

One Hundred Days by Alice Pung

Chapter 1

They all think that things changed for me when I got knocked up, but they don't know that it started much, much earlier. It used to be that I thought one thing at a time, but that summer, the hottest we'd had in a while, my thoughts became scattered. Instead of marching in military formation through my mind, they dithered and loitered and looked in different windows. I had to keep chasing after them, which made it difficult for me to remember practical things – like bringing in the laundry before it rained, peeling carrots and finishing my history homework.

The school chaplain told me it probably had something to do with sudden changes in my life beyond my control, like your Grand Par leaving, but I knew that wasn't it. It had started happening way before that.

Your Grand Mar always had great expectations of me. Because she didn't have many small things when she was growing up, she made me her Big Thing. It was both deliberate and accidental, the way most important decisions are. Like you. Until the summer I turned thirteen, I hadn't realised that she had been narrating the story of my life, including the dialogue. Until then, I believed her fairytales, because I was at the centre of them.

This is how your Grand Mar tells it: one day she was walking around End Point Shopping Centre with me in the pram when she was stopped by a woman. The woman had a booth in the middle of the mall, between a stall that sold imitation Lisa Frank stationery and a Wendy's.

"Your baby is so beautiful!" the woman cooed. She pointed to a small platform she had set up, draped in white satin, against a plastic backdrop of cumulus clouds. A tinsel halo jutted out from a piece of wire at the top like a basketball hoop.

"I don't have any money," your Grand Mar muttered, steering the pram away.

"No, no, I'd like to take her photo for free! For free!"

Your Grand Mar reluctantly handed me over. A camera stood on a tripod like a ginormous insect waiting to sting.

I think I must have been picked simply because of my outfit, a second-hand christening gown that your Grand Mar had shortened so that it ended at my feet instead of hanging half a metre below. With the leftover cotton and lace she had made me a little cape with flouncy cap sleeves. Your Grand Mar was good with her Singer, transforming op-shop dresses into clothes that always looked more like costumes than children's wear.

The woman clicked away and then thanked your Grand Mar, who did not give out her phone number because she knew that as soon as the photos were developed she'd be hounded to buy the box and album sets. To her surprise, when she returned to End Point two weeks later, my face was smiling down at her from the window of the newly opened photo studio Lil' Shooting Stars.

When your Grand Par returned home from J & R Mechanics that afternoon, your Grand Mar demanded that he load our camera with her hoarded roll of Kodak film – "not the cheap Fuji film you always get" – and come take a look.

"Aww," growled your Grand Par, "just go yourself."

But he drove us to End Point in his Datsun. Grand Mar proudly pointed at the blown-up photo in the window.

“There,” she said, tugging at his camera, “take it now.”

“Don’t be cheap,” he said to her. “Besides, the glare from the glass is going to wreck everything and all you’ll see is the reflection of Safeway.” There was no way your Grand Par was going to stand in front of a hundred passing shoppers and take a photo of a photo in a window.

He went into the studio and came out ten minutes later with a receipt for a fifteen-dollar deposit, ten per cent of the purchase price. Even though he didn’t give a stuff about Shooting Stars shopping-mall glory, he thought I was worth a hundred and fifty bucks, your Grand Par. He got the massive picture framed and hung it on our living-room wall, right above the television, even though your Grand Mar wanted to keep it in its box – she complained sunlight would fade it.

My duplicate self, my more famous twin, gazed out of the studio window for about six months. Our copy stayed on our living-room wall for years, until the day your Grand Mar yanked it down, telling your Grand Par that she’d made me, therefore it was hers.

“You already got the girl, can’t you leave me with something to remember her by?” he shouted, but even though he called her terrible names, he didn’t fight too hard. That was the trouble with your Grand Par, he was too placid. He thought it was easier to let your Grand Mar have her way.

Most of the time, your Grand Par had his head stuck in the bonnet or boot of a car, or sometimes slid under its metal belly. He used to let me go to work with him, pass him the tools. Ratchet. Ratchet extender. Nut splitter. Pliers. One time I got a smear of grease on the side of my nose, and he laughed and smeared the other side, then added another few lines down both my cheeks. “My tool kitty,” he called me, and ruffled my hair, but not in the same way as your Grand Mar’s lady customers, who stroked stroked stroked with their creeping fingers. Your Grand Par didn’t think I needed cottonwool padding because he didn’t think I could be marred, not even by engine grease.

Sometimes your Grand Par would take me on trips to pick up car parts from some of his friends who also owned home garages. They let me sit in the raised chassis of the vehicles they were fixing while they talked. Once his mate Steve even gave me a sip of his beer.

“Don’t do that,” your Grand Par protested. “You’ll get her hooked on the stuff!” But he just laughed when I spat it right back out. “And lock up your sons in ten years’ time. I don’t want them near my Tool Kitty.”

“You know, I used to have the biggest thing for Suzie Wong,” Steve sighed.

“Who?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of Suzie Wong. In that William Holden movie, about the gorgeous hooker.”

“What’s a hooker?” I asked.

“Never you mind,” your Grand Par said to me. Then to Steve, “Don’t talk about shit like that in front of my daughter.”

Your Grand Par always had dirty hands, but I didn’t mind them like your Grand Mar did. As a kid, I never let go of his hand when we crossed roads. But your Grand Mar, she would hold mine in hers like it was a bird she was trying to choke the life out of, and she would drag me, and the more she did this the more I scraped my heels against the footpath.

When I turned seven, she promised me a wonderful surprise, something so great we had to keep it a secret from your Grand Par, so we caught the bus into town instead of asking him for a lift. For once, I thought, she was going to take me somewhere really fun, like the roller rink or Wobbies World. We stopped at the chemist and I thought she was just running an errand before our adventure, until the lady behind the counter smiled at me and pointed to a revolving stand of tiny silver earrings.

I kicked and cried while they held my head still. “Don’t be so ungrateful,” your Grand Mar warned, but I had not signed up for guns and needles on my birthday.

It was days before your Grand Par noticed. I was outside standing on a stool, hanging out clothes on the line when the sun must have made the hoops wink. “Hey, Tool Kitty, what’s that on your ear?”

That evening when they thought I was asleep, I could hear him yelling in their bedroom. “Why the hell would you do that? She’s just a kid!”

She told him that in the Philippines, every girl had their ears pierced as a toddler: “If you let me do for her when she baby, then you will not be complain now.”

“You’re crazy. We don’t do backwards shit like this in Australia.”

“Yes, you Aussie think everything is child abuse.”

The next year, your Grand Par wanted me to have a proper birthday party. “After the crap you put her through last year,” he declared to your Grand Mar.

But there was no way she was going to let a herd of eight-year-olds rampage through her house. “They run crazy in my sunroom, use all my make-up brush like toys and wreck my business!”

“She can have it at Macca’s, like her mate Danielle did a few weeks ago.”

“Waste money.”

“For Chrissake woman, and piercing her ears wasn’t?”

By now the holes had closed over because I kept taking out the hoops.

In the end, your Grand Mar agreed to have a party at home, if I only had three friends over and we confined ourselves to the lounge room. The day before, she bought all the ingredients to make fried rice and spring rolls.

“What about a cake, Mah?” I asked, but the look she gave me made me shrink back through the doorway.

“Creating so much work for me!” she shouted, making it clear that no child ever had parties when she was growing up.

“What’s wrong, Tool Kitty?” your Grand Par asked when he saw me sniffing in his garage.

When I told him, he drove me to Sims Tuckerbag and we bought sausage rolls and party pies, little foil hats and lollies, an ice-cream cake and candles. Your Grand Mar didn’t say anything while she unpacked these treats.

At the party, Laura, Danielle and Tabitha stood awkwardly at the front door with their parents.

“Come in!” gushed your Grand Mar. “Have some food. I make so much!” She loaded up paper plates with spring rolls for the departing adults as I led my friends into the lounge room.

After the parents were gone, your Grand Mar came in and slammed two platefuls of party pies and sausage rolls down on the table. Then she walked out without saying a word.

Laura and Danielle looked at each other. “What’s up with your mum?”

“I don’t know.”

“So . . . what are we supposed to do now?” Tabitha asked. Parents were supposed to organise activities. Laura’s mum the Avon Lady had let us test different sample fruity lip-glosses and hand creams. Rebecca’s dad had made an Astro Boy rocket with her and filled it with Wizz Fizzes. Both my parents had nicked off, but not together. They hadn’t spoken in three days.

“Wait a sec, I’ll ask my dad.” I walked outside and into his garage. He was hunched over the hood of a car.

“Hey, Dad, aren’t you coming in?”

“Nah, love, I’m a bit busy today. You girls want to do your girly things without this grimy old man in your way.”

“But there’s nothing to do.”

“Didn’t your mum leave a video out for you?”

She had, but it was our old pirated video cassette of Disney's *Snow White*, which I'd carefully hidden behind the television cabinet before my friends arrived.

"Love, I'll tell you what," your Grand Par said, "come get me when it's time for cake, okay?"

When I returned, none of the food had been touched, not even the lollies.

"Let's go outside," I suggested, hoping that if we loitered around the backyard long enough, your Grand Par would notice.

"Dad, we're bored," I finally told him.

He straightened up, eyeing off each of my friends. "Orright then. Not sure your friends are dressed for this special mission, but." He looked at me. "Neither are you. Never mind." We were all in bubble skirts, leggings and sweaters. He rifled through a drawer in the garage and showed us a bag.

"Cool! Water balloons!" declared Tabitha.

Laura looked anxious. "But we don't have any spare clothes."

"Don't worry, you can borrow Karuna's. Karuna, go inside and get some towels and old tracksuits of yours. Your friends can change in the loo."

"What are you doing with those?" your Grand Mar demanded, spotting me with my armload of clothes. I ignored her and ran outside.

Your Grand Par showed us how to fill the balloons with the garden hose and how to tie them, but he didn't need to show us how to throw them. Then he went back to his work while we squealed and hooted and splashed around the yard.

"You'd better not get my laundry wet!" your Grand Mar yelled from the kitchen window.

"You'd better bring in the laundry now!"

So I had to pause the game while we took the laundry off the line. I brought the basket of clothes inside and slammed it on the kitchen floor before running back out again.

When all our balloons had run out, your Grand Par set an old ceramic pot down one end of our driveway. He'd drawn a happy face on it with a permanent marker. "Girls, this is a pot of gold. It's got lollies and all kinds of goodies like that in it."

At the other end of the driveway, we stood drenched and giddy. Next he gave us a container of spanners and wrenches. "Piñatas are for wimps. Are youse wimps?"

"Nooooo!" we shouted back.

"This game is called Knock Its Block Off. You go first, Karuna. Show them how it's done."

I chucked my spanner as hard as I could. It made a loud clatter against the garage door. We all took our turns.

"Oh, crap!" Tabitha had thrown her spanner too wide and it smashed into the small Buddhist shrine your Grand Mar had set up against the side of the garage. Because your Grand Par would not allow her to have her false idols in the house, your Grand Mar had to keep her gods outdoors: a fierce, red-faced, black-bearded, sword-wielding god and a white, bored-looking goddess standing atop a lotus flower. Tabitha had knocked over the incense urn in front of the porcelain duo, sending their offerings of oranges rolling down the driveway.

Immediately, I checked for a reaction from the kitchen window, but your Grand Mar was no longer there. Phew.

"Don't worry, love, I'll sweep that up later," your Grand Par said. "Cake time!" He went inside and brought out the ice-cream cake and a box of wafer cones. We heaped on massive mounds, the equivalent of shop-sized double and triple scoops. Your Grand Par just chortled. "Such greedy guts."

Your Grand Mar didn't make an appearance at all, until we heard the shouting inside the house. "Hah, thinks he's so clever, thinks he can put on a girl's birthday party. Mud and grass all over the bathroom floor, extra towels to wash, and they won't even remember to give the clothes back!" No one could understand her except me, but we could all hear her banging dishes around in the kitchen. "See who helps me clean up?"

“You and your mates better come with me to the garage, Tool Kitty,” your Grand Par warned. “She’s in one of her states again.” He winked at me. “I have a surprise for you in there.”

The girls crowded around the two big boxes he handed to me. “You got roller skates!” exclaimed Tabitha. She picked up my new helmet and tried it on. “This is so cool.”

Your Grand Mar never let me use the roller skates, of course. “Do you want to break your neck?” she asked. “Why do you think he loves you when he’s trying to get you killed?”

But that afternoon, your Grand Par’s party confirmed my long-held convictions: your Grand Par was the best; your Grand Mar was the worst. I just hoped my friends hadn’t heard her out in the driveway, sweeping up the pieces of her shrine, cursing and crying.

We had a brick house back then, the insides looking and smelling like the pastel colours of Neapolitan ice-cream, with a room that opened out to the backyard through sliding glass doors. Your Grand Mar called it a sunroom because there was a skylight. She had a sink installed, and bought a plastic-covered mauve reclining chair for a hundred and seventeen dollars. That’s where she conducted her business. With a grey pencil and three shades of skin-tint she could conjure up double-fold eyelids where there had been none. With blush and some brown powder she could define a jawline, and her speciality – the thing that had brides-to-be driving across town – was that she would spend an hour and a half gluing small clusters of silk eyelashes onto their eyelids. “This is the newest technique from Japan,” she would say. “None of the local businesses do it yet.”

I lay on that reclining chair while she twiddled with my lashes, perfecting her technique. It would have been a different experience if we were a different mother and daughter, because beauty treatments are meant to be bonding and relaxing, but for me, going to the dentist would have been better. Every part of my body would tense. Every hole in me would clench tight like a fist.

“Don’t scrunch your eyes like that,” scolded your Grand Mar. “I can’t attach the glue properly! And you’ll get wrinkles.”

“I hate lying here like a dead body.”

“Be quiet, I can’t concentrate when you open your mouth.”

“Why can’t you just get one of those stupid plastic hairdressing heads to practise on?”

“Do you know how much those heads cost?” she retorted. “And they’re hopeless. Working on them would be too easy. They don’t blink or fidget or screw their eyes. They don’t talk back.”

When she was done and I opened my heavy-feathered eyelids, I saw the world through a half-black shadow. I looked like one of those sad, long-lashed cow puppets on *Sesame Street*. This lasted for two weeks, until the fake lashes dropped off, along with my real ones. What a relief to see the world again without the top third blacked out.

Because your Grand Mar never learned to drive, she sent your Grand Par on errands, and sometimes I tagged along. He didn’t care what I wore. “She’s fine the way she is!” he’d grumble, when your Grand Mar tried to force me to change out of my tracksuit into a frock. “Leave her alone, for Chrissake. We’re just going to your friggin’ make-up supplier.”

“I don’t want Thanh see my daughter dress like a beggar.”

“She’s dressed like a normal kid! Bugger off, woman.”

And I’d clamber into the car before she could grab me. As he drove off, your Grand Par chuckled. “You cheeky monkey.”

The suppliers mostly conducted their businesses from cardboard boxes in their homes. When Thanh opened the door, I wasn’t sure she was even going to let us in, because usually your Grand Mar picked up the lipsticks and powders while your Grand Par waited in the car with the radio on.

“Mr Kelly, hello. Your wife tell me you come,” she chimed cheerfully. “Business must be good. She tell me she got two bride today.” Thanh’s long pink nails beckoned us into her sitting room, where your Grand Par perched on the edge of a paisley velour sofa.

Opening up a cardboard box, Thanh showed us the contents. “I have her order here. Total of seventeen thirty-two.”

Your Grand Par put down twenty dollars. “Don’t worry about the change, love. Keep it.”

Your Grand Mar would never have done that. She also would have carefully checked to make sure that the lipsticks were all sealed and that no blush powders had cracked.

“Wait!” said Thanh, disappearing down the hallway. She came back with something lolly-coloured and glittery in a see-through case for me. I wasn’t sure whether it was for my cheeks, nails or lips and didn’t want it, but took it out of politeness. All the times I’d visited with your Grand Mar, Thanh had just ignored me. “You better keep a careful eye on her when she get big,” she told your Grand Par.

“If she turns out as pretty as you.” He winked at her.

When I was very young, I loved the attention of adults. I didn’t have to do anything, I just had to let your Grand Mar spiff me up. A real doll, people used to say. In fact, the less I said, the more endearing they seemed to find me. Your Grand Mar’s customers would pinch the top of my nose. “This one won’t need contouring make-up for her wedding!” They would stare at my eyes and say, “Girls have surgery just to have this one’s eyelids.” “Those back home use special creams just to have the skin tone this one has.” I’d seen what my “back home” brown-skinned, jabby-elbowed cousins looked like. In all the photos in my mother’s albums, they wore the same yellow or green smocked dresses, too short to hide their scaly knees.

“This one is so lucky,” the customers would say about me, and after a while, in my mind This One became These Two. There were two of me: the outside one, who was pinched and patted and petted, and the inside me, who felt contempt for these women’s pawing hands, their looks like little hooks. They gave me a power that I didn’t want or need, but which I secretly liked.

And then all too soon, I found out how quickly it could dissolve.

I started to get freckles. They appeared on my arms, legs, nose, like I’d got in the way of some reckless god stomping in a muddy puddle. “You were such a white baby,” your Grand Mar sighed. “Who would have thought that you could end up blotchy?” She told me to stay out of the sun and bought me bottles of Oil of Ulan and Banana Boat sunscreen, wide-brimmed hats and even a little plastic Hello Kitty umbrella for sunny days, which I refused to carry.

It started with those freckles, and then it was my teeth – the two middle ones were too large and rabbit, the canines too sharp – then my height, and then my oily face. Soon there seemed to be nothing left of miniature me, the me on whom your Grand Mar had pinned all her hopes. She never embraced me when I came of age. Her way of showing me love was pestering your Grand Par to put his money where my mouth was and get me braces. Then it was no more playing ball, even by myself against the wall.

“If that ball whacks you in the mouth it could rip all your teeth out, since they’re connected like a zip,” warned your Grand Mar. “One thousand dollars, knocked off, just like that!”

She was pissed off because my beauty didn’t come naturally anymore, and I was reminded of this every day when I looked at our living-room wall and saw the most perfect self I would ever be, *a self I didn’t even remember being*, smiling down at me like a twinkle-star on top of a Christmas tree with no presents underneath.

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