

H.M.

by Amy Tan

Standing at his door with her heavy school bag on her back and her maths books clutched to her chest, Adia wondered how on earth this was going to work out. The man had been recommended to her mother by a family friend, who had insisted that he was an 'exceptional' tutor, despite the brain surgery he had undergone two years ago, leaving him with Anterograde amnesia. Adia felt somewhat confused and nervous. How could this man, being unable to remember anything, possibly assist her with her Specialist Maths? Surely he couldn't remember all of the formulas he had learnt in High School? Adia straightened herself and pondered how one acts around a person with amnesia. *Will he even remember he's supposed to tutor me today?* Adia sighed, and finally got around to pressing the doorbell.

'Mao' read the handwritten piece of paper slipped into a plastic pocket above the button. *Henry Mao*, she thought. She suddenly found herself more interested than nervous about meeting him. The wooden door clicked and opened, and Adia was surprised to see a young man, perhaps twenty-five, or even younger, fumbling with a set of keys and opening the fly-screen door.

"Hello," he smiled, welcoming her in.

"Hi."

He wore glasses with thick, black rims, and the first thing Adia noticed upon having a clear view of him was his perfect smile. He had the most perfect set of teeth she had ever seen. Adia smiled mildly so as not to show her braces, and as she shook his hand she began to wish she had removed her month-old red nail polish. Henry introduced himself, and Adia wondered why she was surprised when he asked her name.

"Adia," she answered.

"Adia? Nice name," was all he said. She thanked him softly, following his hand with her eyes as it reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a tiny notebook with a fittingly tiny pencil pushed through the rings.

"And how do you spell that?" He slipped the pencil out of the rings and opened the notebook to a new page. She spelled her name out for him slowly, conscious of her presumed need to speak very clearly for him. She stared into his stylish mess of black hair, thinking how he should be one of the boys in her maths class, not her maths tutor. She looked curiously at his head for lumps or scars, as though, perhaps, she might be able to see the tiny holes in his brain where portions of it had been removed in surgery, so she imagined.

In the joint lounge room, dining room, and kitchen (separated from the dining-half of the room by only a kitchen bench), Henry gestured for her to sit down. He pulled out a chair for her, a smile coming across his lips as he noticed her unintentionally blink at the unfashionable silver, purple-tasseled cushions that were tied to all four chairs at the round, glass dining table.

"Don't laugh," he said, as she placed her books on the table and sat down. "My sister made them for me when she was twelve. I promised I'd use them in my house when I got one."

He smiled.

"So there you go," he shrugged, when Adia said nothing in reply. He had the friendliest smile.

"How old were you then?" Adia asked, organising herself while Henry walked over to the kitchen. She saw him suddenly stand still for a moment and crease his brow. It made her feel extremely awkward.

"Twelve," he finally replied, still thinking hard about something which Adia didn't bother herself to guess. She noticed steam rising out of a boiling electric kettle at the corner of the bench. Henry gave up on whatever it was he was thinking of, and looked at her again.

"I was twelve," he repeated, "but I'm still the older brother. Two minutes older and wiser." He stopped again and creased his brow, and once again, gave up.

"Would you like a drink?"

"Um...just water, thanks." He smiled obligingly. Adia opened her textbook to the right page and noticed, through the table, a tiny notepad which had fallen beneath one of the silver-cushioned chairs. Like the notepad had earlier, this one also had a tiny pencil pushed through the rings. She got off her seat to pick it up just as Henry was returning with her glass of water. He placed the glass beside her books and motioned again for her to sit down. As she pulled out the chair he smiled again, looking at the cushions.

"Don't laugh," he grinned, taking a seat himself. "My sister made them for me when she was twelve, and I promised to take them with me when I moved out. It took her an entire week to make all four." Adia listened to him attentively, fascinated by the obliviousness with which he spoke.

"I found this on the floor," she said, softly. She handed him the notebook on its open page. He looked at it, reading aloud the last thing he had written.

"Make coffee," he sighed, pushing the notepad away. Adia pretended to search for a particular page in her workbook while he reached down and patted his jeans pocket once, freezing for a moment, and creasing his brow just as he had done in the kitchen.

Adia looked up. He was leaning forward to talk to her. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Adia."

"Adia? Nice name," was all he said in reply. She watched him scribble 'Adia' into the notebook underneath 'Make coffee', but politely felt it best to say nothing.

"I'm Henry," he said, looking up. She nodded, and smiled.

"Let's get started, shall we?"

Henry skimmed the chapter she was currently studying, nodding and turning pages as his memory of the formulas was refreshed. Adia looked back towards the kitchen bench. The kettle had stopped steaming. A jam jar of instant coffee packets peeped out from behind a container of sugar. A notebook with her name spelt correctly on the open page sat quietly on a tissue box on the other side of the kitchen bench.