

Kokomo

Victoria Hannan

This is an uncorrected book proof. It has not been proofread.
Please note that all quotes for review must be checked against
the finished book or with the publisher to ensure accuracy.



Uncorrected book proof published in Australia and New Zealand in 2019
by Hachette Australia
(an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited)
Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000
www.hachette.com.au

Copyright © Victoria Hannan 2019

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be stored or reproduced by any process without prior written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 0 7336 4332 3 (paperback)

Cover design by Alissa Dinallo
Cover photograph courtesy of Chantal Convertini
Text design by Bookhouse
Typeset in 12/18.2 pt Simoncini Garamond by Bookhouse
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. McPherson's Printing Group holds FSC® chain of custody certification SA-COC-005379. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

Mina

One

MINA KNEW IN THAT MOMENT what love is. She saw it in vivid colour, saw that love is being inside each other. Love is being turned inside out together, all that pink splayed and splayed, everything on show for each other.

She knew that showing love is letting someone inside you or being let inside someone. Inside and outside, in love and out of love.

She looked at Jack, at his penis, so tall and pink, a soldier standing to attention, a ballerina in first position. It was tipping its hat to her, inviting her to dance.

Mina saw herself as a sailor lost at sea and Jack's penis a lighthouse alerting her to the presence of land, to the presence of safety. I am a hiker who has lost her way, Mina thought, and this penis a cooee heard deep in the bush. Mina felt ready to call back, to respond to love.

The second thing Mina knew, that she was sure of, was that this was the nicest penis she had ever seen. Both on the internet and in person. She watched Jack as he began to touch it. His fingers wrapped around the base of it, how you might hold a rolling pin,

a truncheon, if you were about to brandish it as a weapon, thwack it down hard on a skull. He moved his hand up and down, that calf-leather softness pulled taut over all the veins and spongy flesh, all the spouts and tubes.

Soon, all of it would be inside her, then outside, then inside again, making its way through the entrances and exits of her body one by one then back again. This was love, she thought, and her heart felt stretched wide open and ready to receive it.

Jack looked at her while he touched it. There was a darkness in his eyes she'd never seen before, that she knew now in this moment – knew for sure! – to be a love so deep it lived in places the sun couldn't reach, down there where the fish had evolved to be too ugly for the light. Love wiped clean. A blank slate. Love as darkness, she understood this now. Love as shadow. Love as shade.

'Come here,' he said, and she shuffled up the soft grey cushions of the sofa, almost on all fours, a kitten padding towards milk. She smiled; wet lips, no teeth.

'Come here.' He grabbed her arm just below the elbow and guided her hand towards him.

She could hear her heart beat, a hollow gerdunk gerdunk inside her chest like a drum. She was aware of her body; it felt suddenly that her skin was covered in feathers being ruffled by the wind, that she had the backcombed fur of a dog. The sound, the beating, the thud, thud, it was below her, outside of her.

It was not her heart, she realised, but her phone vibrating against an empty, forever-yellowed Tupperware container in her bag.

'Leave it,' Jack said, trying to pull her closer.

But her hand reached down, fingers touching the corner of the cool plastic box, feeling the urgent vibrations of it.

‘Leave it,’ he said again, the darkness of love in his voice too. She found it, she pulled it out, she looked at the screen. She answered it.

‘Mina, it’s your mum,’ Kira said. ‘She left the house.’ Then Kira said it again, as if she didn’t believe it either. ‘She left the house.’

Two

MINA WAVED AT THE BLOOD red hatchback as it crept along the passenger pick-up lane. Kira grinned at her from the driver's seat, waved back. Without indicating, she pulled in to the kerb almost at a right angle, blocking in a family in an SUV the size of a tank.

'You're here,' Kira yelled, waving with cartoon-like excitement as she climbed out of the car.

'I'm here', Mina said, and Kira wrapped her long arms tightly around her, locking Mina's in place by her side.

Kira released her, pulled her in again. Mina relaxed into it this time; let herself be held up, held tight, close. She stretched her arms around Kira's back, felt Kira's sharp shoulder blades, her ribs through her jumper. Her black bob smelt like apples.

It started to spit with rain.

'You smell terrible,' Kira said as she broke from the hug.

Mina laughed. 'It's good to see you too.' She let Kira wheel her suitcase out onto the road then lift it with ease onto the back seat of the car. Kira smiled and waved at the family in the SUV, and the driver smiled back. Mina watched him watch Kira as she jogged

around the car and slid into the driver's seat. Mina could tell he was looking at the way her legs moved inside her jeans, that he was thinking about his dry, rough skin touching her perfect soft skin.

Mina sat in the front passenger seat, squeezing her backpack in by her feet. The floor was carpeted with parking fines, dog-eared audition sides, cheeseburger wrappers.

'Sorry,' Kira said as if she was seeing the mess for the first time. 'Just put your feet on it, it's all old.'

She put the car into reverse, then drive, then reverse, then drive, inching backwards and forwards until they were driving out past the airport hotel, past the long-term car parks and into the damp grey Melbourne morning.

'Did you sleep on the plane?' Kira asked.

'Not really. But I'm not a good sleeper these days.' Mina watched the tall white trunks of gum trees whiz by through the beaded curtain of rain on the window.

'It's good you came,' Kira said. Her eyes flicked from the road to Mina and back.

'I don't know that I had much of a choice.' Mina felt the heaviness in her chest, her stomach, like she was submerged in something thicker than water. She reached forward and turned on the radio. The saxophone bit of 'Careless Whisper' oozed out of the car's crackling speakers. 'They look good, by the way,' Mina said, glancing at Kira in profile: the full lips and high cheekbones, the skin that was exactly the same colour on every part of her, save for a light dusting of freckles across her nose. Now the perfect C cups, pointing upwards, everything impossibly in proportion.

'What, these old things?' Kira moved a hand around her breasts like a model on *The Price is Right* showing off a ride-on lawnmower.

‘Do they still hurt?’ Mina asked.

‘A bit when I run, otherwise all good.’ Kira cupped one of them instinctively. ‘Did they feel fake when we hugged?’

‘They felt firm,’ Mina said. ‘But I’ve never touched fake ones before.’

‘Give them a go,’ Kira said and pushed her chest out. Mina poked one, then cupped it, bounced it once, twice.

‘They’re great,’ Mina confirmed. ‘But they were great tits before. Just for the record.’

‘Well, now they’re working tits,’ Kira said, smiling. ‘Just an ad. Well, a series of ads,’ she said. She sounded nonchalant, but Mina could tell she was proud. ‘I have lines, though.’

‘I’m so happy for you,’ Mina said, punching her on the arm. And she was, she was. ‘Ads for what?’

‘Argh.’ Kira scrunched up her face. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ She turned up the radio.

‘Tell me,’ Mina begged. ‘I promise I won’t laugh.’

Kira indicated left off the freeway, everything lined by high concrete walls, hard and grey and tall.

Kira groaned. ‘It’s panty liners.’

‘That’s great,’ Mina said, and the concrete turned to brick, red and cream against a flat white sky.

The traffic up ahead slowed and stopped at the dull, heavy ding of a level crossing. The lights flashed and the arms dropped.

‘When do you shoot?’ Mina asked.

‘This week. So I won’t be around much for a couple of days.’

‘Oh God, you’re abandoning me.’ Mina leant forward and cradled her face in her hands, the seatbelt cutting into her neck. She felt trapped. She pressed her eyebrows with her index fingers,

hard down on the pressure points, round in small circles, along her eyebrows to her temples.

‘You’re one to talk. Don’t worry, I’ll be done in a week.’ Kira reached over and rubbed Mina’s back. ‘Plus you’ve got Mum. And there’s always Shelly.’

The train honked ahead of them, a blur of blue carriages, the silhouettes of passengers facing forwards, facing backwards. Mina looked sideways at her.

‘Come on, you two are still friends, right?’

‘Of course we are. We just haven’t spoken in ages. Our lives have gone down very different paths.’ Mina sat back and closed her eyes. ‘It’s just a few days,’ she said. ‘Just a few days.’

They passed the Dimmeys, the window stocked with high-vis vests and pants. Mina noticed that, yet again, someone had tried to deface the sign that advertised adult circumcision ‘for all reasons’. The graffiti had been scraped off but the faint outlines of the letters were still there. Mina let herself think about it for the first time since the plane; she let herself think about the penis. The Georgia O’Keeffe pink of it, the way it stood to attention, pinged right out of the fly of his boxers.

Mina felt the flight – two middle seats and a four-hour layover – all over her, cramped and heavy and long. There was so much distance and time between her and Jack. Between her and her real life. She made a list of things she’d give to go back in time (an arm, a leg, two feels of Kira’s new tits, one of her old ones) and not notice her phone, not answer it. She should’ve put the penis in her mouth, let it burrow deep inside her, make a home and live there forever. If she’d done that, she would be in London, she would be in love. She would not be driving over the squeaky tramlines in

Melbourne, not driving towards whatever awaited her at home. She would not have this dull ache of dread inside her and the feeling of something unfinished between her legs.

‘Nearly there,’ Kira said, and they crossed a bridge over the dirty brown swill of the creek that bubbled and gushed, snaking its way south to meet the Yarra.

Mina looked at the gum trees dancing in the wind, at the expanse of sky that was too wide, too open, big enough that it could all just fold in on itself at any moment, swallow them whole.

‘Have you seen her?’ Mina asked finally.

‘No, I just know what Mum told me.’

The car slowed, turned. Mina nodded and took a deep breath in, out, another and another, as Kira pulled into the sloping driveway of her childhood home.

THE SMELL OF the Chengs’ house rushed at Mina when Valerie opened the door. It smelt like fabric softener on just-washed sheets, a hint of incense.

‘My baby girl,’ Valerie said, wrapping Kira in her arms. ‘Still so beautiful.’

Mina stood behind them as they embraced, as Valerie took her daughter’s face in her hands and kissed each cheek four times.

‘Mum, you saw me yesterday.’ Kira pushed past her, kicked her shoes off and wandered through the living room to the kitchen at the back of the house.

‘Jasmina, welcome home.’ Valerie opened her arms and waited for Mina to step forwards into them. Mina let Valerie envelop her in silk and perfume. The smell was so pungent Mina could see it:

a sunset of whipped egg-white clouds, a field of foxgloves, pink on pink on pink on pink.

‘You look so good,’ Mina said as Valerie held her at arm’s length and inspected her from head to toe.

‘You look tired, girly,’ Valerie said, tapping her on the cheek before trotting off towards the kitchen. She was wearing a silk shirt, a pencil skirt and a pair of pink fluffy slippers. Mina smiled. You could always count on Valerie Cheng to look glamorous, even at seven-thirty on a Monday morning.

As she took her shoes off she examined the Chengs’ living room. Except for a couple of *Keep Calm and Carry On* throw pillows she’d not seen before, it looked the same, it felt the same. Maybe it was good to be home? She studied the family portrait still hanging above the TV and remembered the day it was taken, how she’d sat and watched Kira get ready, she and Loretta in matching red velvet dresses, Brendan fuming about his red velvet waistcoat. ‘I think you look good,’ Mina told him out of earshot of his sisters. ‘That’s because you’re an idiot,’ he said and stormed out to wait in the car with his dad. Mina’s cheeks burnt the colour of the waistcoat, of the dresses. She’d longed for a family like the Chengs back then; the five of them sitting together in their matching outfits against the mottled blue background. She was jealous of all of them, of the cheeks that Valerie prayed Loretta would grow into, of the ease with which Brendan moved through life: just handsome enough, popular enough and smart enough for everything to seem easy. Most of all, Mina envied the way they jostled each other for space in the car, the noise of a full house. That feeling, the want, it growled and stirred deep down inside her even now, waking from its long slumber.

‘Come on, slow coach,’ Valerie called from the kitchen.

Mina walked down the long hall lined with framed family photos.

There was a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits on the kitchen table. Kira sat looking at them longingly.

‘Mama,’ she whined, a teenager again, dramatic. ‘Why do you tempt me so?’ She licked her finger and dabbed at the crumbs on the plate.

‘You’re too thin, baby,’ Valerie said and poked a bony finger between her daughter’s ribs as she squirmed. ‘We need more healthy girls on TV.’

Mina took a biscuit, dunked it in her tea, let the soggy crumbs tumble into her mouth.

‘Good thing Mina knows how to eat. You always were my favourite daughter.’ Valerie gave her an exaggerated wink.

‘Ha ha, very funny.’ Kira rolled her eyes. ‘I’ve got to go to work.’ She leant over and kissed her mother on the cheek, and Mina stood.

The two of them hugged, Mina holding on the tightest this time.

‘Thanks for coming to get me,’ she whispered.

‘Of course.’ Kira held the back of Mina’s head in her hand. ‘I hope it’s okay over there,’ she said as she pulled away. ‘There’s a party on Friday night. Come stay at mine after.’ She spun her car keys around on her finger. Mina nodded.

‘Love you, baby girl,’ Valerie called down the hall after her.

They heard the front door shut and Valerie shifted her gaze to Mina. ‘You look pale.’ She reached over and pinched the apples of Mina’s cheeks a few times between her thumb and forefinger. ‘Better.’ Lifting the pot, she refilled their cups. There was a moment of silence that marked the end of one topic and the start of the next, the unavoidable one.

‘It’s good you came,’ Valerie began, holding her cup in both hands, the steam rising and fogging up her red-rimmed cat’s-eye glasses.

‘Have you seen her?’ Mina paused. ‘Since?’

‘I popped over for a cuppa yesterday, but I didn’t mention it,’ Valerie said. ‘I didn’t tell her you were coming. She seemed fine, though.’ Mina sensed that Valerie had been on the verge of saying ‘normal’. ‘She’s the same. She’s your mum.’

‘And it happened on Saturday?’ Mina felt like a cop on a TV show, checking to make sure the witness’s story hadn’t changed.

‘Saturday morning. She was just up the street.’ Valerie pointed north, in the direction of the over-priced corner store.

‘And it was definitely her?’ Mina needed to be sure.

‘After all these years,’ Valerie said, her brow furrowed. ‘Who knows if it was even the first time?’

‘Fuck.’ Mina sighed and flopped back in her chair. ‘Sorry for swearing, but Jesus.’

‘No, baby, this deserves a fuck.’ Valerie reached across the table and squeezed Mina’s hand. They both laughed a little, as much as they could manage.

Maybe I could stay in the Chengs’ house forever, Mina thought. Take Lottie’s room.

She sat forwards, finished her tea.

‘I guess I’d better go.’ She pushed her chair out, stood. Her body felt heavy, tired, like she couldn’t remember how it worked. She had to tell herself to lift one leg up, then the other. To remind herself how to walk. She caught a whiff of her armpits: Kira was right.

Valerie stood too, shuffling through the house behind her, ushering her towards the door. A photo on the hall table caught Mina’s eye: it was Brendan in a tuxedo on his wedding day. The

same cheekbones, the same perfect skin as Kira. Next to him, Kylie beamed, blonde and beautiful, her huge teeth bared, a sign of true happiness.

Valerie saw her looking. 'Look at my handsome boy.' She picked up the wedding photo and looked lovingly at her eldest child.

'He's got good genes,' Mina said.

'Just a shame his wife's a bitch,' Valerie said and flicked Kylie's face through the glass. 'She's threatening to leave him. I told him: "Let her go, find a better one," but he's moping around all sad about it.' She put on a comically sad face and pretended to cry. 'Boohoo!' She put the photo back in its place on the table and opened the front door as Mina squeezed her feet back into her shoes. 'I'm always here if you need me. Give Mummy my love.' She kissed her hand twice and blew the kisses to Mina before swiftly closing the door behind her.

Mina looked across the street to number ninety-eight. She'd avoided looking at it from the car when they pulled in, when Kira dragged her bag up the driveway to the brown brick porch, as though not looking would make it disappear. Would make all of it go away.

From here she could see the ivy had grown, spreading and tangling itself across the length of the low wooden fence that sloped even further to the right now. It had been white once, but had since dimmed and dulled into a dirty cream, like soured milk. The front gate was still missing a slat of wood and it leered at her with its gap-toothed smile as she wheeled her suitcase towards it.

She pushed the gate open with her foot. The lone tree in the front garden, a tall green pencil pine, now had a single branch splintered off at an angle, sticking out like a welcoming arm,

a crooked warning sign. She dug around in her backpack for her keys, unlocked the front door, wheeled her case in behind her.

‘Mum?’ she called down the dark hall, the only movement her own shadow. If this were a bad movie there would be a creak of floorboards, a grandfather clock ticking to mark the passing of time. Mina heard nothing but the gentle coo of a spotted dove, a dog barking somewhere nearby. ‘It’s me.’

She felt the silence draw up around her like floodwater. She waded down the hall. The striped green wallpaper dotted with pink roses gave her the impression she was in a prison designed by Laura Ashley. The walls were bare of photos, bare of art, missing any evidence that this was a home, that a family had lived here once.

The curtain was drawn in Elaine’s room, the colourful, floral embroidered quilt Mina had sent home from Turkey one Christmas was spread neatly over her bed. Mina felt a little flicker of something – pride maybe, smugness – at seeing Elaine using something she’d sent her. At seeing how much it brightened up the room, just as she’d hoped it would.

Moving down the hall felt like swimming against the tide. She walked past the bathroom, past the kitchen, all the rooms to the left of her hanging from the hall like clothes from a washing line, grapes from a vine. Lopsided, uneven, until the end of hall where the house opened up. Light flooded the living room through two big sliding glass doors; beyond them, the green mess of a backyard glistened with the residue of the morning’s early spring rain. Mina stood in the entrance to the living room where Elaine sat at the dining table, hands clasped, among piles of books and papers, a cup of tea cooling beside her. Her hair was pulled into a small

bun at the back of her head, low and tight, the blonde losing its fight with grey.

‘I’m here,’ Mina said.

Elaine looked up at her daughter, her expression unchanged.

‘You’re here,’ she said.