



Toy story

Emily J Sun

Before the teddy bear workshop there was nothing.

I am lucky to have a job here. There are so many of us here, and only so many jobs. I am the eyes of the operation. I sew on plastic faux glass eyes onto the half-made bears. The manager reminds us that this workshop is not a factory. Before the teddy bear workshop she, the manager, was unemployed.

We have no bank accounts, so they pay us in cash that we exchange for coupons from the one and only shop in this desert town. We are paid seven-dollars-fifty for half a day's work and with the invisible money we order chocolate, soft drinks and magazines but never newspapers because there are not enough to go around in this town. No one here reads.

The days pass slowly, slower than they used to.

We wake up at six am, eat breakfast at seven-thirty, work from eight until lunchtime. Sometimes we work in the afternoon but dinner is always served at five pm. The highlight of the day is sweet biscuits at nine-thirty pm. We are supposed to have two each, but sometimes the people in the kitchen take the second biscuit for themselves. If I wasn't working at the teddy bear workshop I would like to work in the kitchen. The kitchen workers are never hungry.

Julia, the Chinese woman who sleeps on the bunk below, says that we are fortunate to have the teddy bear workshop. Before this there wasn't much for women to do around here. There were English classes but there was only the one teacher for the whole camp and the men always got in first. Julia says the teacher dislikes Asian women because her ex-husband left her for a Burmese girl. I point out to Julia that being Burmese isn't exactly the same as being Chinese, but she said we all look the same to this woman. Maybe it is our long black hair or maybe it is just Julia.

I met the teacher once. She gave me a spelling test and told me that I don't need to attend her classes and gave me a copy of the *Advanced learners dictionary* upon which now sits a sweaty waxed apple. There are almost as many pictures as there are words in this book. I, myself, am an advanced learner. It is a bestseller in here. It used to be free but now people have to buy it from the learning resource centre. Julia had to sew a hundred eyes onto fifty bears to get her copy. She is an advanced learner too.

This morning Julia asked me if I knew when the mid-autumn festival was this year. She said that she used to be able to calculate the days according to the season and the phases of the moon. But here in the antipodes everything is upside down and we are unable to see beyond the concrete walls of this camp. The windows of our rooms face into the courtyard and even standing outside the courtyard we have only a limited view of the sky.

When Julia first started speaking to me, I thought she was talking to herself. She would from her bottom bunk whisper her travel plans: Sydney, Paris, Toyko; detailing every restaurant, hotel and shopping mecca she would visit. I have been to Sydney. I performed in the Opera House. I told Julia that I think I may have been a musician before I ended up here. She said that she was just a girl from a village in the Zhejiang province that nobody, not even people in China, had ever heard of. After high school she had moved south to Shenzhen, the city bordering Hong Kong; the city of concubines, and this was where she met her boyfriend. He had promised to take her around the world, but they only made it as far as this country. She said that he didn't have to marry her and was just happy to follow him wherever he went. The wife stayed in their mansion in the leafy coastal suburbs on the city fringe and Julia was kept in a penthouse in an apartment in the inner city. On the rare occasions when he slept over, he always left very early the next morning. Julia was happy with the arrangement. When his company opened its first office in Toyko he had promised her that he would take her with him and they would no longer be forced to hide their relationship from the world. Julia said she had never truly believed him but it was still a shock to her when he decided to take his wife instead.

At first he returned once a fortnight to see her, but then once a fortnight became once a month, once a month became every two or three months, until one day he completely vanished.

Julia used to keep track of the days by scratching a mark on her bedpost with her switchblade. When the guards found out what she was doing, they took the blade away from her, so she started marking the days on her arm with a sewing needle from the workshop. So far no one has noticed this. They don't follow our every move the way they do with some of the others. They think we are crazy, but not crazy enough to sew up our lips. There are only Asian girls in the teddy bear factory and one white woman. She doesn't speak English.

According to Julia's calendar, I've been here for four months. I don't remember when I came in, but Julia says that it was in the middle of the night and I did not speak to anyone for about two weeks. She says that I will make it out of here because I, myself, am an advanced learner. Sooner or later, someone other than the English teacher will realise this. Julia doesn't understand why I don't try to speak to one of the guards, but everything we say is written down.

I told Julia once that I am from here and she believed me. No one else does.

When they first found me, they kept asking me for my name. I hesitated because there are so many names to choose from. The name I was born with, the name I use at work, the name I want when I'm married, my English name, my Chinese name, my Japanese name, my French name. Would they accept me as Khadija, wife of the prophet Mohammed? Could I give them this name if we were in the Middle East? We're not in the Middle East are we, even though this place is hot like it is in the Middle East. They asked me for my name again and I gave them my first, middle and last names. *It can't be your name*, they said. *What was the name you were born with?* they asked and I just could not remember. No one ever uses that name any more. They looked at me with their dull eyes and I knew then that I should have tried speaking slower and telling the story that I tell everyone. I was born in ... and moved to ... ended up in ... But I was tired and I could not remember. They said if I couldn't remember did I know someone who could? I said *I am nobody let me go in peace*. Then they touched me all over and tried to find something on me that would let them know who I was. I kept telling them, *I'm one of you. I can't tell you who I am, but if you let me go I won't tell anyone*. But then they sent in a translator who I couldn't understand and perhaps they asked me the same thing again but this time my answers came out funny. I said, *Please where is the toilet, ce suo, jin tian shi xing qi er, ming tian shi xing qi san, the day after is Thursday, my father goes to work*, small phrases from weekend Mandarin

classes that I tried to piece together for them because I thought they wanted me to speak Mandarin to them but I confused these words with French words because there was not enough room in that third-language-acquisition part of my brain. *Where are you from?* they asked. *I've never left the country. Where are you from?* I asked him but he kept talking so fast and my mind began to pound like it had to be fed, then there was the high-pitched ringing in my ear. *Can I have a glass of water? Later. They need to figure out who you are. I am nobody. Where do you work? Please don't ask me about work. I can't think about work. Don't send me back to work. Is it hospitality work? I got a job once. No, not 'got' I say, 'got' is only for people who have no other words to use. No not 'God'. 'God' is for everyone. Got. G O T... short vowel. God. That's something else altogether, I know God because after Adam had begotten Seth some eight hundred years, he didn't die until he was nine-hundred-and-thirty, Enos, Seth, Mahal'aleel. Stop playing games with them. We can help you apply for asylum but you need to tell us who you are. They just want to know where you're from. I am from the suburbs, around the corner on the sixty-eight bus. You take two turns from the big shopping mall and it's around the corner, second traffic light. Do you have any form of identification on you?* Or at least I thought he said identification *hu zhao*. It might have been *zhao ji* or *jiao zhi*, but what would I want with a newspaper or dumplings? *jiao ji* I repeated ... *je ne comprends pas, je dit en Francais mais*. He was not speaking the same language. I just didn't know what to say after that. The translator's teeth were yellow and I could no longer hold onto my smile and answer their questions. I screamed out, *I am no one you need to know*. They told me that it was time to sleep. I said, *I can't sleep because I'm contemplating and I'm very anxious about contemplation. I am the child who stayed up one Christmas Eve and contemplated the welfare of my stuffed toys after my inevitable death. I can't sleep. Leave me alone*. My mind got louder, or they got louder, and I couldn't hear what they were saying. They grabbed me, a needle in my arm. I slept.

There were more needles, but one morning they said I only needed a pill. I still refused to tell them anything so they gave me my new name: J5678 and more pills and I slept until one day I woke up on the bunk bed above Julia.

They let me take my own pills now. Yellow pills for my yellow skin.

The new guards have arrived. They never stay for more than six weeks because familiarity dissolves distance. They are checking to see that everyone is where they should be. As usual, we stop what we are doing. One of the Muslim girls covers her head. I don't know why she bothers. The new guard looks nervously into the room. He is not sure if he's supposed to be here or whether he's supposed to smile. I am J5678 and I smile at him.

The manager at the workshop says that a couple of the girls will be sent back to wherever it is they came from once their appeals have been rejected. She says she will offer me a few more shifts if I want them and maybe let me move onto name labelling. The labeller gets to pick the bear's name from a list generated by the company: John, Paul, George, Ringo, Emily, Fiona, Tara, Kate. The Indonesian girl, or at least I think she is Indonesian, who is currently in charge of labelling says that she doesn't think too much about the process and just takes the first name off the top of the list. If I get the job I will pick a name that suits the individual bear. I have been sewing the eyes in different positions so that each bear has a slightly different personality. The only thing is, if I move onto labelling, who will be in charge of sewing on the eyes? It is the placement, colour and shape of the individual feature that makes each bear unique. It would be a lot easier if humans came from machine-run factories.

Summer solstice. Twenty-second of December. I look out the window and see families sitting in the shade, fanning themselves with paper plates in an attempt to cool off. There is air conditioning in the common room area but there is also the smell of stale half-washed humans. I'm used to the heat because this is the dry desert heat of my childhood.

The guards do not want to be here at this time either. They want to be surfing in Bali, on the beach with their families, anywhere but here. Last night they stood in the courtyard talking very loudly on their walkie talkies. I could understand every word they were saying, but I have no memory of their conversation.

The young blond guard has walked in for the third time. He looks like a child playing dress-up in the pseudo-military uniform they all wear. I comment that he looks more afraid of us than we are of him.

He's cute, Julia says. *Like my ex-boyfriend's son*.

Everyone here remembers too much about the past. They say it must be something in the water.

Tell me a nice story, Julia says.

I don't know any, I say

Tell me a story your mother once told you.

So I begin a story about a woman who lives in a village with her son because China is full of villages. She is a poor woman who lives in a hut because China is full of poor people in huts.

Julia says that this is a fallacy.

I remind her that this is my story. This is the China in my mind.

She laughs and curls up next to me.

Once upon a time, I begin again, *there was a woman who lived in a village with her son. Maybe she had a daughter. She used to make porridge for her son to eat on the steps of the house. There were tigers in the village, because this was when China was full of wild tigers. Then one day the young boy saw a tiger and told his*

mother. The mother said, 'What tiger,' but by then the tiger had carried away the young boy.

Julia says, *That's a stupid story* and laughs.

It's not supposed to be funny, I say. But I laugh out loud as well.

She says it's been too long since she had sex.

I know what she means.



We know that the officials are coming because everything in the workshop is clean and the guards have taken out a big net of new soccer balls and are releasing them into the courtyard. The guards beckon the children to play with them.

Julia says that this is the perfect opportunity for me to get out of here. All I have to do is make contact with the guest and surely he will be able to tell that I'm not supposed to be in here. I tell her it's been so long since I've spoken English, I don't think I remember how to. She says that everyone remembers their mother tongue. It's the language we revert to when dementia sets in or when we lose our minds.

The special guest turns out to be no one important. His name is Lee and Lee is a visiting artist from Germany. Lee came to this country to paint the sweeping plains and sunburnt lands. He has brought with him ten of his favourite paintings; big white canvases with multicoloured squiggles, a map of my mind. We gather in the courtyard to listen to his speech. There are no translators, so only a small number of us actually understand what he is saying. The children watch him as he flicks paint onto the white canvas. He says he is using red and orange to represent the earth. I look around and see only grey. He dips his hand in a tin of dirty green paint and starts finger-painting trees over the earth. He invites one of the little boys standing near the front to join him. Lee then takes a big brush, dips it into blue paint and begins swirling it all over the canvas.

This is hope, he says. *This is the ocean.*

Some of the adults who understand him walk away.

Lee picks up a stick from the floor, breaks it into several pieces and dips that into black paint. He then tries to stick the pieces onto his canvas.

This is not hope, he says and pauses.

Some of the guards begin muttering into their walkie talkies. They quickly usher a couple of young boys up onto the stage to thank Lee for his time. Lee in return gives them two large boxes of paints. The guards cheer and clap.

I join the people milling around Lee as he packs up his gear. One of the men walks up to Lee and asks him if he could paint his child. Lee politely declines.

I used to be an artist too, the Afghani says. *But then the Taliban came.*

Why are you here if you want to paint this country? I ask Lee. *You speak English very well*, he says.

A guard approaches us and asks us to step back and give Lee some space. He reminds Lee that he only has a performer's permit, not a visitor's pass. He is not allowed to speak to us.

They're not bothering me, Lee says. *I don't mind if they stand around while I pack up.*

Rules are rules, he says. *Performers are not social visitors.*

Come on. Show me the rule book that says that, Lee says.

You can't see the book.

Why not?

Because it's confidential.

Because it doesn't exist, Lee mutters.

I'm sorry. You're only allowed one rule. If you want to speak to them, you need to return tomorrow and fill in another form. The guard is almost apologetic.

What is this fucking place? Lee asks.

A more important-looking guard tells us to go back to our rooms.

There is nothing more to see here, he says.



Julia is crying.

She says that her fingers hurt. She is sick of cutting little ears off faux fur.

I walk over to her and awkwardly pat her arm.

Her appeal has been rejected and she will be sent back to her home town the day after tomorrow. She says she doesn't know why she's so upset. It's not leaving this place that upsets her, it's knowing that her ex did nothing to stop this from happening. She had a perfectly happy life before she met him. She had her own job, her own apartment and she had a group of friends she saw regularly. Then she followed him and ended up here.

She sobs uncontrollably.

She assures me that she is not always in the deepest pit of despair, that she likes to do other things like ponder how the world spins around and how many times her boyfriend has thought about her since he disappeared out of her life.

Shhhhhh. The others in the room will wake up, I say. *Everything will be better in the morning. Things are always worse at night time.* But she can't stop crying, she says she needs a break from the monotony of faces, voices and blandness. A space to breathe and sleep. I tell her that she will get that soon. But she tells me that there is nowhere for her to go after this. The shame of returning to her home town escorted by guards. What will her sister think? She still has a sister you know. She didn't tell anyone about her, just in case they sent her back without considering her case.

Why do you want to stay here so badly? I ask her.

Why do you?

I'm from here, I say.

She doesn't believe me anymore. She tells me to give up this ridiculous story. She thought it was clever at first and she would have told the same story if her English was as good as mine.

Where are you really from?

But she forgets about me and reaches for her sewing needle.

Even my scratches are temporary, she says.

I tell her that I will learn English, set up a café and sell bastardised Asian food. With a stable business, I can sponsor her and together we will be mistresses of our own destinies. Or I'll look for her when I am out and we can sell bastardised Western food to Chinese people. With money, we will both be free.

Julia reminds me that I already speak English and that they can't send me anywhere because they don't know where I'm from. Plus, I haven't signed any forms that'll allow them to search for my true identity. Anyway, why would she even want a crazy girl following her around when she's back in China? She says she was on her way to freedom when she took a shooter glass of bleach. But it hurt her too much and she had to go to hospital, which is how they found out she was not supposed to be here. Someone at the hospital snitched and told the authorities she was an illegal immigrant. She says that I am medicated but I tell her that I stopped taking my pills two months ago because I am better now. She calls me crazy and pushes me away.

Julia is ranting and puffing. If only she knew then that the best way to go was with pills and a plastic bag. If only she had known that first.

I tell her not to talk about suicide because life is beautiful. In the morning we will go to the workshop and make bears for the children's hospitals. We're luckier than the others in here.

But Julia is inconsolable.

Making teddy bears will not set me free, she says.

She rummages through my bag and finds my unopened container of yellow pills and begins popping them out one by one. I tell her that she needs a whole lot more if she wants to kill herself. But she continues to pop out my pretties one by one and ingesting them.

I don't know what to do. I try to slap them out of her hand, but she pushes me aside. She starts calling me awful things and begins throwing around anything she can find.

One of the other girls wakes up.

Any minute now the guards will come and they will take Julia away from here. I don't want them to take her away because I'll have no one if she leaves me. But I don't want them to take me because I don't want to sleep in a concrete block all by myself.

The other girl is wide awake and she begins to cry and bang her head against the wall. Julia walks over to her and slaps her

hard. The shock of the slap silences her for a brief second but the girl begins wailing again.

Stop it, I tell Julia. You can't treat people this way.

The guards will come for Julia soon so I rush back into my bed and pretend I am asleep. It is much easier that way. I pretend I'm fast asleep when the guards come for her. I do not want to go back to that concrete room where there are only six hours of fresh air. I am not going back there. This is my bed. This is my blanket. I am safe in this blanket. The guards open the door. Julia is screaming.

I let out a little snore.

The morning after, I wake up to an empty room. I look at my clock. I've missed breakfast. I walk into the common room and the girl from last night acts as if nothing has happened. She doesn't even look at me. I make my way to the teddy bear room alone and I ask the manager if she can train me for the labelling job.

I work through lunchtime. My head hurts. I am so tired that every thought hammers my head. But I must put on my face, animate it, coordinate muscle movement, pretend that everything is okay, smile and ask them for more pills. Julia ate all the ones I was saving up for my special day.

I am labelling bears today. John, Paul, John Ringer, Emily, Fiona, Tara, Kate. The girl who stuffed Kate put too much into her. Kate has turned out too fat and squints at me through her evil wide-set eyes.

I am not feeling well, I tell the manager. I leave Kate on the bench and walk back to my room. I feel as if someone is spinning me around and around from twenty-two storeys high. I hear my footsteps and feel the nothingness churning around in my stomach and in my head. I think about the gravel and why it is grey when the guards' shoes are covered in red dust. I think about red dust and what makes the earth that colour. I see attached to my eyelids little metallic hooks upon which hang little iron weights swinging back and forth, back and forth and forth and back.

The younger blond guard walks up to me and asks me if I am okay.

I want to ask him if my friend is okay, but I'm too scared to tell him the truth so I smile and keep on walking.

Pacing, heart racing.

I go back into the room and the other girls in the room are folding their clothes. I do not understand a single word of what they're saying. Their words eat into my brain. I curl up in a foetal position and close my eyes. Even in the darkness, I am pacing up and down the corridors between the grey matter.

There is no rest in sleep. I sleep between compressed bricks.

I dream of dance halls, ice-cream and sandy white beaches. I see a man in the ice-cream truck and a boy telling him that it's perfectly natural for an ice-cream truck to be cold. I see my

mother except it can't be my mother because now I can see my house and my mother never lived in my house. I know it is my house because I run through the corridors. Hope, flying, fleeting. A metallic smell from the petrol tank, alloy on my finger and a metallic taste in my mouth as the blood trickles out from the gap in my mouth where my front tooth used to sit. I am seven-years-old and I march down the driveway wondering how many more people are walking along the footpaths tonight around the world.

I am me again, my heart is singing and my feet are walking. I am running through the garden but the back fence is padlocked and I run back into the house and through the billowing luxurious peach raw silk. This is my home, but a bearded blond man is here and wants to bury me where no one can find me. Julia is there, she says my only way out is to seduce him. I climb onto him, cling onto him. I am the baby rhesus monkey and he is the dummy mummy wrapped in a towel, except he is naked, smooth and his body devoid of hair. I tell him that I want him to do what he needs to and distract him as another me sneaks out. A Doberman barks. The plan is to set the Doberman on the killer, but the dumb dog faces the wrong direction. It is up to me. There must be a gun because I have killed him. He lies face down on the ground and I have no warm feelings towards him. I place his head beneath my boots and want to crush his skull. The man with the ice-cream truck returns. The small boy is now inside the truck. I see him through the frosted clear-plastic pane. He is frozen.

I wake up with my throat dry. The door opens again.

The blond guard steps in and smiles sympathetically.

Are you alright? he says. *They're looking for you in the bear shop.*

I rub my eyes.

There's a rumour going around that you're in here by mistake.

That you're one of us. They found you wandering around in the desert by yourself. I can help you if you'll let me.

I blink.

His eyes are hazel and his face is smooth.

What's your name? Where are you from? he asks gently.

He has a softly spoken voice and smooth hands.

I take a deep breath. I am ready now. I am ready to tell him what he needs to hear.

My name is Madame, Madame Butterfly. I come from the Orient. My English is not so good. I hope you can understand me.

Emily J Sun is a Hong Kong born, Australian raised and New Zealand residing new writer. She enjoys long road trips but dislikes snow chains.



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