
Opening Extract from...

Green Island

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Published by Random House Inc

This Is a Borzoi Book
Published by Alfred A. Knopf

www.aaknopf.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Ryan, Shawna Yang, [date]
Green Island / Shawna Yang Ryan. — First edition.
pages ; cm
ISBN 978-1-101-87425-7 (hardcover) —
ISBN 978-1-101-87426-4 (eBook)
1. Taiwan—History—20th century—Fiction. 2. Taiwan—Social conditions—20th century—Fiction. 3. Taiwan—Politics and government—20th century—Fiction. 4. Taiwan—Social life and customs—20th century—Fiction. I. Title.
PS3618.Y344G74 2016
813'.6—dc23 2015002202

Jacket image by Aaron Joel Santos/Offset and Henry Westheim Photography/Alamy
Jacket design by Stephanie Ross

Manufactured in the United States of America
First Edition

Was it possible this one would be a son too? She hoped so, but not because she favored men. Her husband modeled the seriousness, the stoicism, that she hoped her sons would inherit, but she had nothing to teach a daughter. She could teach her to dream—say, to be a painter, as she herself had been trained—and then teach her to let it go. Teach her to cloister herself in dark hallways, admiring how the light fell through the rice-paper doors while knowing that there was no point in putting it on canvas. Already, her oldest child, a daughter, at ten years old could make simple meals, washed laundry, and cared for her younger brothers. Li Min did not know how to give her more.

Last time, the midwife had said castor oil would bring out the baby faster. But the shops were closed.

She concentrated on pressing each foot to the floor, deliberately, feeling the wood, cool at first and then warming to her skin. She concentrated her whole mind in her foot, and tried to forget the pain.

##

The agents stumbled their way through the street and hid in a police box, where they waited while the military police were called.

A knot of people eased open. Among them, a man lay bleeding. Bystanders turned him over, saw the bullet hole clogged with blood. Shouting helplessly, pushing someone's shirt against the wound and feeling it grow heavy with his blood, they watched his eyes glaze over, his mouth gape. Somebody beckoned to a rickshaw. When the driver saw the dead man, he shook his head and waved his hands in protest. "Oh no. No dead passengers." He cycled away.

Two samaritans made a stretcher out of shirts and carried the body away.

The military police arrived in a military truck and the crowd rushed them to demand a

summary execution, on the spot, for the murderers, who cowered inside the police box. The MPs promised justice at headquarters.

Justice. That abstract word. Reluctantly, the bystanders allowed the Monopoly Bureau agents to be escorted away. But the crowd's fettered rage demanded release. They pulled open the doors of the agents' abandoned truck, ransacking the backseat, building a bonfire of everything they found inside. The crackle of the fire was hungry.

Still electrified, the crowd turned its attention to the truck itself. They rocked it until it fell over and the windows on one side shattered.

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Her husband slept but Li Min could not. Next to him, she sat up, in the dark, feeling the weight of the baby pressing against her bones. If she had risen, gone downstairs, and soothed herself beside the radio, she might have heard the news.

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The fire burned itself out, leaving a heap of ash on the pavement.

2.

By morning, Li Min felt her pelvic bones separating, opening up to greet the new baby. The creature shifted inside her, settled lower. It *is* a creature, isn't it? she thought. Some little monster feasting on her. Two months ago, she'd lost a tooth. In the palm of her hand, the tooth was translucent, almost gray. "Don't worry," she could not help but notice the affectionate chiding in husband's voice as he assured her, "the baby is not sucking the marrow from your bones."

Downstairs, the boys shrieked, and her daughter, good girl, hushed them. Far off, someone thumped at the clinic door. Chaos, muffled by the floor and walls, rumbled. Maybe the midwife had arrived. The woman was efficient, no nonsense. A different kind of mind lay inside a person who was accustomed to seeing blood without injury and to thrusting her hands into that most private and miraculous moment.

My mother lumbered over to the vanity, pulled a sweater from the pile of clothes on the stool, and struggled into it. When the knitting cut into her, she realized how much her arms had swelled.

At every third stair, she winced with pain. At some point, the body became a boulder barreling toward the precipice: the cramps grew closer in time, harder, her heart quickened, and she would not be able to resist the impulse to force the baby out. An irreversible course. The clinic had quieted. She passed by the dining room, where the boys splayed on their stomachs on the tatami, brows furrowed over a board game.

“Ah Zhay?” she asked.

“Kitchen,” the oldest boy said. His eyes stayed on the game.

She found her daughter at the stove trying to stoke a fire. Hiccups broke her attempts. She was crying. She wiped her nose on her sleeve and tried again to build the fire.

Mama stroked her daughter’s hair. “What’s wrong? Where’s Baba?”

Ah Zhay cast her wet eyes toward the door that connected the clinic to the house.

“Did he scold you?”

Ah Zhay shook her head, but refused to say more. Li Min made it only two steps when her legs were suddenly drenched.

She hoped the other voice behind the door was the midwife.

She found her husband kneeling beside a man whose blood dripped through the bamboo mat of the clinic bed and spread over the floor, soaking her husband's knees. At the queer, metallic smell—worse that the bloodless pig heads in the market, with flies lighting on their eyelashes; worse than the far-off recollection of her thick menses blood—she fought the heaving in her throat. Her husband jerked his head, and his eyes, wild, met hers.

"What is—?" She could barely get the words out.

He snapped, "Not now."

She noticed a man standing in the dark corner, wedged between the microscope table and the bookshelf. He looked miserable, shocked and impotent. He glanced at her, then sank down onto his haunches and held his head.

Her husband's world encompassed the radius of an arm's length. He and his patient. Her husband's angry intensity alarmed her almost more than the blood. She stumbled back to the kitchen and found Ah Zhay struggling with the hot kettle.

"Is he dead?" Ah Zhay sobbed.

"Go look after your brothers." She grabbed the kettle, set it back on the cooling burner, and limped back to the clinic. Her husband had propped the injured man on his side. Keep the wound above the heart, she recalled her husband once saying. With the man now facing the wall, she could see what had been just a black knot in his chest was an angry, ragged tear in his back. Her husband had snipped open the jacket around the wound, and the petals of ripped and stained cloth hung limply.

The wad of rags that had already been stuffed against the bleeding was soaked, and her husband took a thick fold of fresh gauze and pressed it against the old bandage. The blood seeped through quickly, flowering against the white. The man's eyes were closed, his lips blue.

She was sure he was already dead. She noted the spent syringe, one last drop of liquid swelled at the tip, discarded on the tray beside the bed.

"He was shot in front of the Governor-General's," the other man offered. Even without the worried twist in his eyebrows, he had a maudlin face, heavy-jowled and droopy-eyed. She realized that the splotches on his hands, which she first took to be freckles, were dried blood.

"Why?" She still had not left the comforting rigidity of the doorway where post pressed to spine. She could flee easily into the kitchen and shut the door, and exist again in a world where life, throbbing and churning inside her, was primary.

Her husband hushed them. His fingers curled delicately over the man's wrist. His nostrils flared once, quickly, the only indication of what he'd learned. What good did it do to be so impassive, she wondered, then immediately reminded herself that a cool head—aloof even—was a doctor's talent.

"The bullet has broken into pieces," he said.

The other man groaned, like a cat, then fell silent.

She couldn't help feeling that giving birth seemed almost an indiscretion at this moment. Quietly, without alarm, she told him that she was going to have Ah Zhay fetch the midwife.

Her pregnancy registered on the face of the man in the corner and fear lit up his eyes. "Your daughter? No I'll go. They are shooting in the streets."

Her bones were widening, the baby insisting. She couldn't fit his words together.

"Who is shooting in the streets?"

He told her of the widow in the park, the morning's protests—the banners hung with the call for the "mainland pigs" to return to China—then the shootings at the Railway Station and in front of the Governor-General's, where he'd been with his friend, this man who lay propped like

a straw dummy in the mise-en-scene.

"It was inevitable," her husband said softly. Yes, she silently agreed. She thought of the slimmer and slimmer offerings in the market since the Japanese had left two years before, and how self-conscious she felt strolling past the wary gaze of the Mainland Chinese soldiers. She had felt the tension of the city in her own body: her purse pulled close, her shoulders raised, her eyes averted.

Her husband wedged rolled towels beneath the man's shoulder to brace him. She could barely see the rise and fall of the man's chest.

"I'll go for the midwife," the injured man's friend said again, as if the errand was the only payment he could offer. Li Min saw how anxious he was to leave, and she wondered if he would return. Her husband gave him the address and the man slipped out.

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Grimacing and impatient, she waited upstairs on her own bed. The man still had not returned and it was already afternoon. Finally, her husband appeared, his hands scrubbed and pink, but she swore she saw the injured man's blood dried, rusty, under his fingernails.

"Wash your hands," she said. She hoped her panic came off as annoyance. He nodded, dismissively, and pulled a chair to the foot of the bed.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"I think," he said, "that we are on our own, so let's move ahead." He was sure she saw the effort in his words; his confidence was half-hearted. He did not tell her that he had not planned for this, that he had been downstairs, in the clinic, thumbing through his old medical school text, taking a quick review course in obstetrics. He urged her knees up and lifted her skirt.

"Perhaps you should fetch your sister?"

He laughed. “We’re better off on our own.”

“You’ll need my help,” she said.

He pushed the hem to her hips and separated her legs.

“How big?” she asked.

He made a circle with his finger and thumb. “Like a—a date.”

“A date?” She felt hysterical. “When it’s a durian, we’ll worry.” He didn’t smile at her joke. She carefully exhaled as another cramp clutched her and squeezed away her humor. Rage flooded in with the pain. The urge to urinate was strong, but she didn’t trust it. When the tightening had relaxed again, she giggled.

“What?” His distracted question drifted toward her.

She didn’t know why she was laughing. Just as quickly, the image of the