

Clay Birds

Jeremy Newman

from a completed novel

Meet Your Other Half

Chapter One: A Steamboat Horizon

A year before Gemima was born, I saw her by a waterfall. I didn't know her name then.

She sidled along a rock ledge and slid behind the cascade, as if it were a shower curtain. Her sunlit outline kind of *cavorted*, barefoot on stone, and looking a bit like me, I thought. White, fair haired, a little younger, about eleven. More to the point - a painful point - I was like her.

I didn't follow. Instead I looked round to see if my aunt had noticed.

A week earlier, my parents met up at a hotel in Bangkok, for what me and my dark-haired sister called the Annual Conference. Sis and I spent some years apart because she lived with Dad and his lady friend in Singapore. This time round she didn't come with him to the meetup.

I came from England with Mum, and the promise of an Asian hotel breakfast.

"Look Ma, you can have dumplings, egg, tomato and rice pudding, all together. And a prawn."

The family meeting was the *culinary* highlight of my year. Ma taught me the word. Ma stood for Mum - because of her name, Margot.

And Pam stood for Aunt Pamela, who showed up as an honorary big sister for the week. She wanted to see a Thai island, and timed her trip to coincide with ours. As far as I could tell, she traveled light; my baggage included a hopeless crush on her. What with my willowy mother, and a sister who would keep the nickname 'String' well into her teens, my aunt was the most impressive female in the family circle. Not a blood relative, she brought a big, brown-haired womanliness to our party, and a twinkle in her eye. I didn't know if it was the *proverbial* twinkle, but I hoped it was for me.

"Pam's invited me to the island. What do you think, Dad?"

He had the vote. I already knew Ma approved of having me out the way for a week; she probably wanted to punch the air. When Dad agreed, she punched down, below the breakfast table.

On the way to the bus station that afternoon, I couldn't walk straight. I bounced around Auntie Pam like an eager puppy. She took it well.

"Yes, yes. It's all good Hugh. You've helped them with their business, and we'll have a super time."

"I've helped them by buzzing off."

"Yes."

She had a habit of speaking her mind, and so did I.

"Let's get a drink in a bag."

Year after year, my parents' *business* never ended in a deal. I put them out of mind as Pam and I took a garlicky bus trip out of Bangkok. We arrived late at the ferry town and checked into a basic kind of Chinese hotel for the night.

After showering, we both went outside in our towels onto the balcony, high above the traffic, the night hot as a furnace. Pam let me sit on her lap, as I had half a life before, when I was six. Doing this now, I felt a strange mix of safety, and danger. I liked it. Maybe she liked it too, and teased.

"You're manspreading, Hugh."

"At least I'm man-something."

I had convinced myself I'd stopped growing.

"Ha ha. Don't worry about it. You're a boy, nothing wrong with that." Peering over my shoulder at the street scene, Pam asked me what I thought about girls, as many grown-ups did at the time.

I took a deep breath, and gave her the *lowdown*.

REVIEWS

TSW Sharman

Thanks Jeremy for submitting the first 600 of your novel. Two principal reactions: first, I'd keep reading, in fact was surprised how quickly the first 600 went by. Second, it's a bit of a tale of two cities for me (not literally the Dicken's book) but in the balance of my notes

I'll start with what really worked for me. There's some wonderful chemistry going on here. I love the Tagline "Meet

your other half” and the chapter title “A Steamboat Horizon” which are both brimming with promise.

The opening sentence is arresting, there’s a wonderful line “More to the point - a painful point - I was like her”; and then this section is polished off with an unexpected reaction: “instead I looked round to see if my Aunt had noticed.”

There are some other attractive flourishes I highlighted: ‘my baggage included a hopeless crush on her’, ‘When Dad agreed, she punched down, below the breakfast table’ and ‘a garlicky bus trip out of Bangkok.’

The other city, what I found didn’t so much work for me (and this is just my opinion as one reader) were: too little and too much. What do I mean?

Too little, that opening section. It’s unusual for me to ask for more, I personally prefer concision. But I would have been happy to let that play out longer. A sense of surprised, a double check, rubbing the eyes. All the things running through his head – this is an existential “Wha...?” for Hugh. Instead, it feels as quickly dispensed as if he’d seen an oversized mouse scurrying around. You start in media res, which is great, but you could go back to before the sighting, hit us again with the sighting, then let the mental confusion play out. I have no doubt you’re a strong enough technical writer to sustain that.

Too much? Too many characters introduced too quickly: the unborn sister, Sis/String, Mum/Ma/Margot, Dad, Aunt/Auntie/Pam – and the action/dialogue moves away from Hugh to other people, even if only reported (the punching down interaction). And far too many names for me as a reader to remember, like walking uncomfortably into a big family dinner where you know only one person, and don’t know that one person well either. As you’re writing in the first person (as I usually do) I want to, need to, get invested quickly in that person I’m going to be mentally intimate with – going to other characters feels like a digression.

That then cascades into too much information that feels like I’m being slowed down from getting to know Hugh: the one that stood out for me is: "Look Ma, you can have dumplings, egg, tomato and rice pudding, all together. And a prawn." I know you’re piping character (correctly showing rather than telling) but it didn’t do anything for me in terms of character definition. You do this much better in

his conversation on the balcony with Pam, though I found it a bit peculiar.

It's OK to be peculiar, but he's 12 as I read it ('half a life before, when I was six') and I'm unsure about conversations on booze and girls with an adult woman. Knowing Richard, I'll bet he zooms in on that too. I can't figure if it feels unreal to me, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt as we're only looking at the first 600 words

As I think about closing notes, there's a little inconsistency. You set yourself up for this by writing really well, so 'the night hot as a furnace' stands out as obvious, an easy remedy for you. I wasn't wild about the description of Pam either ('big, brown-haired womanliness...a twinkle in her eye'). Presuming this is obviously written as a recollection by someone much older than a 12-year old, this doesn't rise to the level of your other writing. Perhaps this goes to the dilemma of 'who old is the narrator?' Not 12... but 25? 50? 75? And how is that expressed in terms of style, cynicism, happy recall etc.

So, two cities, but as I said I'd keep reading. But I'd probably skip over some parts to keep my focus on Hugh (and maybe lose my way).

Richard

I had a problem following this piece at first, and I had to read it two or three times before it started making sense. That's not a great start because you can't rely on an uninvested reader making that effort with the first few pages of a book.

There's nothing unduly complicated about it, so I tried to understand why I had an issue. I think the first thing is the sequential relative times, "A year before" and "A week earlier". When was Gemima born? Is she born this week? Or is there no connection between when the character is reflecting on Gemima and when he is reflecting on the Bangkok trip? Why bother saying "A week earlier" at all?

When we see "Ma" the first time, we immediately presume it is an abbreviation of "mama" since he's just mentioned Mum. It's a little confusing to then find out he calls her by an abbreviation of her name, Margot. How old is Hugh? It strikes me as odd that a child would call his parent by her name, and not one of Mum, Ma, Mama, Mother etc. depending on culture and register. Also,

shouldn't it be consistent, and "I came from England with Ma ..."?

Finally, the relationship between Pam and Hugh is a bit curious, to say the least. He hopes that the twinkle in her eye is the "proverbial" one, for him. He sits on her lap, both of them only dressed in towels, and she tells him he is manspreading. But he says that he used to sit on her lap when he was six, "half a life before". Does this mean he is now twelve? That's problematic. Under-age sexual references are under-age sexual references, whatever the sex of the child. Pam is an adult, and shouldn't be making such comments to Hugh, or encouraging inappropriate physical contact. Perhaps I've got totally the wrong end of the stick, and Hugh is also an adult, in which case, okay, but then his sitting on her lap with both of them only dressed in towels is pretty much foreplay, and what eighteen-year-old lad would sit on an older woman's lap anyway? And a twelve-year-old certainly wouldn't. I don't get it, I'm afraid.

A cumulation of these issues, the Ma who isn't a "ma", the Pam who isn't an aunt, the disjointed timeline, and the unsettling tone of the Pam/Hugh relationship all leave me confused and a bit perturbed. It might all become clear in the next few pages, but you've got to get your reader to those next few pages.

Jeanette

I'll be honest, this took me a few times to read.

Partially because life is distracting and I thought maybe that's why it felt disjointed. Then I sat down again and read it through without stopping. It still felt disjointed. I'm still not quite sure what type of story I should be expecting. Is this about the family? About a trip with his "aunt"? Or a girl he meets somewhere along the way?

I would probably give the story about two more pages before I decided if I wanted to keep reading or put it down and never look back.

A couple little things that threw off my attention were just unnecessary descriptions of what "ma" and "Pam" stood for, most readers are capable of deducing this on their own.

Mostly, I would suggest bringing more of the first paragraph to life. That is where I'm going to decide if I'm interested or not in reading the backstory that begins so quickly thereafter.