Hope, A Needle Pulling Thread

The hope of an immigrant is one that is unparalleled, one which is unrivalled. To dream, to leave, to defy, is an act of hope. There's a picture in my house—an aerial view of Melbourne from the 1970s, taken close to Flinders Street Station—which hangs above the glass fruit bowl. To simply call it a picture would be a great disservice, for it is not *just* a picture, but the reason I live and breathe. When we're young we dream incomprehensibly big. If you ask a child what they want to be when they grow up they often say something like 'astronaut'. But what they want to say, even if they can't articulate it yet, is that they don't want to be confined. They don't want to be defined by what someone else says is possible. I've always thought of astronauts as a construct, the idea that *anything* is possible. My father wanted to be an astronaut—not in the physical form but in the abstract sense.

A red nose and flushed cheeks. My father, aged ten, walks home from school. Grey buildings, dead trees, and a thin layer of snow covers the streets. The snow is like a blank canvas, or a notepad, possibly. And with all that white, and all that cold, he thinks. He thinks about his future—a grey static blur that rarely comes into focus. He longs for the Western World, where they have chewing gum, and Nutella, and mangos. Concepts he could hardly fathom. As he treks through the streets he thinks about those mangos, trying to forget about his frost-bitten fingers. Yellow was hard to imagine in a world of grey. When he arrives home he sees steam billowing from a pot, his mother hunched over, stirring with such focus and intensity. As he hangs his jacket up he notices a small envelope poking through his mother's coat. He knows meddling is bad, but he's curious. He opens it and pulls out the contents. It's a postcard from a distant friend, one that lives in an inconceivable place. He's entranced, mesmerised by this small landscape photo. His mother calls him from the kitchen, but his

eyes stay fixated on the postcard—*City Skyline, Melbourne, Victoria by E. Ludwig.* And as he stood there, nose still red and fingers still slightly numb, an act of hope was born.

When I stare at that photo I realise I am the product of so much courage, so much resilience, and above all, so much hope. In summer, our home is flooded with mangos. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say there are more mangos than you can poke a stick at. And now that I think about it, this thing, once an abstract idea, is now as real as the skin on my body.

My grandmother, a Greek immigrant, a dreamer. Her broken English, her smile, her cooking. I think about her a lot lately. She knows I love to write. In her little rocking chair, she sits, closes her eyes, and listens. *I don't speak very well but I'm understanding*, she says endearingly, as I read to her. One day, when we were sitting together, she asked me a question. *Why you not write about me*, she said. I sat there for a second and pondered the question. Why *hadn't* I written about her? The reason was that I didn't know her beyond her cooking and smile. I felt some guilt about this. I felt guilty that I never learnt Greek, that I didn't have the ability to fully understand her. The deepest pain I feel when it comes to my immigrant grandparents is that I was robbed of the opportunity to know them. They have always been a part of my life, like a fixed star, but as I matured I realised that they were once little boys and girls. Boys and girls who dreamed about astronauts, even if the idea of an astronaut was futuristic at the time. My grandmother dreamed; she told me herself. She dreamed of a family, she dreamed of making beautiful dresses.

Hair tied up, sweat glistening on her neck. My grandmother, aged fifteen, walks to the tailor in Athens. She's living there doing an apprenticeship. She hopes she can make enough money for her family back in their village, *Leondari.* The hours are long, and the pay is poor, but the fabric is real. In a world of such uncertainty, she has the comfort of knowing the

fabric she holds is *real*. So she sews and sews, embroidering her way to a better life. The dresses she makes are like armour. She has some money, and she has the ability to be the most beautiful girl in the village. She soon realises she can make her own rules. Australia, a distant land, a concept almost as foreign as an astronaut. But when you have nothing to lose you have everything to gain. As long as she had her hands and a needle-pulling thread, she would be alright. After a month on a boat into the unknown she arrived in Australia, a foreign place with a foreign tongue. Although she has never explicitly stated it she has alluded that she felt isolated, that she was lost. But she had a good heart, strong and impenetrable like a thimble. She got married, she had children, she became a business owner, and she made mistakes. To create roots in a world of such uncertainty is hope. *I'm so proud about you,* she would tell me. Because I am a mirror, and everything I have achieved, so has she. All the love I have felt is her love too. We wish to make a difference on this earth, even if we are only here for a brief second. And as our two lives intersect she becomes the soil which nourishes my roots and allows my flowers to grow.

My grandfather, Hercules. Just as the name suggests, he was tough and strong. However, he was also kind and tender too. The church bells ringing in the distance. Hercules, aged eleven, struggles to tie his shoelaces. His boots are three sizes too big—the only pair in the house. After his brother returns from church he slips them on, walking with pointed toes to ensure they don't slip off as he walks. The church is the nicest building in the village. He spends his time admiring it, the murals on the walls, the kaleidoscope of colours projecting from the stained-glass window at the back of the hall. Bored and tired, he etches patterns into the row of wooden seats in front of him. After the service is over he goes around the village knocking on doors, hoping someone will invite him in for food to fill his—always—empty stomach. By the time he arrives home, he has visited five different houses and has eaten his body weight in

bread and olive oil. With a stomach full, he lies in bed dreaming, allowing the breeze from his bedroom window to lull him to sleep. The name of his village—*Leondari.* He doesn't know it yet, but his wife lives there too. They will spend their whole childhoods narrowly missing one another. And only once they both move to Australia, a whole different continent, will they finally find each other. He would be happy to know that in the future he has a pair of shoes all to himself, as well as a wife and two children, all of which keep him warm.

Hercules, aged seventy-eight. He lies in a foreign bed, his daughter by his side, and her son grief-stricken. He only has forty-eight hours left to live. His face is pale, and his breathing is shallow. The diffuser next to the bed releases a small, narrow stream of constant steam. I remember those few days the clearest out of every day I spent with him. I remember the stillness of the room and the silent tears in my mother's eyes. My grandfather died from cancer. Years of farming with dangerous pesticides had eventually caught up with him. We hoped he would get better, but in those final few days, he was like a candle at the end of its wick. I watched, excruciatingly, knowing that the flame was about to go out. I was eleven when he passed away. The permanence of death had always been somewhat elusive. However, at that moment, I realised death was a very real possibility, that it hid sly and unseen, and that it could happen to anyone at any time. Although my grandfather's death had been encroaching for a while, it still tore me apart. Because he had fought and won so many times I thought he would win again. I thought his will was the strongest thing on this Earth. But sometimes courage is to let go, to refuse suffering and choose peace. I always used to view death as a punishment, but after his final breath, and the peace on his face, I realised it was an act of kindness.

It's not easy having the weight of your parent's lives on your shoulders. My mother, daughter of immigrants, was often held at the mercy of my grandparents' whims and wishes. *They*

hoped for a better future, but *you* hoped for stability. My mother told me when she was younger she believed that she was a princess that had been kidnapped, and she hoped someone would come and save her. But she wasn't a princess, she was just a girl. A girl with a small frame, thick curly hair, and her own desires. While she cooked and cleaned she would dream of what was beyond this world of endless schoolwork and domestic chores.

Nothing in sight for a mile, except home, a dot in the distance. My mother, aged nine, walks along the cantaloupe fields during a balmy night. Mendota, California, a long way from Australia, her *real* home. Her parents believed there was 'opportunity' to be found there, harvesting the land, but they had been tricked and deceived. Sometimes hope leaves no room for truth. My grandfather worked the land like a slave, and my grandmother had become a maid for the rich family who owned the cantaloupe farm. The days were long and never-ending. My mother lived in a state of confusion, never knowing when to place down roots, as they were so often violently ripped from the ground beneath her. She played with the Mexican children next door, as their parents worked. When she looked in the mirror at home and then back at the Menendez children, she realised that they weren't very different from herself. Not only was their skin sun-kissed and their hair the same dark brown as hers, but they were *also* yearning. She might not have known exactly what for, but she was sure of it. They were created under the same circumstances as her, so they must have dreamt like her. One night her premature roots were once again ripped from underneath her. Her father told her and her sister to pack their things—they were leaving. He had been accused of stealing jewellery from the owners of the farm—my mother always referred to the owners as the Cantaloupe King and Queen. In the middle of the night, with the help of a groundskeeper named Butt, they fled. Her father kept the rifle close to him. They—the Cantaloupe King and Queen—were no longer going to rob them of their liberty, of their freedom. My grandfather was prepared to defend his family at all costs. And under a dark tarp in Butt's Ford, they

stayed silent, hoping they would be okay. They arrived at the airport, scared and unknowing. Only when the aeroplane doors shut did my mother realise she was safe, that she would hope another day.

My mother experienced a tumultuous childhood. In the pursuit of a brighter future, there were many missteps along the way. I admire my mother's strength. Although she has been challenged many times in her life she never compensated by becoming hard or quarrelsome. She still hopes and dreams, even if she does it quietly—when no one is around.

Myself, nineteen, holding back tears in a café. I look away to hide my face. I have always been slightly embarrassed to cry in front of people. It's a level of vulnerability that makes me uncomfortable. I like to curate what people see, display a version of myself that is sweet and engaging, and avoid anything that someone could weaponise against me. I wipe my tears and recompose myself. One of my father's friends, Michaela, had recently lost her mother. Michaela said to me that once her mother passed away, not only did she mourn her death, but she mourned the siblings she never had. She was scared that she would forget her mother, that she would have no one to corroborate her childhood, that she would have no one to reminisce with. This was like a knife twisting in my chest. I sat there holding back tears, seeing my entire future in her eyes. As a child all I wanted was a large family. But that's the problem with immigration, family can often be scattered around the world, unreachable. All I wanted was a sibling, someone to laugh with, someone to remember with. However, my mother told me her body wouldn't allow it. I cried when she said this because I knew she wanted to give me a brother or sister more than anything. I know she felt betrayed by her body, by the miscarriages. I often felt isolated as a child. My parents wished for a better future, a life free from financial burden—but I only wished for them and their attention.

I reminisce about my childhood a lot because I often felt unfulfilled. I felt as if I was at the mercy of the winds of life, whichever way they blew. Although, when I ponder the past, especially my family's past, I realise that not even *they* had the power to dictate their lives. I have come to realise that sometimes things just happen *to* us, with no proper explanation, and no rhyme or reason. If my father hadn't found that postcard while he was a boy in Romania he may never have ended up coming to Australia. If my grandparents didn't have the courage to flee the cantaloupe farm in California I would've never been born. If they stayed in California my mother would have lived a completely different life, parallel to this one. Maybe she had a bigger family, a bigger house—bigger aspirations.

Hoping is an individual act. However, although we hope individually, we all hope as a collective. All the people before me hoped for different things, and all their hopes converged, like railway tracks, with me waiting at the end. I stand here, able to hope, because the people before me *never* stopped hoping. They travelled land, seas, and skies. They defied borders, defied limitations, and always kept hoping for better. I will hope relentlessly, as the people before me have.

I owe them that much.