

WHAT I WISH I HAD KNOWN

& OTHER LESSONS YOU
LEARNED IN YOUR 20s

I've lived my whole life following people and taking their choices as mine. I will dream a new dream, a dream that's totally my own, and I will work hard to get it.

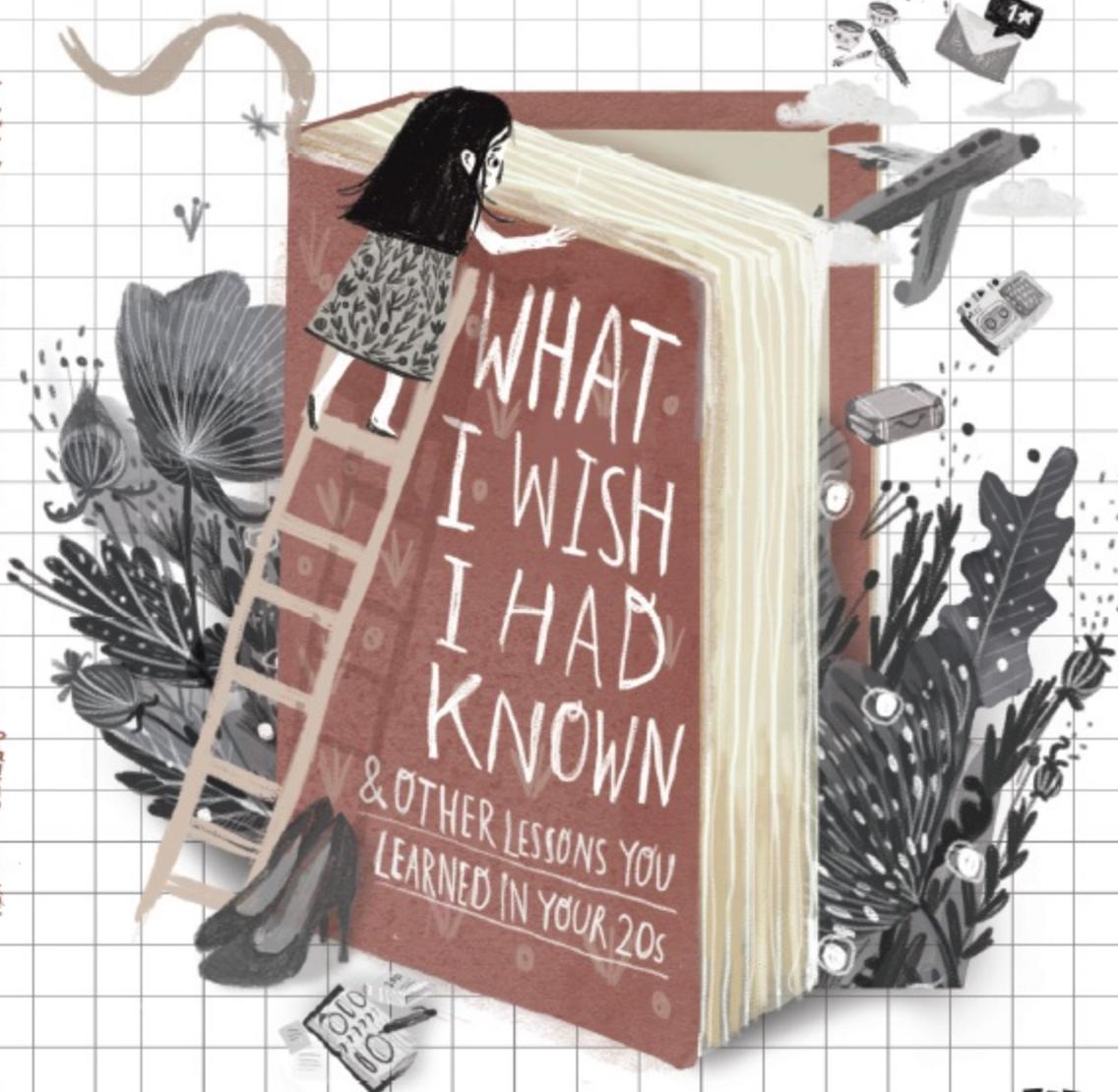
Ever since her acceptance letter to study abroad arrived at her inbox, nothing in Marcella Purnama's life has gone according to plan. Instead of choosing Science, like her two older sisters did before her, she steered path to study Arts—a degree so alien to both her families and friends. But as she traveled thousands miles away, struggled with English, had her first byline and went back home to apply for her first job, Marcella realized that plans are meant to be changed. Full of relatable tales of horrific group work, falling in love, first job interview and quarter-life crisis, this illuminating account follows how a young adult grapples with life's small and big questions, and the lessons learned along the way.

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SELF IMPROVEMENT



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PROLOGUE

My father always says that in order to achieve success, you need to do two things: to work hard and to dream. To achieve something, anything, you should be willing to work hard for it. That's why he has stayed at one company all through his adult life, for twenty-eight years to be exact, and he's still there. That's why he climbs up the corporate ladder, from being a low-ranked employee to a director. That's why I am here.

And dare to dream. Papi would say these philosophical things randomly, like in a car ride to the shopping mall on a fine Saturday afternoon. "La, remember, you have to have a dream. You have to dream big. I can be where I am now because I have a dream that one day I will be successful. I will send my children to university. Have a dream, and work hard for it."

Papi would then ask about what we should have for lunch, as if he hasn't talked about such a serious topic before. I would be sitting there in the back seat of our family's prized car, thinking about the dreams I had as a child.

I had no childhood dream.

My dream consists of other people's. When my sister Jessica was in primary school, she wanted to become a teacher. A couple of years later, she chose to become a doctor. She was twelve when our grandfather from Mami's side died of lung cancer, old enough to understand the complexity of sickness and health. So she wrote in her university application, "I want to be able to help people who are like my grandfather." She was accepted rather easily with her stunning grades and brilliant mind, it was not even a question. She's graduated high school with a near perfect score. So I grew up wanting to be a teacher too. And a doctor. And I know that I suck at both.

My oldest sister Christina has forged the same brilliant path. She has gotten a scholarship in Singapore to do PhD in Bioscience. My parents, who only have high school diplomas, succeed in raising us with the ideals of getting higher and higher education. We would get the highest education they can afford we would not be reliant on others, not even on our future husbands, you know, just in case the rainy season comes. They want to equip us with everything they never have a chance to have: knowledge. Money can run out, but knowledge will enable us to make money again.

So one morning in January I sit down at our dining table. It's a round, glass table, capable of hosting ten people. I

lean back, drinking my hot green tea as I do every day. I look through the sliding glass door beside the table to our side garden. *What should I choose?* I wonder. I am my sisters' sibling after all, and I have graduated with a good score. While it is not as perfect as my sister Jess's, it's close enough. I have only applied to one university the University of Melbourne where Jess is studying medicine, and I have been accepted as easily as I send in my application.

Marcella Purnama, a going-to-be Bachelor of Biomedicine student. I haven't decided which major to take, but the news that I'm accepted is enough to make my mother thrilled. I am also thrilled. We go out to have lunch at a local restaurant and over a bowl of *bakmi kangkung*, I say, "I hope you'll be proud that your youngest will graduate with a biomedicine title. It's prestigious. It's hard to get in."

Mami gives a small laugh and says, "Yes, yes, I'm proud." Then she puts more chilli powder into her noodles, a twinkle of her smile never leaving her eyes.

I feel proud for not letting my parents down, but I feel like a fraud because I genuinely hate science. I do well in Chemistry, but I only do so because I've copied a brilliant friend's exercise. He has been diligently solving every problem in class while I play *Tap Tap Dance* on another friend's tablet. Somehow, I am able to memorize the lessons blindly in time for exams and get the better mark. I do well in Maths because I like problem solving I don't like to be defeated by logic and a series of numbers. In Physics, my teacher always says, "The key words. Remember the key words!" So I do just that.

I have a knack at Biology report, because my essay writing is better than average. But excelling at subjects, I realize, is not the same as having a passion for them.

So I sit there at the table, thinking about my options. My sister Christina sits on my left, holding a scrap paper and a pen. She writes, “Biomedicine”, “Commerce” and “Communications” on the left side of the paper, and “pros” and “cons” on the right side. Papi joins in and sits on my right, both talking about the decision I should take next.

“I think if you study Biomed it will be more prestigious,” my sister says. “Then you can become a researcher, or even a doctor if you want to.”

I nod, rather unwillingly, but I understand what she tries to imply.

“Commerce,” she underlines the word, “is important because everything needs business skills now. If you end up wanting to open a business or work in big companies and make big money, it’s good to study commerce.”

Can’t say that I disagree, but I’m looking forward to hearing where she’s heading with our last option.

“I don’t know much about Communications,” she admits. “And I don’t know what you’ll study, but it’s equally good to get practical skills that can be transferred to the workplace. It just has less prestige. And,” Christina takes a second pause before saying, “less money.”

She hands me the paper and the pen, gesturing me to write more pros and cons. Of course studying Communications has less prestige – the entry level to get to an Arts degree is lower than Biomedicine.

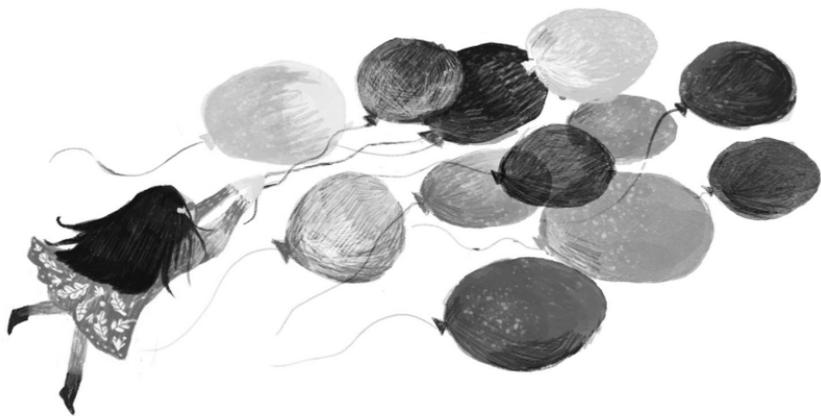
I frown. Papi looks at the paper. He sips his own cup of green tea, and asks, “You don’t like science, no?”

I shake my head.

“Then it’s easy.” Papi smiles. “Whatever you choose, we will support you.”

They leave the table. I’m staring at the paper, imagining the life I would live if I study science. Perhaps like what my Physics teacher envisions, I would become a biomedical engineer, doing magic on CT Scans, MRI, or even creating a new kind of prosthetic leg. Perhaps like what my Biology teacher predicts, I would follow my sister’s footsteps to become a doctor.

But I’ve lived my whole life following people and taking their choices as mine. I smile. I know what I will choose now. I will dream a new dream, a dream that’s totally my own, and I will work hard to get it.



PART 1

“A lot of people want a shortcut.
I find the best shortcut is the long way,
which is basically two words: work hard.”
Professor Randy Pausch, *The Last Lecture*



THE FALSE START

This story didn't start on orientation week. It didn't even start on the first day of school, with a confused girl holding a map of the university in one hand and GoogleMap opened on her smartphone in another. This story started on a plane, but not on one that was going to Melbourne.

It all started on a plane to Singapore.

My student visa had not yet been processed. I was about to leave in one week, and I was getting anxious. Partly, it was my fault: I was not yet eighteen, and in order to get my student visa, my sister Jess needed to become my guardian in Australia. She sent through her Victorian Police Check, only to find out two weeks later that she needed to send an Australian Police Check instead. Partly, it was her fault: she thought that Australian and Victorian police checks were the

same thing. So my visa had not arrived, and uni was going to start next week.

While my visa had some trouble processing, our family was shocked with this news: Ama, my grandmother from my father's side, had cancer, which had spread to her colon. "It was a stage three cancer," Papi said over the phone. That same day, Ama flew to Singapore accompanied by her husband my grandfather, Engkong and Papi. Mami and I followed two days later. I sat there on the plane thinking of a thousand things that could go wrong and how to make things right again.

It was a long flight. I looked out of the window, seeing the blue sky and the endless possibility of life overseas, feeling disappointed that I had to go to Singapore on such important time. I had been waiting to go to university for ages. There were those people who adored high school and swore that anything would not be as awesome as being seventeen and having a lot of friends and being popular and gossiping about the girl next door. While they were living their best years in high school, I was dreaming of freedom. Perhaps on my first day in Melbourne I would accidentally meet my ex-crush, and we would rekindle our relationship. I heard that he had gone to study in Melbourne a year before. A wishful thinking, I knew, but a girl could dream.

But instead of being on the plane and getting excited to go to Melbourne, I was on a plane to Singapore. I thought about having to extend my stay and thus postponing my

studies until June. *What would I do for six months? Enrolling in a baking class, perhaps.*

Mami and I touched down in Singapore, took a taxi to the hotel to drop our baggage and went straightaway to the hospital. The hospital was covered in white, and the smell of antiseptics filled the air. I saw old people in wheelchairs with IV stuck through their veins, behind them stood their adult children who took time off work. There were sick kids too. I couldn't imagine what brought seven-year-olds to the cancer section of the hospital at two in the afternoon. I didn't want to imagine.

We went to Ama's room. Arriving there, we were told that she wanted the operation to be done the next day no question asked, no second opinion needed. The doctor nodded and assured with complete confidence that it would be successful, and said a series of procedures to do and not to do before.

My grandma, who was about one-hundred-and-sixty-centimeter tall and weighed about sixty kilos, wore her red high-heels with her head held high. She didn't look scared. Her face looked daring. Papi used to tell me that after the bankruptcy claimed Engkong and Ama's car showroom business, Ama was the one who was strong enough to get back on her feet to get back in the game and do other business with her relatives. They never reclaimed their former state of glory, but they lived comfortably, giving their three granddaughters big gifts every birthday and Christmas holiday. Cancer, it



seemed, was another problem she had to face, and she was determined to win.

The next morning, we waited at the open room that had two sofas and one coffee table. Engkong went to the toilet every twenty minutes and Papi was praying. Mami also prayed. I prayed silently. I was still thinking of my university, but now it seemed ridiculous to be thinking about studies when Ama was

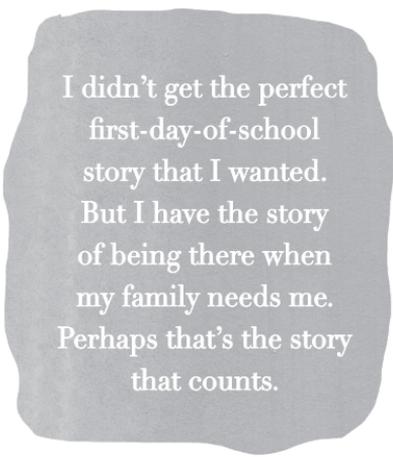
lying on the operation table. My oldest sister Christina, who studied and lived in Singapore, brought us takeaway meal. I played with my phone. Listened to some music. Waited.

When the door was finally opened, the doctor smiled and gestured us to go to one of the smaller spaces beside the operation room. There was a nurse who brought a flat, rectangular silver tray and a blob of flesh the size of a small rabbit. “The operation was successful,” he said. He was wearing blue-green gloves, and he picked up the smelly flesh like a butcher picking up dead chicken at the market. The doctor pointed to the small circles that looked like oversized ulcers, which were inflamed and white in color, contrasting heavily with the deep red flesh.

“These were the cancer cells,” he said. “She would need to go through chemotherapy, of course, but we managed to get most of them out.”

That twenty-centimeter-long flesh was Ama’s colon. Mami put her right hand on her nose and mouth, and began to step backwards. I looked at the flesh intently but wondering inside: *Does every doctor show the patient’s families the torn flesh from inside the body?*

The doctor excused himself and skipped ahead with such a



I didn’t get the perfect first-day-of-school story that I wanted. But I have the story of being there when my family needs me. Perhaps that’s the story that counts.

good mood, and we all breathed in relief. Especially Papi.

That night, I finally received an email telling my visa was accepted and would be ready to be picked up the next day. I told Mami the news, but decided to stay for a few more days, even if it meant that, in addition to missing the entire orientation week, I would miss the first week of uni as well.

I didn't get the perfect first-day-of-school story that I wanted. I didn't meet anyone who would become my best friend in the entire world, nor did I meet my ex-crush randomly on the street and batted our eyelids with each other. But I have the story of being there when my family needs me.

Perhaps that's the story that counts.