



**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.

Chapter Two

When they returned to land, Uncle was already waiting. He stood in the shallows, feet planted in the shifting sand, wooden wheelbarrows parked by his side. His singlet was graying, his shorts of rough canvas pulled high on the waist.

Uncle was Ma's brother, not Pa's, but somehow the two men looked more alike than the actual siblings. Both Uncle and Pa had short, skinny builds, frames lined with wiry muscles, like weathered trees with boughs both thin and flexible. They had the same interrogative, beak-like noses with elongated nostrils, cracked disapproving lips, and skin hardened into the same liver-spotted shell.

The real difference was to be found in their breath: Pa's strong and steady, Uncle's slow, wheezing, a reminder of the long illness he had barely recovered from six months ago. Ah Boon shuddered to think of the sour, metallic smell, nights kept awake by terrible hacking. The fine spray of blood that would emerge from Uncle's mouth with a particularly painful cough, the steaming water in Ma's laundry buckets turned pink when they soaked his sheets the next morning.

Pa stopped the boat where the water was knee-deep for the adults, which meant it would come up to Ah Boon's chest. Hia leaped out of the boat, splashing seawater into Ah Boon's face.

"Come on, you want to stay inside forever is it?"

"Leave him alone." Their father's voice was stern.

Hia made a face at Ah Boon when Pa turned his attention to the nets, but fell silent. He swam around the back of the boat to join his father.

"Come, Boon."

It was Uncle. Ah Boon wrapped his arms around Uncle's neck, trying not to touch the knobby protrusions of the man's spine. They had grown pronounced and grotesque during his illness and filled Ah Boon with a

sick feeling. Still, it was Uncle with whom Ah Boon had always felt most at ease, quiet, patient Uncle. He gently lifted Ah Boon out of the boat, one arm under his buttocks, and carried him to shore.

“Thank you,” Ah Boon said, dropping to the wet sand, grateful but also a little resentful. If Uncle had left him for just a minute longer, he thought he might have summoned the courage to swing one leg over the boat’s edge and slide into the water. How was he ever going to change if no one ever thought him capable of it?

Pa was staring at the nets. He turned to Hia, asking him a question Ah Boon couldn’t hear. Hia shook his head and threw his palms up. Staring at them from the shore, Ah Boon longed for Pa to speak to him as he did to Hia. To be scolded, taken in hand and told what to do. When Pa ran his hand through Ah Boon’s hair as he passed, he did it as one might pet a tame animal of whom one did not expect very much.

Uncle and Hia were coming back, each dragging a net filled with fish. Ah Boon couldn’t see their faces, but their backs heaved with effort. He pushed the wheelbarrows down the shore toward them, and saw now that the nets were bursting with fish. The fish were large and small, some flashing silver, others shimmering pink. Many were round and flat, the kind that would sell for good money at the market. Mixed among them were several fat, glistening prawns, long whiskers twitching. Ah Boon’s eyes widened.

“How come today so good?” he said to Hia. The nets were never even half this full when Pa and Hia returned from a trip.

Hia shook his head. “Don’t know,” he said. He seemed too amazed to be snide, pointing out the grouper, the black bawal, the catfish the size of his forearm. “Maybe can keep one to steam for tonight!”

Ah Boon’s mouth thickened with saliva. The catfish’s sticky skin, steamed taut, would yield a buttery white flesh when prodded open with a chopstick. Usually they kept only the smallest of fish for themselves, scrawny creatures filled with pin-like bones, made edible only by frying to a crisp.

“Wah! You think can, Hia? Did you ask Pa?” Ah Boon said.

“Not yet, but look, so much fish. Sure can keep at least one big one, to celebrate!”

Ah Boon nodded happily at his brother. When Hia was kind to him, he could not help but adore him. He gazed at Hia's tanned, plump face, his sparkling black eyes and long fine hair that flopped over his forehead just so. His brother was surely the strongest, the funniest, the handsomest of all the boys in the village. It was natural that Pa should be closest to him, it was the order of things.

Pa called to the boys. He wanted them to run to the houses of his closest friends and fellow fishermen—Ghim Huat, Ah Kee, and Ah Tong—and pass the message that the men should meet at the Lees' house after market hours.

"Is it because we're going to cook a big fish for dinner tonight? Because we caught so much?" Ah Boon asked.

Pa shook his head. He squatted so that his face was level with Ah Boon's.

"Boon, be a good boy and don't tell anyone about today's trip. Not the island, not the fish. Okay?"

"But why?" he asked. "Catch so much fish is good, right?"

"Be a good boy, don't tell anyone," Pa repeated.

Hia grabbed Ah Boon's hand, pulling him away from Pa. "We won't tell anyone. Come, Boon, let's go."

"But why?" Ah Boon asked again. "Why?"

He was tired now. It had been his first trip, after all, and they had risen at three thirty in the morning. Behind them, the sun was beginning to rise, the thin moon fading. The sky was growing brighter. It was the kind of blue that reminded Ah Boon of egg yolks, even though egg yolks were yellow. Pa's face was flushed orange, the cliffs of his cheekbones dusted with fine white specks. Ah Boon knew that if he were to lick Pa's skin, it would be salty, just like the back of his own arm. For as long as he could remember, his skin had always been salty, sweat mingling with seawater. Grains of sand on the soles of his slippers chafed the bottoms of his feet, his eyes stung.

"Why?" he said again.

"Shut up," Hia hissed as he dragged Ah Boon up the beach.



All morning at the market, Pa and Uncle were silent and tense, terrified that someone would notice their unusual catch and start asking questions. They had sold a good deal of it to a middleman before heading to the market themselves, to minimize attention.

It was only now, sitting in the house with Ghim Huat, Ah Tong, and Ah Kee, that the pair began to relax. Cigarettes hung from the corners of all mouths except Pa's and Uncle's. Uncle had, with great difficulty, stopped smoking because of his illness, and Pa had never taken it up to begin with.

Men like them were to be found throughout the kampong, the coast, and the city beyond. Settled in groups of three, four, five, on stools, stumps, pandan mats, wooden floors. Muscles aching sweetly after a long day's work—the location of the ache depending on the cargo hauled, be it fish, brick, rice, trishaws—they permitted themselves coffee, oil black or softened with condensed milk, sipped quietly as they rubbed their knuckles into the hard gnarls of their bodies. Topics of conversation varied by group, tended toward gossip with the occasional foray into politics. Who had won big at chap ji kee, whose son had been matchmade with whose daughter, how the war effort in the homeland was faring, where the most generous servings of nasi lemak might be had. Conversation unspooled languidly, words given up as offerings to the stultifying afternoon heat. Talk softened the knots in their minds, dulled the edges of their aches and pains.

Pa, Uncle, and the three men had engaged in such talk on such golden afternoons many times before. But today their voices were urgent, furtive. There was the matter of a mysterious apparition, an entire solid landmass, an island.

“What you mean cliffs? Here where got cliffs! Eh, Huat, you wake up too early is it, still dreaming on your boat . . .” This was Ah Tong, the most boisterous of the group, a man whose thick palms were as smooth and shiny as the inside of a seashell.

“You mean like Kota Tinggi?” Ah Kee said, thoughtful. He was a quiet man, known for his ability to haul sacks of dirt as large as a pig. Born in a town in northern Malaya, he had moved to the kampong with his parents as a boy and had lived here ever since.

Pa had never been to Kota Tinggi, and said as much.

“Is it you go too far? Go until Sakijang Pelepah? Or Kusu?”

“No,” Pa said impatiently. He had fished there his entire life. He knew where those landmasses were, and this was not that.

“Got ask Pak Hassan, Pak Suleh?”

Pa shook his head. He had told no one except those in this room.

“How can suddenly got island appear out of nowhere?” This skepticism came from Ghim Huat, the oldest of the group and a veteran fisherman.

“I know what I saw,” Pa said.

“And you all saw the fish, right?” Uncle added.

There was silence except for the nervous tapping of someone’s fingernail on the side of his stool.

Ghim Huat conceded that he had seen the fish, and he had never seen such a thing in all his forty years of fishing. The other men nodded along. It was decided that they would all head out together that afternoon, so that they could see the island for themselves.



Ah Boon and Hia ran down to the beach when they heard the engine roaring to a start. How strange to see that many grown men crammed into one small boat. Pa was perched at his usual spot by the motor, while the other four sat two by two, each leaning against the side of the boat to make sure the weight was evenly distributed. They all had their knees pulled into their chests, like children.

The boys watched the boat speed away across the gray waves until it was no more than a speck on the gentle curve of the horizon. What would the men find? Perhaps the island was a secret pirate den, or the habitat of a million colorful songbirds. Despite the fierce afternoon sun beating down on their backs, they stayed until Ma began calling for them.

Boooooon! Yaaaaam! Her distant voice stretched from their house to the shore. The boys leaped up and raced toward her, slippers sinking into soft sand. As usual, Hia dashed ahead and when Ah Boon got to the house, he was already sitting on the grass out front, helping Ma arrange the fish in rows on the newspapers laid out on the ground.