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## **The Transference of Minds**

As a child, Althea would work herself into fits of terrible rages, ripping the paper from the wall and pulling the insides out of soft toys. She tore the fabric with her teeth. The stuffing would erupt from the gash, and her mother Ethel found it scattered over the floorboards, Althea herself flung amongst it. What disturbed her mother so much was the quietness of these rages. Althea didn't howl or stamp her feet. Ethel would watch her for a minute and leave, shut the door, walk fast to the other side of the house. She practised disconnecting Althea from her own space; the room she was in could be cut off from the rest of the house, a technique she also practised on her out-of-her-control neighbours when they made sounds in the night time.

Once Ethel heard Althea scream. It was over so quickly she wasn't even sure it happened. It broke Ethel's concentration, which held together the webs of make-believe she'd spun throughout the house, so that she felt Althea's presence again and her distress. Ethel ran to the end of the house, took the girl by the shoulders, said, 'What's wrong with you?'

Althea shrugged out of Ethel's grip. 'They're all so stupid,' she said.

Althea's feelings were so close to what Ethel had herself thought on occasion that she felt guilty. Althea's face was so filled with her own sense of frustration, she said, without meaning to, 'I know, but it's not polite to tell them.'

Ethel watched Althea closely during this time, took to writing down this or that thing she said. It occurred to her for the first time that there was someone else in the world exactly like her, only unformed. She became fascinated with her daughter in a way she never had before—the birth so painful and the baby so demanding.

Once, she saw Althea playing with some of the children from school on the verandah, the Chinese market garden sprawling beneath them. They were playing a game of gypsies. The three of them had set up a circus, draping tablecloths over the chairs, painting signs, inviting each other to view natives caught in the wild or a man with two heads. The boy was wearing a top hat—Ethel recognised it as her husband’s, but didn’t say so—and over-sized shoes. He played a guessing game with the other girl, while Althea looked on. The boy asked the girl to tell him which cup the ball was hiding under. He would shuffle the cups around awkwardly, the rims getting stuck and tipping over. The girl kept guessing the right cup; the boy was on the brink of tears because of it. Althea was not helping, laughing every time the girl pointed to the cup and the boy tentatively lifted it to reveal the ball again. Ethel usually didn’t interfere, but today she felt generous, connected to the boy waiting for the magic to happen. She called the little girl away, distracted her by asking her to help make tea. While the girl was struggling with the big pot, Ethel gestured to the boy to hide the ball. So when the girl came back out—making him swear he hadn’t touched anything—she guessed wrong.

This sent Althea screeching, ‘How couldn’t she know he hid the ball? How couldn’t she know?’

Althea was genuinely perplexed, on the edge of one of her rages.

‘She didn’t see,’ said Ethel.

Althea didn’t understand, kept repeating the same question: how couldn’t she know? Ethel sent her away, leaving the other children to play, although you could see the fun had gone out of the game.

Althea’s outburst startled Ethel—here was the heart of the problem. Althea didn’t understand that other people didn’t know what she knew. She transplanted her own mind onto others, not recognising other people could think or know differently.

Ethel taught Althea to hide this fact, to read people by their eyebrows and hand gestures. They developed a system of hand signals; palms up and open for signs of hurt in others, palms down for silence, hands to face to show embarrassment.

The thing Ethel found most hard to deal with: Althea's lack of tears.

In her adolescence, Althea took to canoeing through the back creeks of Toowong. She once asked a Chinese man to take a picture of her. While he set up the camera, he used the gesture meaning 'I love you'—left hand to the cheek.

Although she was almost certain it was an accident, Althea couldn't look at him while he took her picture. He didn't call to her, or ask her to smile either, which made her grateful towards him. He handled the camera solemnly, and, apart from the gesture, was restrained, economical in his movements. He barely spoke. In truth, the gesture drew her attention to him, is all. The rest he did himself.

She took to canoeing past that spot every day. Sometimes she saw him working the market garden, but didn't wave. She spoke to him only once again, when he gave her the picture:



Althea came to associate her love with an upset stomach. She became diarrheic, would rush to the toilet during meal times. She once was struck with an attack in the bathtub, the outside lavatory too far away. Ethel found her in her nightie emptying out the soiled water. She thought her daughter was dying and that she should get married before she did. Ethel invited a friend of the family to stay, Frederick, a fellow with a plot of land in Eumundi. She made a new hand signal: destiny.

Althea married him because of his face. In all situations it reflected hers; here too was the Chinese gardener, his elegance. He would smile when she did, or laugh. On their acres in Eumundi, he would mimic the magpies and kookaburras. Once, when she expressed her sadness at the death of a hen named Robin, who was hatched the day her first child was born, he wept for her. She felt his gesture was a generosity she could never reciprocate. This always between them: she never knew what he was thinking, he gave up his own thoughts for her.