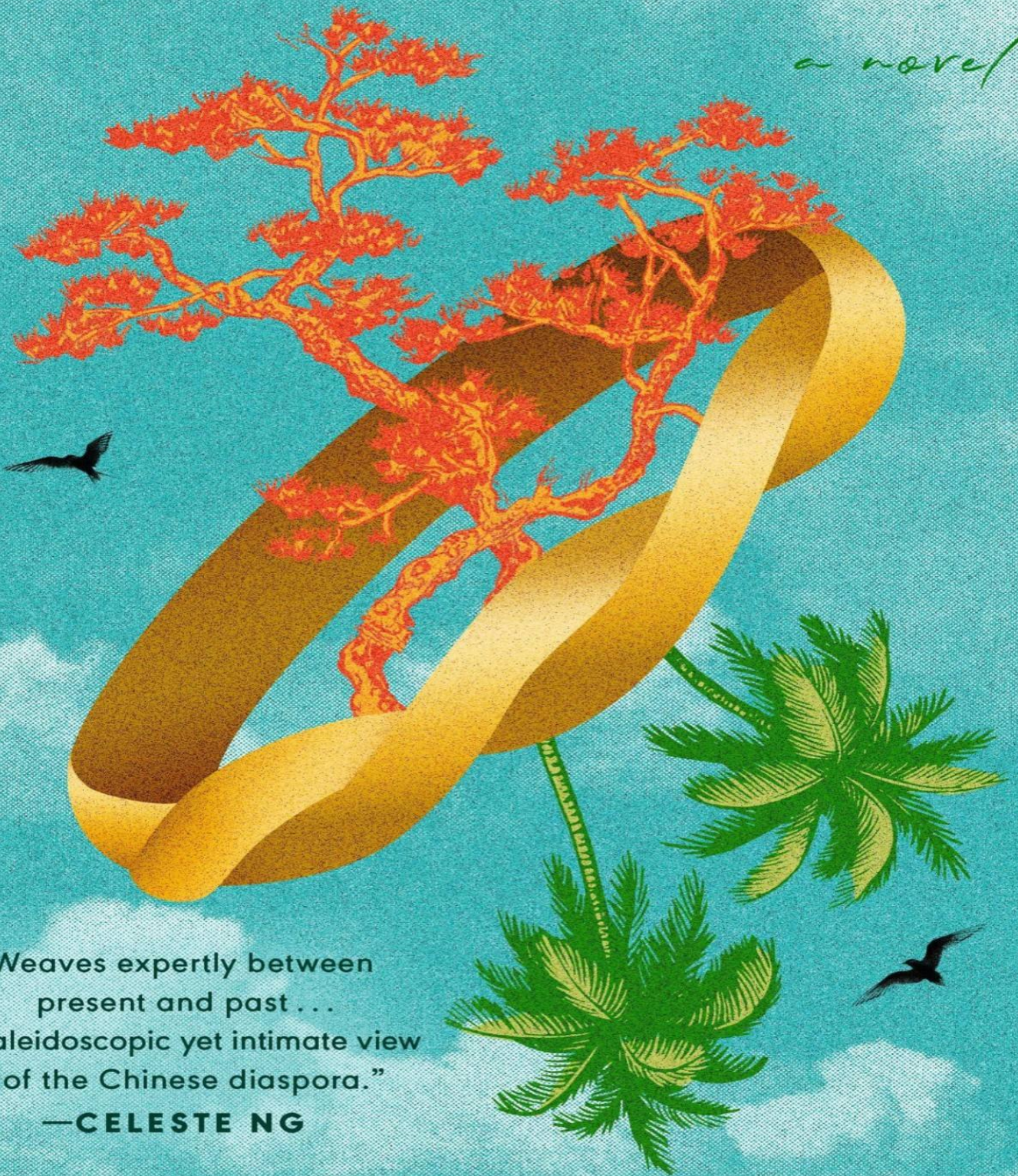


HOMESEEEKING

a novel



“Weaves expertly between
present and past . . .
A kaleidoscopic yet intimate view
of the Chinese diaspora.”
—CELESTE NG

KARISSA CHEN

Homeseeking



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G. P. Putnam's Sons
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PUTNAM
— EST. 1838 —

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Contents



Dedication

Epigraph

A Note on Languages

Overture

April 1947

January 2008

August–October 1938

January 2008

April–August 1945

February 2008

January–April 1947

April 1993

September 1948–December 1953

December 1981

February–August 1965

April 1975

January–March 1966

March 1966

October 1972

February 1959

May–September 1985

March–April 1947

April–June 2008

Coda

June 1982

Notes

Acknowledgments

About the Author

*For my grandparents,
Henry 陸海林, Eileen 康秋季, Larry 陳隆寶, and Chi-Yen 張笄翊,
who carried home with them wherever they loved*

那些消逝了的歲月，彷彿隔著一塊積著灰塵的玻璃，看得到，抓不著。

他一直在懷念著過去的一切。如果他能衝破那塊積著灰塵的玻璃，他會走回早已消逝的歲月。

—花樣年華 (根據劉以鬯的《對倒》改編的)

As though he were looking through a dusty windowpane, those bygone years were something he could see but not grasp. He yearned for everything that had happened in the past. If only he could break through that dusty glass, he could reclaim the years that had long since vanished.

—*In the Mood for Love*
(quote adapted from Liu Yichang's "Intersection")

「世鈞，我們回不去了。」

—張愛玲《半生緣》

“Shijun, we can't go back.”

—Eileen Chang, *Half a Lifelong Romance*

A Note on Languages



ONE OF THE challenges in writing an English-language story about the Chinese and Taiwanese diaspora is figuring out how to faithfully represent the different Sinitic languages spoken in different regions (and sometimes even within the same region). Because the Chinese written language uses a representational (versus phonetic) system, the same written word has many different pronunciations, depending on what language the speaker is using. This includes names. Given that my characters move within various Chinese-speaking regions of the world, I wanted to make sure to denote their code-switching in a way that would feel accurate. Therefore, each character may be referred to in a multitude of ways and may even broaden or change the way they think of themselves given a situation or over time. For this reason, chapters have not been labeled by character names, as our characters' names evolve over time.

An astute reader might also notice the novel is told in alternating points of view, with Suchi's narrative moving forward in time and Howard's moving backward in time, with only a few exceptions.

Mandarin is mostly represented in pinyin, although there are several exceptions, particularly when in Taiwan or for commonly used romanizations (e.g., "Chiang Kai-shek"). Other Sinitic languages are represented in a combination of accepted romanization systems and my own sense of how words are pronounced.

For many people in the world, learning more than one language is a necessity, either because of migration or simply because the place they live

in is a global one and survival dictates it. It is a skill that requires an ability to adapt and challenge oneself, and for many immigrants, it's one of the most difficult, humbling, and uneasy parts of coming to a new country. If you, the reader, find yourself confused, I hope instead of giving up, you might take a moment to imagine what it must be like for those who have to navigate this on a daily basis, and then forge onward.

Overture



APRIL 1947

Shanghai

IN THE LAST violet minutes of the disappearing night, the longtang wakes. The neighborhood's familiar symphony opens with the night-soil man's arrival: the trundle of his cart on the uneven road, the chime of his bell. With a slurry and a swish, he empties the latrines left in front of uniform doors and sings a parting refrain. In his wake, stairs and hinges creak; women peek out into the alleyway to claim their overturned night stools. Crouching, they clean silt from the wooden buckets: bamboo sticks clock, clamshells rattle, water from back-door faucets glugs and splatters. By the time they have finished, the sugar porridge vendor has emerged, announcing her goods in repetitive singsong as she pushes her cart. Later, the others will join her: the tea egg man, the pear syrup candy peddler, the vegetable and rice sellers, each with their own seasoned melodies. But for now, it is her lone call that drifts through the lanes of Sifo Li.

She passes the Zhang family shikumen, the sixth row house along this perimeter. Inside, on the second floor, sixteen-year-old Suchi sleeps fitfully after hours of weeping, her slender limbs twisted around the thin cotton sheet, her sweat seeping into the mattress. She is mired in a nightmare in which Haiwen no longer recognizes her. A delicate crust of dried tears rims her lashes.

Next to her is the older Zhang daughter, Sulan, who snuck back home only an hour earlier. Her skin is sticky with the smell of smoke and alcohol and sweat. She sleeps peacefully, dreaming of dancing in a beautiful dress of plum taffeta and silk, arm in arm with her best friend, Yizhen.

In the room above, her father, Li'oe, lies sleepless, troubled by uncertainties. He wonders how much his stash of fabi has depreciated overnight, how much gold he might buy off the black market with what currency he has left. He weighs the continued cost of running his bookstore, of printing the underground journals—all he is taking from his family, not to mention the danger—and for a moment guilt licks at the edge of his thoughts. He regrets now pawning that little ring he purchased the day Suchi was born, two delicate twists of gold braided into one, something he'd saved for her dowry. But Sulan had insisted she'd found the perfect secondhand cloth to make Suchi a qipao for her birthday, and he'd agreed to give Sulan the money. Now he thinks only of how valuable that loop of gold has become.

Beside him, his wife, Sieu'in, pretends to sleep, pretends to be unaware of her husband's nervous shifting. She inventories the food left in their stores—half a cup of rationed gritty red rice, a handful of dehydrated mushrooms, cabbage she pickled weeks ago, radish scraps boiled to broth, a single cut of scallion she has coaxed into regrowth in the spring sun. She can stretch these ingredients for a week, maybe a week and a half—she will make a watery yet flavorful congee, and when none of that remains, she will empty the rice powder from the bag and boil it into milky liquid offering the illusion of nourishment. After that? She won't add to her husband's worries by asking him for more money, she decides. She has a few pieces of jewelry remaining—the jade bracelet that presses coolly against her cheek now, for instance. Her mother gave it to her from her own dowry, and its color is deep, like the dark leaves of the green vegetables she so desperately craves.

A floor and a half below, in the pavilion room, Siau Zi, their boarder and employee, is dreaming of the older Zhang daughter. Sulan smiles invitingly, her lips painted red, her hair permed and clipped. He is effortlessly

charming in this dream; for once he says the right things to make her adore him. *I can take care of you*, he tells her, *I'll be somebody in this new China, you'll see*, and she sighs into his embrace.

Outside Siau Zi's window, the sky is turning a violent shade of pink. The neighborhood's song shifts its layers as its inhabitants dust off their dreams and rise. Lovers murmur. Coals in stoves crackle. Oil sizzles in a pan, ready to fry breakfast. Doors groan open, metal knockers clang against heavy wood. A grandma sweeps the ground in front of her shikumen, the broom scratching a staccato beat against the cobblestone. A child cries, seized from sleep.

The porridge vendor continues her route. In vain, she calls out, remembering a time when her goods were beloved by the children of this neighborhood, a time before the wars, when she could afford to use white sugar and sticky rice, when adding lotus seed hearts and osmanthus syrup was standard instead of a great luxury. As she nears the shikumen where the Wang family lives, she pauses, recalling how the young son particularly delighted in her dessert. She bellows out twice: *Badaon tsoh! Badaon tsoh!*, deep throated, as passionate as if she were calling out to a lover—but she is met with the dim stillness of the upper windows. After a moment, she blots her sleeve against her forehead, leans into her cart, and continues on her way, the echo of her song trailing behind her.

But the Wang household is awake.

Yuping has not slept the entire night; her eyes are puffy and dark. She tries to cover her despair with makeup, but when she catches her reflection in the mirror, the tears resume. Her husband, Chongyi, pretends not to notice. He dresses quietly, parts his salt-and-pepper hair to one side with a fine-toothed comb, and slicks strays with oil. He thinks to gift his son, Haiwen, this comb. It is carved from ivory and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a frivolous vanity he has held on to after all these years when they have sold so much else.

In the next room, their eleven-year-old daughter, Haijun, rummages through her music box, searching for a memento to gift her big brother. Onto

the floor, she hurls the paper cutout dolls, the hair ribbons, the red crepe flower she palmed from a store's decorative sign. All these so-called treasures and she has nothing worth giving him. In a fury, she balls herself beneath her blanket, hoping to suffocate in the damp jungle of her breath.

In the attic room, the eldest son, Haiming, and his pregnant wife have been up since before dawn. The room is foul with the stench of bile, Ellen having vomited twice. She doesn't want to go to the train station later, she tells her husband. But Haiming only looks at her, silent and somber.

Haiwen is first to descend the stairs. In his new uniform, his armpits are already sweating through the heavy, unforgiving fabric. He steps outside, into the modest courtyard of their shikumen, and looks up at the expanse of sky. The pink is receding, giving way to a noncommittal blue. In several minutes, nothing of that brilliant color will remain, only a veil of thin cloud, like a layer of soy milk skin.

He listens to the longtang's symphony, this comfort he has grown up with. He closes his eyes and sees it all, no longer a symphony but a movie, one more vibrant than any he's attended at the cinema: The cobblestone alleys crammed with wares and possessions. The neighborhood children, laughing as they chase one another. The barber they nearly knock over, Yu yasoh, and his client, Lau Die, whose crown is sparse but beard is full. The nearby breakfast stall opened daily by Zia yasoh, and the rickshaw driver who sits slurping a bowl of soy milk on a low stool. The second-story window that opens so Mo ayi can call to a passing vendor, who stops as she lowers a basket with a few coins in exchange for three shriveled loquats. Loh konkon and Zen konkon in the middle of it all, the two men oblivious to the surrounding hubbub as they mull over their daily game of xiangqi, a ritual that continues uninterrupted as it would on any other day.

But it is not any other day.

Haiwen opens his eyes.

Today is the day he is leaving.

In another two hours he will be on the train with the other enlistees, a bulging backpack pressed against his belly, a photograph of Suchi against his

breast, a tremble in his heart, waving at the receding image of his family. The longtang of his childhood, Sifo Li, will be behind him; Fourth Road, with its bustling teahouses and calligraphy stores, will be behind him; soon, Shanghai, too, will be behind him. For years afterward, he will riffle through his memories of this place he considers home, layering them on top of one another like stacks of rice paper, trying to remember what was when and never quite seeing the full picture.

For now, Haiwen closes his eyes again. His mind traces the alleyways he knows so well, the well-trod path between his house and Suchi's, cobblestones upon which he will walk one last time in the coming minutes: The four-house expanse between his shikumen and the first main lane on their left. The right turn down the lane that intersects with the one that heads toward the west gate. Another left, another main artery. The straight long distance toward the south gate's guojielou, the turn right before the arched exit. The five plain back doors until the painted bunny comes into view, its flaked white outline wringing a pang in Haiwen's chest. He will leave his violin here: he sees himself setting it down, laying it against the chipped paint as tenderly as he imagines a mother abandons a beloved baby.

He knows he will look up at the second-floor window. Suchi's window. Its vision dredges an unbearable loneliness in him.

He squeezes his eyes tighter, tries harder, and what comes next is impossible: He is peering through her window, gazing upon her as she sleeps. In another moment, he has prised open the panels and is inside her room. She is dreaming, she is talking to him in her sleep. He places a palm against her cheek, strokes a thumb across the soft velvet of her skin. He takes in the fringe of her lashes, the bud of her mouth. A mouth he wishes he had remembered to kiss one final time. He wants to remember every pore, every stray hair, wants to emblazon her into his memory, even as he is certain he will always know her, that even if he is an old man by the time he returns to her, even if she has aged and changed, he will know her. He brushes the hair sticky on her parted lips, his fingers lingering on the

warmth of her breath. He is sorry for what he is about to do, what he has done; he will never stop being sorry.

Her nightmares have turned sweet. Suchi can smell sour plums on the horizon. *Is it already so late in spring?* she murmurs. Later, she will wake and remember yesterday's careless words; she will lose half a lifetime to regret. But for now: she can feel the warm heft of Haiwen's presence encircling hers, the tender touch of his hand cupping her face, and she believes he has forgiven her. Her body unclenches. Right before a deep, untroubled sleep claims her, she hears his voice in her ear, kind, reassuring. *Soon, he promises her, the plum rains are almost here.*



JANUARY 2008

Los Angeles

A CHORUS OF violins ushered Suchi into Howard's life for the third and final time. Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 in A Major, celebratory and elegant, floated out of muffled speakers in the 99 Ranch Market, its golden jubilation incongruous with Howard's mood, the blank haze of gray he'd been living in since he'd buried Linyee sixteen months earlier. He glanced up from the bananas he was inspecting to search for the source of his irritation. Instead, he saw her.

She was picking up Korean melons, their skins the color of lemon curd. He watched her knock on them with her knuckles, her head bent to listen. Howard was sure it was Suchi this time, but he had mistaken so many women for her over the last four decades. Women with cheekbones like hers, gaits like hers, but who transformed into other people when he approached. He stood transfixed. This woman's face was plump and sagging, her hair was thin and gray at the roots, but her eyes—eyes never changed, he had once heard someone say. And hers, caramel and bright, were every bit as intense as he remembered, even in the task of selecting the ripest melon.

"Excuse me," he said hesitantly in Mandarin, and she glanced up. Her eyes widened.

"Wang Haiwen." The name came out carefully, more a statement than a question.

For a moment he couldn't respond. He was a child again, a teenager again, not in this American supermarket but in the alleyways of their youth.

He gripped the handle of his shopping cart, feeling the bite of plastic where it was uneven. "So it is you," he said.

"Wang Haiwen," she said, more briskly this time, a confirmation. She smiled, revealing teeth too straight and white to be real.

He pulled his cart alongside hers. His, empty aside from three bunches of bananas; hers, already filled with various greens, tomatoes, a box of Asian pears, and a daikon radish. "You live here now?" he asked. It was a dumb question; he didn't know what else to say.

"I moved in with my son and daughter-in-law a couple years ago," she answered in Shanghainese.

A jolt ran through him. Howard had not heard his childhood language in several years, and it caused in him an aching relief, the sensation reminiscent of a sour candy his granddaughter had once given him.

"They said they needed help with the grandchildren," Suchi continued, "but to be honest, I think they worried I was getting lonely, living all alone."

Howard understood that loneliness. Each morning he woke up to an empty house and expected to hear Linyee in the kitchen, pots clanging, a mug being washed, a soap opera keening on the television set. Instead, he heard nothing but the breeze in the trees, or a lone pigeon purring, or the neighbors mowing their lawn.

"And you?" Suchi asked. "Have you lived in Los Angeles long?"

"We've been here for about thirty years," Howard responded in Shanghainese, then inwardly revised. Not *we* anymore. *I*.

Suchi's eyes grew soft. "And your wife?"

Had he become that transparent? Did every thought of Linyee paint itself across his face whether or not he wanted it to?

"Linyee passed away a little over a year ago," he said quietly.

She murmured a sound of condolence. She reached out and touched his arm. He stared down at the back of her hand, at the age spots dotting her dark blue veins. One splotch of chipped coral polish remained on her pinkie nail. He remembered she'd had beautiful hands, once.

“Pneumonia,” he said in response to the question she hadn’t asked. “But really, Parkinson’s.”

Suchi retracted her hand. “I wish I could have met her,” she said.

“I would have liked that,” he answered, and they both said nothing for a while, letting each of their kind lies mingle and hang in the air.

Suchi broke the silence. “You must love bananas.” She looked pointedly into his shopping cart.

“They help with digestion,” he said with mock defensiveness.

“I recall you having an extremely efficient digestive system.”

“I don’t know about you, but things don’t work quite as well as when we were kids. Getting old has been a disappointment.”

Suchi laughed, full bellied and open-mouthed. Her laughter sounded exactly as he recalled, like spring rain upon glass.

“It’s so nice to hear you laugh,” he said, and immediately regretted the sentimentality of the words.

“And it’s nice to see you, Haiwen.”

“People call me Howard now. Easier for the Americans to pronounce.”

“How-wud,” she pronounced slowly. “Not so easy for a Chinese person to pronounce.”

“And yet even my Chinese friends know me as Howard.”

“Wasn’t that the name they gave you at that missionary school? I thought you hated it.”

He was surprised—even he’d forgotten the origin of his English name. “I couldn’t think of another one,” he said. “Now I’m used to it.”

“Lucky for me, my name is easy for Americans. Many people just call me Sue.” She shook her head and smiled. “I must be going now,” she said. She plucked a melon from the mountain before her and made a show of rapping it. “You should buy a melon. They sound promising.”

Howard was pulling the car out of the lot when it occurred to him that neither of them had asked for the other’s contact information. He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or sorry.



AS HOWARD WAS UNPACKING THE groceries, his cell phone rang. It was an unwieldy black brick of an object with (preposterously) no buttons to dial and a crowded touch screen, a gift from his older daughter, Yiping, who insisted it was the coolest new technology. Aside from picking up phone calls from his daughters and occasionally hitting autodial, he hadn't figured out how to use it. He reminded his daughter what a waste of money it was each time she called and did so again this time.

"Ba, I told you, I could teach you to use it. It's not that hard. You're just being stubborn."

"I'm too old," he said. "It's too late to get used to something new. What's wrong with the regular phone?"

"I feel safer this way," Yiping said. "So I don't have to wonder where you are."

"I'm a widower, not senile," he responded.

Yiping caught him up on what the kids had been doing—Jennifer had won second place at the fifth-grade spelling bee and Charlie had been named the high school orchestra's first violin. She mentioned that her husband, Adam, an American-born Chinese of Cantonese descent she'd met in college, was away again for work and that she herself was overloaded at the hospital.

"It's not good he travels so much," he told his daughter. "Couples need to be together."

"That's the nature of consulting, Ba," Yiping said. "You go where the client is."

"I'm telling you, that's how couples fall apart."

"Well, we can't all be you and Ma, never spending a single night away from each other. Things aren't like when you two were married. It's different now."

Howard was about to point out that he had occasionally traveled for work too, but Yiping interrupted.