if I said I wasn’t intrigued. Excited, even. I’d been in a small part Eden’s world before: an exclusive space with wealthy people. I’d moved as they did, once. It’d been intoxicating to believe—just for a moment—that I’d been worth the finest things, just as Eden was. That I’d been born lucky. So, for the upcoming dinner, I had studied wines and the rules on etiquette not only for Auntie Lee’s sake, but for my own. The illusion didn’t break when I played my part.

And if I played it well now, I would be allowed to see Lee Gung Gung again.

I walked up to the hostess at the entrance of the restaurant, tall in heels. A red neon sign hung above the entryway, reading *La Vie* in big, red cursive letters.

“Good evening. Do you have a reservation?” she asked. A mini iPad had been turned to its side on a stand and her finger hovered over its screen. She smiled like she had fish wires hooked to the sides of her mouth, the lines pulling towards the ceiling. Paired with the sign’s glow, the sight was almost unnerving.

“Yes, it’s under Mrs. Athena Lee.”

She didn’t have to check for the name. “Of course, right this way.”

The restaurant was dimly lit with small, intricately detailed lamps as centerpieces for

every table. Conversations chattered into a river of sound that flowed through the room. Couples looked lovingly at one another, and friends took photos as they posed with the delicately prepared dishes in front of them. The waiters glided from table to table in red vests and dark, freshly pressed black trousers, with their hair all styled the same: slicked back out of their faces.

“Mrs. Lee preordered with us when she made the reservation, so you won’t be needing a menu tonight,” the hostess said. She led me to the back of the restaurant where a line of booths stood against the wall. Each had a gossamer curtain for privacy – when not in use, they were ribboned to slim metallic poles on either side, ready to receive and engulf their next diners. The hostess gestured to the booth at the end.

“Please have a seat. Would you like a drink while you wait?”

I glanced down at my watch. I was ten minutes early. “Water is fine.”

“Still or sparkling?”

I’d read on a blog that in countries where water from the tap is drinkable, these restaurants deliberately did not mention ‘tap’ as an option so that you’d be tricked into paying for an overpriced bottle. I told her, “Tap would be great.” I didn’t want Auntie Lee paying for more than she’d ordered.

“Your waiter will get that for you. Enjoy your evening.” She turned and left me to wait.

There was a floor-to-ceiling window along one side of the space, despite the disappointing view. The restaurant was on the second floor of a stout building, and the windows looked out into a neighboring one across the busy street. This made it clear to me that I wasn’t here for a good time; I wasn’t supposed to get lost gazing at a beautiful cityscape as I sipped champagne. No, this was a meeting. An interview. I needed to focus. My attention flitted through the room, attaching things I’d learnt online to the different aspects of these strangers' dining habits. Some had their napkins folded wrong on their laps. Others clinked their glasses too hard.

A peel of laughter whipped the air several decibels above the accepted volume. As I picked these things out, threads of commonality between these rule breakers became apparent.

The breakers wore logos. Multiple. On their ears, around their necks, on their dresses, shirts, and bags. It didn't matter how put together their outfits were; the logos glared, as obvious as the restaurant's own sign. *I belong here*, they seemed to signal, *I can afford it*. But those who truly did belong lacked that desperation to prove themselves. Logos were kept to a minimum, usually just the one on their shoes or bag. This didn't mean that the rest of their clothes didn't belong to one luxury brand or another; it just wasn't obvious which one. Only those who knew would know, and if you knew, you usually were one of them. What was the saying again?

'Wealth whispers'?

"Amilia?"

I looked behind me.

The memory of fingers flexing like talons flashed in my mind.

"Oh my, how you've grown," she said.

Auntie Lee. She wore a muslin, loose dress in a muted yellow like petals of a daffodil. Her long black hair tumbled down her back in curled rivulets. Earrings the shape of four-leaf clovers studded her lobes and shone a pearlescent creme color. Age had hollowed her cheeks instead of filling them. The only wrinkles she hadn't bothered smoothing away were the ones by her eyes. Her irises were as dim as the lighting above our heads.

I sprang onto my feet. "Hi, Auntie. It's so great to see you again." I offered my hand.

She looked at it. Contemplated. Then, with a soft grip and half-hearted smile, she took it.

*You will never see my daughter again.*

She told me, "Please, sit. I want to hear all about what you've done this last decade."

*You fucking pervert.*

“So, you’re the wonderful Mila I’ve heard so much about,” Auntie Lee said, looking between Mom and me. Mom was here to drop me off at their estate that Saturday afternoon so Eden and I could work on a fourth-grade project together. The lobby alone was fit for a film. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, crystal droplets glinting underneath the warm lights. I had seen a slight frown pull at Mom’s lips when she’d first stepped in, but when Auntie Lee emerged from the lift to pick me up, Mom’s bright and bubbly ‘teacher face’ fell over her features.

“From us teachers or from Eden?” Mom joked.

“Both,” she replied. Although this was her home, Auntie Lee was smartly dressed in a silky, low V-neck blouse tucked into pleated trousers. Her white sneakers were spotless. Mom had on her favorite pair of Converse, which she’d had since I was born. This, here, was my first proper interaction with Auntie Lee. Our families attended different churches: theirs went to one in Central, whereas mine went to one near Saint Nick’s. At school functions, Auntie Lee was more of a mirage – far off and surreal. I held onto Mom a little tighter.

“Behave, okay?” Mom said to me.

I nodded.

“Come along, Mila. Eden’s so excited to see you.” Auntie Lee extended her manicured hand, her dazzling engagement ring snug against her silver wedding band. I released Mom and took it, feeling its soft coolness in my sweaty palm.

When the lift doors slid open, I felt like I'd teleported, bypassing the typical front door. The living room spanned before me with its white marble floors and modern furniture. Enormous windows looked over the mountain that the complex perched on, and the roofs of others were dotted around the winding road down. Past the mountain was the Hong Kong Harbor with its tiny ferries that lazed between the Island and Kowloon side of the city. The skyscrapers along the banks stood solemnly beneath the sun. I didn't know there were apartments like this. This one was easily more than five times bigger than the one I stayed in with Mom. The cold air from the central air-con made goose pimples rise all over my arms. Auntie Lee ushered me out of the lift.

"Mila!" Eden ran up to me and pulled me into a hug. She wore a plain dress and a red ribbon in her hair. Seeing her out of our school uniform was jarring – I didn't think that this was the kind of thing she'd wear if she could choose. Auntie Lee spoke to her in Cantonese, and Eden quickly fished out an extra pair of indoor slippers from the shoe cabinet to the left of the lift. She laid them at my feet and told me to leave my sneakers behind.

A woman then appeared behind Auntie Lee. She was younger than her and a lot shorter. A loose, black T-shirt hung from her shoulders over a pair of washed-out jeans. She looked like Mom. She looked like me.

"Yaya, Eden's friend is here for the afternoon," Auntie Lee said to her.

The woman and I locked eyes, recognizing instantly that we were the same: far from home and somewhere we didn't belong. She beamed at me.

Auntie Lee turned to Eden. "Let Yaya know if you need anything." Then warmly, to me, "Make yourself at home, Mila." With one last smile, she walked off down a hallway to the right and slipped through one of the doors, closing it shut behind her.

Eden looked at Yaya. "Can we have some tea, please?"

"What kind do you guys want?" Yaya's words were curved and blunted with a Filipino

accent that was a lot heavier than Mom's. I wanted to say something to her, something that would confirm what we were both thinking. As Eden mentioned a type of tea, I blurted, "Kamusta ka po." It spilled out of me, eager and excited. Yaya's entire face brightened.

"Ay! Alam na alam kong Pinay ka," she said. *I just knew you were Filipina.* "Pinay ng nanay mo?" *Your mom's Filipina?*

"O po." *Yes.*

"At tatay mo? Pinoy?" *And your dad? Filipino, too?*

"Hindi po, American siya." Although I was horrible at speaking Tagalog, I mustered every ounce of the language I had in me, sifting through it for the right words. I wanted to show her that she wasn't alone.

"Ah, nakakita ko yun." *I can see that.* Then, she turned to Eden as though she suddenly remembered she was standing there. "You guys can go – I'll bring the tea to your room, Eden."

"Thanks, Yaya," Eden replied.

I waved at Yaya as Eden led me down a hall to the left. "How long has Yaya worked for your family?"

"A year after I was born, I think," Eden said.

I'd met a lot of domestic helpers before, especially around the Saint Nick campus. They usually hovered around the entrance, waiting for pick-up time to roll around. Some had to wait hours if the kid they were looking after had extracurricular activities within the school. I'd seen some kids being sweet and courteous to them, but I'd also seen some throw their school bags at them on sight. The latter were impatient and spoiled, often acting like these women had to hang onto their every command. Mom and I would stop to talk to these domestic helpers if we passed them by, and they'd easily flip their speech into Tagalog like they'd been waiting all day for the chance to. They'd say what was on their mind without a stutter. Then, if their kid was

misbehaving, they would switch back into strained English, both exasperated and exhausted. I thought about Yaya. Wondered how Eden usually treated her.

Eden's room was decorated similarly to the living room; minimalist with its various shades of white. The fluffy polyester carpet was the only colorful addition, and even then, it was the color of gourmet vanilla ice cream. It was all eerily sterile and a massive contrast to the Eden I knew. But as Eden took me around, her essence began to sift to the surface, the white peeling back. There were pale glow-in-the-dark star stickers that trailed up her wardrobe. At the foot of her bed, there was a trunk of toys she'd collected over the years, its lid slightly open with a few stuffed animals peeking through the gap. On her bedposts, there were ghost trails of crayon markings that had once been viciously scrubbed at. Her bookcase, however, was my favorite. Behind hinged wooden panels, vibrant spines lined the shelves with tiny figurines poised before them like guardians.

By her desk there was a pile of scattered papers on the floor, to which she said, "Sorry for the mess." She crouched down to compile them, explaining that she'd been looking for our project's instruction sheet before I'd arrived. I got down beside her to help. Among these papers were worksheets we'd finished in class, homework for our various subjects, and—

"What's this?" I held up a sheet with lettering I couldn't recognize.

"That's my French stuff."

"You're learning French?"

"Yeah. I have classes with my family friends, Austin and Alistair. Dad says French will be useful. For the future."

"Why?"

"Business. He works with French people sometimes."

The more I looked through the pages, the more I realized just how many of them came

from classes outside of Saint Nick. On top of French, I spotted Asian History (Saint Nick only focused on World and American History), Advanced Math, and Advanced English. We both learned Mandarin at school, but the Mandarin worksheets she gathered now were unlike the ones I'd seen; denser and more complex. I picked up the final thing left on the floor, which was a stapled stack of sheet music. I asked Eden about it as I looked through the staves. She snatched it out of my hands.

“Classical singing. I hate it,” she said.

Where did she find the time for all of this? It was like she was operating on a completely different timescale; every minute was stretched into five, and each one was too valuable to be wasted. Then it dawned on me that this must have been why Eden always hurried home the instant class was dismissed; her additional education began as soon as her primary one ended.

“You're lucky your mom doesn't make you do these things,” she said.

“I guess.” There was a slight pain in my stomach. It hurt finding out about this other life of hers. Not only had it been hidden from me – she was molding herself behind the scenes, out of sight, so that she was consistently three steps ahead. Before this, I believed that she was naturally the smartest of us all. Some people were just born gifted. But she'd only pretended and had done so without me.

There was a knock on the door.

“Your tea, ladies,” Yaya announced.

Eden smiled kindly. “You can leave it on the desk. Thank you.”