



**THIS
FEAST
OF A
LIFE**

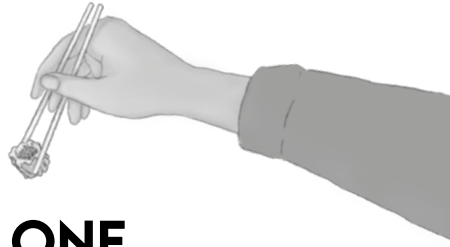
CYNTHIA SO

LITTLE TIGER
LONDON

PART ONE: SCOUR

SCOUR, VERB:

*To scrub something until it's sparkling clean
(e.g. the blackened bottom of a burnt pot),
almost as though new again.*



CHAPTER ONE

January 2025, Auden

On a drizzly, wintry Saturday, Auden calls themselves by that name for the first time.

Instead of studying, they've been staring at their list of names yet again. Names collected over the past few months and constantly revisited. Some scratched out. Some underlined. Some with question marks.

'Auden' is just one of the many names on the list, but they write it again at the bottom of the page and circle it with a green highlighter, as though that will make them feel more confident that it's the correct choice. Auden Ma. Mentally they say this name, over and over again. And then out loud. "I am Auden Ma."

They imagine someone else calling them Auden. Ivy's soft voice. And then they feel miserable because they haven't talked to Ivy in months.

No, they're not sure about the name yet. But they do like

it more than any of the other ones on the list, so that's a start, they suppose.

"Adeline!"

They jump at the sound of their mum's voice. Adeline is who they are to everyone else. It doesn't a hundred per cent feel like them, which is why they're searching for another name, which is why they would maybe, kind of, probably, like to be Auden.

But right now they're still OK with being Adeline to other people.



"You wanted cooking lessons, right?" Mum asks. "Why don't we start today?"

Auden tugs the sleeves of their hoodie down over their hands. It's chilly on this January morning, and nobody ever turns the heating on in the kitchen. Usually, by the time Auden comes in here, it's steam-filled and warm, and food's ready to be shovelled down.

They're nervous. Up until now, they've barely been able to make instant noodles without supervision. But they can't continue that way. Under their skin, something's been gnawing at them: a restlessness that crumbles their whole self. Their name, their life. They want to rebuild themselves from the ground up. On the first of January, they had tried to write down their New Year's resolutions. Top of the list was: *Become the person I want to be.*

Then they tried breaking that down into simpler parts.

Pick a new name.

Try out they/them pronouns outside my own head.

Learn how to cook.

Kiss a girl/someone who's not a boy.

Finally, with more dread than the rest of the list combined: *Get all As in my AS exams and get into Oxford.*

They square their shoulders. Big day for them today – ticking off two things on their list at once! Or at least having a crack at two, even if they might both be ongoing projects for a while.

“Yeah.” Auden eventually answers their mother’s questions.

“Don’t worry, we’ll start you off on an easy one,” Mum says. “Chicken and broccoli. Anyone can do it. Basic stuff.”

“Hold on – let me get a notebook to write everything down.”

They could use the Notes app on their phone, but Auden’s always been a fan of good old-fashioned pen and paper. Also, they have way too many notebooks that they haven’t found a use for yet. They’ve learnt that as soon as you make it known that you’re a stationery person everyone buys you pretty journals for your birthday and Christmas.

Having retrieved one from their room, Auden watches their mum’s practised hands showing them what to do.

How to marinate the meat, wash the florets, mix the sauce.

“So, why the interest now?” Mum queries, pouring out another spoonful of soy sauce.

“Well, I thought, with university coming up—”

“Oh yeah? It’s not because of that girl you’re always going on about? The one who won last year’s *Recipe Rumble*? Lena?”

“Rina,” Auden mumbles.

Their mum sees through them way too effortlessly. Yes, they were inspired by Rina Ooi, their latest obsession, an incredible chef and also stupefyingly gorgeous. But it’s not only that.

“How did you learn how to cook?” they ask.

“My mother taught me,” Mum says. “Who else? She said I had to learn if I wanted to get myself a husband. Now I find that outrageous, but I also think I wouldn’t have married your dad if *he* didn’t know how to cook. It’s just a valuable life skill, isn’t it? Nothing to do with being a good wife.”

Mum’s smile is a toothy flash. On the stove, the wok heats up, a curl of smoke rising from the oil in it. In a pot, the broccoli simmers away.

Feeling whimsical, Auden asks, “So, what advice do you have for me trying to find a spouse then? Because I’ve had zero practice at it, and I could use some tips for when I’m finally allowed to date. What if I’m an absolute disaster?”

They say that well aware that they *are* an absolute disaster, no what-ifs involved. But Mum doesn't need to know.

"You'll be just fine." Mum slides all the meat into the wok, and the oil spits and hisses immediately. "Natalie focused on school too, and she found Elliot at uni, no problem."

"Yeah, but Toby's still single."

"Toby has plenty of time. He's only twenty."

"I literally hear you fretting to Dad *all the time* about whether Toby's going to find someone."

Mum pours the broccoli into a colander in the sink. "He's just so quiet. I never know what's going on with him."

"So, no dating advice for me then? Or Toby?"

"You really want dating advice from me?" Mum teases, stirring the sizzling slices of chicken. "Your wizened old hag of a mother? Aren't you kids too cool for any kind of advice I'd be able to give?"

"I'm *definitely* not too cool."

"I have heard, though, that it's all about sliding into the DMs these days, isn't it?"

Auden splutters. "*Mum!*"

Mum holds her hands up. "But it's all second-hand info. I have no idea what that really entails."

Auden decides they have to drive the conversation in a different direction before this gets even more embarrassing. "What about you and Dad? There must be something he did that made you go, *He's the one.*"

“I suppose, while we’re on the subject of food... I told him offhand once, early on – maybe our third date – that my favourite dish was Hong Kong-style chicken curry. And he surprised me on my birthday a few months later by bringing me a Tupperware of chicken curry that he’d made, exactly the way I like it. If I had to pin down just *one* thing, that would be it.”

Auden feels a warm glow within them, just the way a well-spiced curry would sit in their belly on a cold night. “You should teach me how to make that at some point.”

Mum nods, lifting all the pieces of chicken out from the wok with a slotted spoon. They look browned, crisping at the edges. “You can ask your dad too. He’d be thrilled to show you.”

“Do you and Dad have any of these recipes written down? Or do you just remember them?”

“It’s all in here.” Mum taps her temple. “You should have a better memory than me, no?”

Auden grimaces. “I need my brain for remembering, like ... what year the Russian Revolution was, not this.”

Mum narrows her eyes. “What year was the Russian Revolution?”

“It started in 1917,” Auden replies automatically. Then, in a pained whine, “Please don’t quiz me.”

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t know what else to ask.”



Dad smacks his lips several times as he starts to dive in.

“This is *very* good, Adeline.”

“Thanks, but I didn’t actually make it,” Auden says.

“Next week,” Mum says. “I’ll have you make it next week. See if you can do it.”

“Well, I’m sure yours will be just as great.” Dad nods encouragingly at Auden.

With a twinkle in her eye, Mum says, “When you’re at Oxford next year, will you make this a lot and think of your mother?”

When they’re at Oxford. Next year.

Auden blinks. Of course. That doesn’t sound terrifying at all, the surety of it like a guillotine.

Round a mouthful of food, Auden says, “Mm-hmm.”

“Now what should I make for dinner?” Dad asks.

“We’re having lunch right now, Raymond: why are you thinking about dinner?” Mum says.

This is a recurring conversation that Auden has heard a million times before and will hear a million times again, which makes it rather comforting. Dad is always thinking about the next meal while he’s in the middle of enjoying the current one, and Mum is always annoyed about it. Or she pretends to be.

Dad grins. “What about pasta? Or ... oh, wait, a lasagne!” He slaps the table, overcome with excitement at his own idea. “Perfect for these freezing winter nights.”

But Mum objects. “We had *so much* cheese over

Christmas. We said we wouldn't have any again for at least a month."

"It's *nearly* been a month. Besides, it doesn't count if it's an ingredient in something else. Adeline, do you agree with me?"

"Yeah. I'm on Dad's side. I want lasagne."

Mum gives Auden a disapproving look.



Back in their room, Auden, who promised themselves they were finally going to get started on their history essay after lunch, is decidedly *not* doing anything resembling homework.

They thought that since they had finally settled on a name that they want to test out, it would free up a little bit of headspace – because *God*, having a gender crisis takes up so much of your brain – and they'd be able to concentrate properly on school again.

But turns out the gender crisis isn't the only thing getting in the way of them studying.

It's their parents' certainty that they'll get into Oxford, like their brother before them, and like their sister before that. It looms over them.

Just last week, they were at Oxford – they sometimes go with their parents to drop off Toby at the beginning of each term and to pick him up again at the end. And they stood in the middle of the quad of Toby's college, feeling

longing, but also a growing tide of nausea. Anxiety twisting in their stomach.

Even in January, the quad looked picture-perfect, the grass as green as ever. The aged stone buildings golden and grand on all sides, watching Auden with their rows and rows of windows.

All their life, they've known that Oxford is the university they're meant to go to. It's either that or Cambridge, but Oxford is what runs in the family.

When they were eight years old, Mum would hold their little hand and walk them round the quad of Natalie's college and say, "One day, you'll go here too. I'm sure of it."

And Auden wants to study there, as Natalie did, and as Toby's doing. But for years it was far-off and had the feel of a promise made by some mysterious force, like fate or destiny.

Now UCAS applications are around the corner, and Oxford seems like a promise that *Auden* made, and they have absolutely no idea how to make good on it.

They can do this, probably. They have to do it somehow.

But the *fear*. The fear that they might not be able to – it's paralysing.

It stops them from actually being able to do the *work* that will actually get them into Oxford, which is ironic.

They just sit there, picking their nails, feeling horrible.

There's got to be something they can do that isn't *this*.

They scroll through Instagram. The first post that the app throws at them always seems to be one of Ivy, as though it knows of Auden's abject failure in the realm of friendship, and delights in reminding them of it every day. Ivy in a lilac puffer jacket, taking her adorable labradoodle Percy on a walk. The skies are clear and a piercing blue in the photo, so it couldn't possibly have been taken today.

Auden scrolls past without liking it.

Further down, a post from Rina catches their eye.

can you believe my little food blog turns five today! from me just nattering on to an audience of precisely ZERO followers about silly experiments in my tiny home kitchen, to now actually having a food column in one of this country's biggest newspapers and having all 84k of you witness my daily ramblings and cooking adventures... it's been a journey! even more than making food, i love writing about it, so i'm glad you're here reading. feeling grateful, made a pear tart. recipe in the link in my bio!

Auden looks up from their phone. On their desk, a scattering of notebooks. One depicts outer space on the front – a wide expanse of black dotted with silvery stars – in which they record all their gender thoughts. Strutting peacocks adorn their 2025 diary, which begins with their New Year's resolutions. The one they've now designated as their recipe journal has illustrations of different kinds of

sushi, cute little California rolls and salmon nigiri beaming at Auden from the cover.

They could start a food blog.

They're going to be writing down all the recipes that their parents teach them, anyway. Why not share these with the internet? And – most importantly – it will be a place where they can be whoever they want to be. They can blog as *Auden*. Test out how the name feels without having to tell anybody they know yet.

It sounds like a *brilliant* way to procrastinate.

And it's got to be good for them academically speaking, right? Practising writing more, when they want to apply for English at Oxford?

They grin, searching for articles on how to get started.