

Lina
Catherine Ta

*Travelling on shaky roads,
Untamed seas,
Dangerous mountains and terrains,
A brand new land,
Can I be free?*

I remember the first day she moved into our class. The teacher asked her to introduce herself.

'Li-' the rest of the word reduced to the volume of a mere whisper. Everyone leaned forward, pushing their ears to the front of the room. Her eyes were permanently fixed on the ground, seeming to burn a hole into the floor, or her shoes.

'Oh uh- could you please repeat that?' The teacher requested.

After a pause, she finally nodded her head and repeated, 'Li-' Once again, the rest of the word faded away, into the wind.

'Uhh, well everyone, please welcome Lisa to our class. She's moved here recently and doesn't know much, so help her if she needs it!' The teacher chimed. Drawled yes's filled the room and everyone's attention faded from the girl.

But I had heard her. No doubt about it. Lina.

*The chest is closed,
Ensure it's sealed,
Locked,
Click,
throw the key into the dark abyss.*

She had become infamously known around school. The girl with no words, born with no speech, or no words to say. During lunchtimes she sat beside the garden bed, lunch box in her hands, flowers near her feet. No one approached her, as if she were strange.

One day during class, we were working in group assignments. I suddenly heard a loud gasp, followed by 'You're a liar!' There I saw Lina's eyes wide with fear. Her name was messily scrawled in the corner of the group work paper and Jerry pointed at Lina's face with his chubby fingers accusingly. 'Lisa's a liar!' Jerry chanted over and over again. Lina only stared down at the paper and I could see a deep crease between her eyebrows.

After that day, they called her names like 'Loser' and 'Liar Lisa'. But to my surprise, Lina ignored them. As if they weren't talking to her in the first place.

I knew. Maybe I was the only one that knew, that she wasn't a liar at all. Lina was Lina to me from the beginning. So for the first time during lunch time, I joined her near the flower beds.

*Abandoned in the dark - left to rot for days,
Numb to the pain,
Shackled by chains,
Don't open your eyes,
Block out the cries.*

The brown leaves decorated the floor like sprinkles on a cake. *Crunch*. Lina turned immediately to my direction, but her eyes didn't meet mine. I wondered if her neck ever felt sore. She flinched, and her body started to turn away, looking for her nearest routes of escape.

'Wait! Don't go. Lina!'

And her entire figure froze. It came out slowly and quietly

'...No one...listen me.'

Her voice was heavy with an eastern accent. Moments of silence escaped between us, the brown leaves danced around us, and then she continued to leave.

'I'm here to listen to you'

Burgundy. Rich burgundy orbs—they were the first thoughts I had when our eyes met for the first time. Her eyes shone radiantly in the sun and they attracted me towards her, like a magnet. And this time, she didn't try to leave - she let me sit next to her, near the garden beds.

Her words came out slowly, sometimes with hesitation and fear. But she told me her stories from lands far away, her troubles in Australia and how difficult it was to understand English sometimes. Her name, Lina, meant beautiful in her native language, and it really suited her. I'll admit, her English wasn't the best -- sometimes I couldn't understand exactly what she was trying to say. But her gestures, tone and facial features could depict a story that was much more colourful than words alone could.

*Rattle,
The chains slowly fall off,
The lid still sealed shut.
The key gets fished out from the darkness,
Click.*

Days passed and the number of lunches we shared increased. Slowly with each lunch, I could see Lina's improvements with English and she became more accustomed to Australian culture. We would share our food, her steamed dumplings or *jiaozi*, while I let her try my ham and vegemite sandwiches. After a bite, her face scrunched up,

'Too...salt.'

One lunchtime, Lina was in the middle of telling me about Chinese New Year, and how she was given pockets of money, when she stopped mid sentence. An uninvited guest had come.

'Why do you always hang out with liar Lisa?' Jerry interrogated, his mouth full of bread and chicken, 'And woah, what *is* that?' he said, starting to pick at her food.

'Her name is Lina,' I grumbled. 'And those are spring rolls,' I added.

Without asking, he grabbed one.

'This tastes good! Can I have some more tomorrow?'

While I was trying to hide my anger at Jerry, I looked at Lina for her permission. She shrugged, her face saying, 'Why not?'

The next day after lunch, Jerry was telling the entire class how great Lina's food was. Somehow the class had planned to have a class picnic, including Lina. From that day on, everyone started calling her 'Lunch Lina'. Well, I guess it's an improvement at least.

The chest opens,

Freedom,

Safety,

Love.

This is my home.