

the Garden of CARTERIAN

GABRIELLE WANG

with illustrations by the author

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The Shop of Strange Smells

There were those at school who smelt of tomato sauce, others of garlic. And of course there was no avoiding the stench of BO after the cross-country run. But Mimi had a curious smell that no one could recognise.

Mimi Lu lived in a two-storey shop that seemed to float on a cloud of strange smells. She was embarrassed enough that her home stank like a compost heap on a hot day, but the odour seeped into everything — her clothes, her pigtails, her skin — and could even be detected on her breath. Her parents forced her to drink all kinds of disgusting brews. The only way to get them down was to hold her nose until the very last swallow.

At school she was called Smelly-Loo. Kids complained if they were asked to share a desk. She never told her mum or dad about the bullying. They wouldn't understand. They might as well have come from Mars.

'Remember, Mimi, you are Chinese. Be proud of it.' The words rattled around inside her brain. They were empty words that didn't belong to her.

How can I be proud? They speak English with a funny accent that makes them sound really dumb. And other kids live in a proper house with grass and a garden. All I have is the footpath out on the street.

Mimi sat at the old laminex table in the kitchen staring at her navy blue school hat. She was remembering what Miss O'Dell, her art teacher, had told her that day about *chiaroscuro* – how to paint light and dark. The more she looked at her hat, the more it looked like a mountain range with hills and valleys.

Through the red curtains that separated the shop from the living quarters, Mimi could see her father putting on his clinic coat ready for the first patient.

Ding ding-a-ling. The shop door opened.

'Dr Lu, I'm in a bit of a hurry. Can you see me now?' came a voice used to giving orders.

Uh oh. Mimi hid behind her maths book.

'Of course, Miss Sternhop,' replied Mimi's dad.

Miss Sternhop rapped her walking stick on the

concrete floor. She was a solid lady with short, straight brown hair and two massive trunks for legs. The only thin part of her body was her lips. If Miss Sternhop ever collided with a car, it would be the car that suffered the most damage.

She placed her wrist on a small cushion. Dr Lu felt her pulse. Was it weak or strong, stringy or full? He wrote on a pad in Chinese characters.

'See your tongue please,' said Dr Lu.

Miss Sternhop opened her mouth wide and poked out her tongue. It was purple and thick and swollen at the edges.

She looks like an iguana from the Galápagos Islands. Mimi stifled a giggle.

On the back wall of the shop stood an antique wooden cabinet, with one hundred box-like drawers. The cabinet once belonged to Mimi's grandfather in China. He was a herbalist too. Dr Lu didn't know how old it was but he was always finding secrets from other people's lives. Once he found a carved jade bracelet hidden in a secret panel at the back of a drawer. It was so tiny only a child could have worn it. There was a letter too, folded into the shape of a bird and pushed through the centre of the bracelet.

'Aiya, family so poor, have to give away precious baby daughter. Before in China many people like this.' Mrs Lu touched her heart.

Mimi wondered what it would be like to live in China. If I was born there I'd look like everyone else. I'd fit right in.

Dr Lu pulled one drawer halfway out and grabbed a handful of dried mistletoe. From other drawers he pulled out slices of fragrant angelica, licorice root and creamy white grains of Job's tears. He weighed each herb separately, then divided them evenly into four paper packages.

'This good for arthritis,' said Dr Lu. 'Drink two times every day.'

'How's Mimi doing at school?' asked Miss Sternhop. Mimi slid down in her chair.

'Not good,' Dr Lu replied, shaking his head. 'She draw too much.'

'That was her trouble when she was in my class last year.' Miss Sternhop hardly moved her tight, thin lips. 'Never concentrated. In my experience you've got to come down hard on children like that.' She banged the counter with a clenched fist, as if she were squashing a helpless bug.

'See you in a month, Dr Lu.' Miss Sternhop strode out to join the stream of life on the street.

When Miss Sternhop was well out of earshot, Mimi yelled from the kitchen, 'I hate old Stir-em-up. She never liked me.'

'Hate not good word, Mimi.'

'But I do. She's mean. The whole school was glad to see her go.'

'Why you late today?' Dr Lu wiped the counter with a feather duster then walked through the red curtains.

'I told you already, Dad, Miss O'Dell is giving me special art classes after school. She says I have real talent.' Mimi hadn't made a big deal of it. She knew her dad would be angry.

'You need to concentrate on school work...not painting,' he said, suddenly breaking into Chinese. He did this whenever he was serious or angry. 'Painting is not a respected profession.'

'But I love drawing and painting, Dad,' she replied in English. Two years ago, Mimi had decided never to speak Chinese again. 'I'm Australian *not* Chinese,' she had said defiantly. She knew it made her parents angry, but it was the one thing in her life she had control over.

Her dad waved his hand towards the yellowing

photograph hanging above the altar table in the hallway and frowned at her. 'Your *nai nai* and *gong gong* are watching, waiting for you to honour the family name. You have no brother, so it is up to you to please the ancestors.'

'Oh phooey,' Mimi said softly, then looked up, hoping the ancestors were hard of hearing. She felt the disapproving stare of her grandmother and grandfather on their ancestral cloud. Isn't burning incense every day enough for you? Don't you know that other kids' parents say, 'well done, you did your best'. They're always being told how great they are. I get 98 for a maths test and Dad says it's not good enough. All he ever does is criticise...

'Tell your teacher you are busy after school. No more wasting time.' Mimi's dad broke into her thoughts.

'But Dad, that's not fair,' she replied angrily.

Dr Lu sat down at his desk, his back blocking the conversation. It was no use. He had shut her out as usual. Mimi had learnt long ago that Chinese children never argue with their parents.

She stared at her maths book as tears melted the black digits into blurry grey blobs. Why did I have to be born into a Chinese family?



The Gift

Traffic was busy this morning on Rumba Street. Trams were banked up along the track like large green caterpillars playing follow-the-leader. Two men stood on the roof of a yellow tramway's truck, fixing the power lines overhead, black wires playing noughts and crosses against the sky.

'Hey ching chong,' a voice yelled from a passing car.

'Unfortunate beings!' Mimi muttered, to keep out the hurt.

'People like that, very unfortunate,' her mum would say. 'Their parents no teach them right or wrong.'

As Mimi arrived at the school gate, the bell started ringing. This week's number one hit, 'ME-YOW' by

The Furballs, was blaring from the loudspeakers into the assembly area.

'I thought we could do some pottery today, Mimi,' said Miss O'Dell, walking beside her down the asphalt path. 'I fired up the kiln yesterday.'

Miss O'Dell's rosy cheeks stood out like little pink balloons as she smiled at Mimi. Her skin was smooth and soft, and when she spoke it was as though she was singing a gentle Irish lullaby.

'Dad won't let me come any more,' Mimi replied sadly.

'Why ever not?'

'He says I draw too much. I have to concentrate on school work.'

'My, that's a shame. But maybe if you work really hard, he might change his mind and let you come back. Give it a go, all right? Why don't you drop by the art room on your way home anyway. I've got something to give you.'

After morning assembly, Mimi slipped into her wooden desk beside Josh Rudd. She liked Josh. Everyone did. He had a broad smiling face and spiky fair hair and his voice would crack in mid-sentence. But best of all, he never called her Smelly-Loo. Instead he called her M.

Josh was extremely untidy. His books would start in a nice neat pile at nine fifteen. By nine sixteen, they would slowly spread, like molten lava, across both desks, onto the seat, then finally spill over onto the floor. By three thirty, Mimi's feet would be surrounded by books, pencils, pens, rubbers and rulers all belonging to Josh. But Mimi didn't mind a bit.

At lunchtime, Mimi sat by herself in her usual spot under the peppercorn tree, swinging her legs to keep away the flies.

'Hey there, Smelly-Loo... what ya got for lunch today?' chanted Gemma Johnson, the leader of the 'cool' group. She winked at her two offsiders Phoebe and Eliza. Gemma always wore her hair high in a ponytail which she would deliberately swing from side to side to attract attention. Especially the attention of Josh Rudd. She was jealous that Mimi got to sit next to him in class. 'What a waste,' she told everyone.

Mimi grimaced, desperately trying to hide her thermos before Gemma could make fun of it. But it was too late.

'She's eating flied lice!' Phoebe pointed and laughed. 'Oh, puke,' said Gemma sticking her fingers down her throat. 'And look at these primitive eating sticks.' She snatched Mimi's chopsticks and rolled them under her shoe. 'There, all nicely sterilised. Why don't you use a knife and fork like civilised people?'

Eliza and Phoebe giggled. 'Seeya, Smells,' they chorused and ran off towards the oval.

Why won't Mum give me a plain old sandwich like everyone else?

Mimi had pleaded with her mum to pack *normal* lunches but her mum didn't understand what the problem was. 'Hot fried rice is surely better than a cold sandwich for lunch,' she had told Mimi. 'Cold food is not good for the stomach.'

Suddenly, Mimi had lost her appetite.

As soon as the bell rang for dismissal, Mimi grabbed her bag and raced to the art room. She loved the thick and slightly sickly smell of paint, and the brushes standing up in their containers like bunches of hairy flowers. The shelves were stacked with a new delivery of coloured paper, but it was the pure white paper that Mimi loved the best, lying there waiting to be given new life.

Miss O'Dell stood on a bench pinning up giant papier-mâché faces, with bulbous eyes and hairy noses. 'Hello, Mimi,' she said, her lips studded with drawing pins. 'Come in, I'll just be a sec.' She spat the pins into her hand and climbed down, then cocked her head to one side as she looked into Mimi's face.

'Something's bothering you, I can tell.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Come on, what is it?'

Mimi wasn't used to telling *outside* people her feelings. 'We Chinese keep them to ourselves,' her mum always said, 'that way we never lose face.' But Mimi did feel a closeness with Miss O'Dell that she never felt with her parents.

'I hate being a banana.' The words echoed around the art room.

'A banana?'

'You know... yellow on the outside and white on the inside. I wish I didn't look Chinese because I don't feel Chinese. I feel just like everyone else. I hate it.'

Miss O'Dell smiled her soft smile. 'I know it's hard being different, but that's what's wonderful about you. You are a Chinese Australian just like I'm an Irish Australian. And I think we're lucky.'

'I don't think so. Someone like Gemma Johnson is lucky. She fits right in.'

'You might feel that way now, but as you grow older you will see how you can choose the best from both cultures. Sit down, Mimi.' Miss O'Dell pulled out a stool. 'You know, there's something else, apart from your Chineseness that makes you different from others. You are an artist. You see the world in a special way — and you paint with your heart. Few people can do that.' Miss O'Dell's eyes brightened. 'I've got an idea. If you don't mind giving up your lunchtime, how about coming in twice a week, say Mondays and Thursdays? Your father surely wouldn't object to that.'

'Oh, Miss O'Dell, that'd be so great.' Dad'll never find out and I'll be able to eat my lunch in peace, thought Mimi.

'I've been meaning to give you something for a long while now. I think the time is just right.'

Miss O'Dell went over to her bag and pulled out an oblong object wrapped in a purple silk scarf. She handed it to Mimi.

'Open it,' she whispered, as if she was about to share a secret.

Mimi let the silk slip away. It was a long wooden box with a beautiful carving of a miniature oriental garden on the lid, with willows and pavilions and bridges crossing lakes. As Mimi ran her fingers over the honey-gold surface, it was like touching the finest silk or the smooth skin of a newborn baby. Flowing Chinese characters were carved around the sides and inlaid with mother of pearl. Mimi read each character out loud:

Empress Cassia

Supreme Ruler of all China

80 Sticks of the Finest China Pastels

A Treasure for Some

A Curse for Others

That's funny, why would pastels be a curse? Mimi wondered, then put the thought out of her mind.

She laid the box on the bench and opened it carefully. Inside were rows and rows of coloured pastels that shimmered in the light. The colours were so delicate they looked as though they had been made from the gossamer wings of fairies.

Mimi rolled the pastels under her fingertips and her imagination began to fill with amazing pictures.

'You must promise me one thing, Mimi.' Miss O'Dell spoke in an unusually serious voice and a frown touched her brow.

'What is it, Miss O'Dell?'

'No one is to use the pastels but you. Look me in the eye, Mimi, and promise me now.'