

Chapter 1

Lan An

It was cold in Montana, colder than her home by the ocean. Ann lay on the grass with Robert by her side. They had just finished their popsicles and left wrappings all around them; Ann could still taste the bits of chocolate clinging to her tongue. The breeze—along with coldness in her stomach—rendered dizziness in her brain, alongside a feeling she could ever so coarsely make out. It would take Ann many years to finally recognize that same feeling, but she felt happy nonetheless.

Ann closed her eyes and began to rethink her life. She had been like that lately, always thinking about her past, trying to figure out her presence in the world, yet she had been unsuccessful in her recollection. She knew she was nine years old, and that she was a small girl with small eyes and a flat nose. She knew she was unlike anyone else in the class and came from the opposite side of the world, but that was about all she knew. Oh, and Ann's name wasn't Ann. Her name was Lan An, her grandmother had given this name to her when she was a month old. Ann was giggling before her family as they placed her on a cold glass table. Of the toys and robots and pens and lipsticks, Ann's parents shared concerned looks as she grabbed the lipstick without hesitation. Ann never fully understood the essence behind this ritual, yet her parents were wary, looking into her eyes as if she had made the most horrifying choice. Ann understood their looks a little bit better now, but only a little bit.

She could scribble down her last name, "An", in Chinese, but "Lan" stumped her. She felt as if the little sticks and dots intertwining in the character danced before her, rendering in her much frustration and shame, so she liked being called Ann. Ann felt right for her. She liked it when Robert or her classmates or Mrs. Kimberly called her Ann. She felt secure with this name, simple and yet so soothing. It reminded her of home, of warmth, of the ocean, of wanting to escape the barren state of Montana.

If only Montana was beside the sea, thought Ann. She loved the sea as she liked to walk on the beach, her little feet rubbing against the fine sand. She liked to step into the ocean, her body merged in the shallow water. As the tides approached and retrieved, Ann would sway and shift, thrown by the currents. Ann both feared and loved the sensation, the feeling of losing control and allowing the sea to take over her body. Losing control was easier sometimes, thought Ann. Ann got up from the grass and beamed at Robert. He stared back at her, eyes still as water. Ann liked Robert's blue eyes and freckles, as she had neither on her face. Feeling hollow from her swaying thoughts, Ann decided to play hide and seek with Robert, and so they played in silence, with occasional laughter as Ann mocked Robert's hiding spot behind the trash can. She proudly told him that one of his shoes could be seen from one side of the can "like a little green turtle", and Robert smiled at her. Before long, night had fallen.

As Ann proceeded to say goodbye, Robert quietly whispered into her ears: "Earlier today, Omar told me I had better not lie down on the grass with you." Ann thought of a million things, but

she remained dead silent. Robert said goodbye and went home. Ann watched him go as streetlights shone on his messy blond hair, and Ann felt empty. She was surprised at how often she would feel this way: it seemed only yesterday she was a carefree little girl, thinking about her doll's outfits and whether her parents would make her favorite Macaroni and Cheese. But now, Ann was more sophisticated. She kept thinking about what Robert said to her and what he meant, and she was slowly overwhelmed by an urge to cry. Since when did she start feeling unhappy? She had long regarded "unhappy" as a grown-up's issue and none of her concern. Yet she had been proven wrong by no other than herself.

Later that day, Ann caught a fever. As she lay in her room, countless figures danced before her. Waves, one after another, gently stroked the deep sea inside her eyes.

Chapter 2

The deep blue sea

Ann awoke to the worried faces of her parents. She had a wet towel on her forehead and felt like her throat was on fire. When she tried to cough, soreness pulled her back and she only succeeded in making muffled groans. When Ann turned her head, she saw the familiar brown, steaming bowl of Chinese medicine, which meant a journey of bitterness awaiting her. Growing up, Ann envied her classmates, who would always take Aspirin or Ibuprofen and never had to suffer like her. Holding her breath, Ann emptied the bowl with great difficulty, holding back her urge to vomit. Oddly, she did feel better. She felt as if the bitterness had neutralized a part of her pain.

But Ann had more on her mind. In her fever, her vision turned grey and she felt as if she was meandering in the abyss of her life. She was dancing and swimming in the deep blue sea, just like how she used to in her hometown. Then it struck her: Robert didn't want her as a friend anymore. What's worse, he said it calmly, as if it didn't even matter. He even brought up Omar, who had nothing to do with them! But perhaps it never mattered to Robert. He was popular among the kids in school. He could sprint and do two-digit addition faster than anyone else. Ann remembered that she used to spend the entire afternoon chatting with Robert, her eyes filled with amazement as he taught her bits of history and chemistry. In green plants, Carbon Dioxide and water make sugar. Ann was so amazed by this that she tried breathing into a tree to make it grow faster.

But now Robert was gone from her life. She didn't want him to leave, but what could she do? Ann was suddenly saddened by her insignificance, and could no longer push back her urge to tear up. On October 15th, 2009, she cried in front of her parents for the second time since she was born, the first time being her birth. Only this time, it was silent. As tears came trembling from her cheeks, Ann felt very sorry for herself.

"Ma, Pa", murmured Ann.

“What is it, Ann?” Her father pulled out a piece of napkin and gently wiped her tears.

“Why does no one like me? No one wants to be near me and talk to me at school, and now Robert is leaving me.” Ann’s voice was nearly cracking as she kept sobbing.

Ann’s father froze. He exchanged looks with his wife. The consolation was gone and a shade of disbelief shadowed their faces. It was the same concern and disbelief nine years ago when they saw Ann paint her cheeks red with lipstick.

“What do you mean Robert is leaving you?” Asked Ann’s mother, her face pale and wrinkled as she struggled to force a smile.

“He told me that Omar... that Omar said he shouldn’t be lying on the grass with me, and I don’t know why he would say that... why would Omar say that? Ma, can you tell me why he would say that?”

The parents were sweating. They exchanged looks again and, placing a cold towel on Ann’s forehead, anxiously left the room. Ann was all by herself once again. She now regretted her outburst in front of Mom and Dad, but what was done was done. She cried because she felt Robert was leaving her, and that was a valid reason, thought Ann.

But she could no longer think clearly. Her headache never receded and now she felt cold. It was strange because her head was still burning hot, but she felt as if she had drowned in the cold water. The water dragged on her limbs, making her movement sluggish as if held back by ocean currents. She fell asleep once again.

Chapter 3

The little green turtle

Ann avoided Robert at school, and she persuaded herself she wasn’t doing this on purpose. It was Robert’s fault, not hers. Surely, Robert was the one who changed the way between them. When she sat alone under the shade and finished her burger, she couldn’t help but think about how Robert used to take out his tater tots from his tray and put them in hers. She didn’t like tater tots, but somehow Robert’s tasted better than all the tater tots she had in her life. She used to believe there was something special about Robert’s food, but deep down she knew they were the same as hers. Ann’s burger tasted dry, although juice was slowly oozing from the patty and she tossed it aside. Ann craved tater tots.

Then she briefly made up her mind: She was going to get back at Robert one way or another. She did not care, because things could never go back to the way they were. Ann felt soreness in her nose.

She then thought that she must have done something wrong to upset Robert. Was it because she pointed out his shoes sticking out from the side of the trash can? No, that can't be it. Robert was elusive to Ann, and Ann could sense this—although she couldn't come to understand it, ever. His eyes were always staring into her pupils as if he could read her mind, and the sophistication in his eyes shot right through Ann's heart. Whenever Ann glanced Robert's eyes, she knew that he knew what she was thinking.

But perhaps this was the reason she was so insignificant to Robert, because he was so perfect, while she was like a blank piece of paper. Why did he even bother to spend so much time with her before? Ann wondered if Robert was ever aware of her existence the same way she was of his, but she was afraid that the answer was going to be no, so she dropped this thought and quickly finished her lunch. Before she could return to the classroom, she noticed the familiar pair of green shoes before her, and above them, pale, thin shins. Ann did not look up.

Ann sat in silence for a while, trying to look away, but she couldn't help but quiver when a ray of lightning struck from the thick clouds. Then, thunder came as if the sky had been ripped apart like a cloth. Ann's classmates ran for cover from the coming rain, but she remained on the bench, her feet dangling, head buried low. Robert advanced to sit beside her.

Again, Ann felt coldness in her stomach as the wind gushed through the playground, the same coldness she had felt two days ago. At this point, the playground was empty, and yet she and Robert remained on the bench, silent and still. Ann casually picked up her juice box to take a sip, but another bolt of lightning shot across the dark sky, its forking trails reminding Ann of spider webs, her worst fear. She emptied the entire juice box in one big sip.

The rain came pouring down and the leaves rattled above them. Ann almost decided to get up and leave before Robert pulled out his umbrella.

"You can't avoid me forever, you know."

Ann did know. But that's why she avoided him: she needed time to figure out everything. Sitting under his umbrella, Ann played with the tip of her ponytail. She let out a light sigh, which immediately turned into white fog in the cold. She felt Robert shiver, and a surge of warmth shot across her body. She had these weird sensations sometimes, either near her chest or across her feet. It was a combination of being ripped apart and then mending the crevice, like touching super glue with her two fingers and quickly forcing them apart. Ann wanted to lean toward Robert, and she was surprised at that thought, but she couldn't help herself. As the sky darkened and lightning continued to strike, Ann pressed her forehead to Robert's shoulder and Robert held very still. It was very cold in Montana, even with Robert by her side.

Ann waited for Robert to say something again but no words came. So, Ann focused her mind on the present, the moment in which she had her head pressed against Robert's body and was safe from the wind. She stared at Robert's very pale face.

A gust of wind carried drops of rain towards his golden hair, dampening it, before Robert shifted the umbrella further to Ann's side and shivered even more. Once again, Ann felt his inconceivable sophistication. She refused to think more and allowed herself to be intoxicated by the reality. She thought she was going to have a fever again.