

The logo for the 2020 Schools Programme is located in the top right corner. It features the text '2020 SCHOOLS PROGRAMME' in a bold, sans-serif font. Below this, in a smaller font, it says 'SUPPORTED BY THE FREEMAN'S FOUNDATION'. At the bottom of the logo, it reads 'AUCKLAND WRITERS FESTIVAL' and 'WAITUHI O TĀMAKI' in a larger font, with 'WRITERSFESTIVAL.CO.NZ' in a very small font at the very bottom. The logo is set against a white background with an orange triangle pointing towards the top right corner.

2020
SCHOOLS
PROGRAMME

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AUCKLAND WRITERS FESTIVAL
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The Tiger Cub

–Rose Lu

You were born on a Sunday. I awoke in the bedroom that I shared with Mum and Dad, and found that they were gone. This wasn't unusual; I was accustomed to being occasionally left alone while they negotiated work and study.

I got myself out of bed and went to the fridge. Without parental supervision, for breakfast I chose the carton of sugared doughnut holes from the Pak'nSave bakery. The living room was dim but my parents said to keep the curtains closed if I was home by myself. I settled in front of the TV. *What Now* was on. That's how I remember the day of your birth was a Sunday.

When you came home you needed to sleep in the room with Mum and Dad, so I moved into the study. Both my wishes for a sibling and my own room had come true at once. All the other kids at school had siblings; how nice it would be to have someone to play Chinese checkers with. But the reality of having a baby around was that my parents had even less time for me. I contained my resentment for the first few weeks, but one morning before school I snapped. Mum and Dad were too busy with the baby to make me my breakfast. I burst into tears, wailing that they didn't love me anymore.

The load eased when our grandparents arrived in New Zealand and this little hiccup was forgotten. As soon as the month of confinement for mother and child ended, I pleaded to take you into school for show and tell. I was so proud to have a new little brother.

Nine years and four months is the gap between us. You were born in the Year of the Rabbit, 1999. Dad is also a rabbit. Mum and I are horses. It's a funny connection. In personality though, I take after Dad: animated, gregarious, in constant motion. And you're more like Mum: quiet, acquiescent, a content homebody. In pictures of Mum in her youth, with her short hair she looks exactly as you do now.

These differences started out young. I was a menace; scratching up a kid so bad they were taken to the hospital, walking home alone from my first day of school in Rotorua. You were easy to raise. Obedient, staying exactly where you were left.

The only behaviour management you received was a trick that Mum used to play when you were a toddler reluctant to go to bed. She would tell you that a family of tigers shared our house. As evening fell they left the forests they hunted in during the day, heading to our lounge to make their bed for the night. In the morning, Mum would get up early and chase them back outside. Such was our agreement with the tiger family; a family like ours, a mum, a dad and two cubs.

I was a natural co-conspirator. Sometimes you would hear this story, pout, and ask, ‘为什么姐姐不去睡觉?’ | *‘Why does older sister not have to sleep?’*

‘姐姐大，老虎怕她了。’ | *‘Older sister is big now, the tigers are afraid of her.’*

I exchanged a glance with Mum. ‘这一家老虎很凶呀！牙齿很尖!’ | *‘The tiger family is very fierce! They have such pointy teeth!’* I would say to you, eyes widening and arms raised for effect.

Your mouth set with the fear of tigers. You would let her pick you up and carry you out of the lounge, leaving me in the company of tigers.

My semi-parental relationship with you continued when I moved to Christchurch for university. I convinced Mum and Dad to send you to visit me in the overlap of our school holidays. For a week I would cook dinner for two and drive you around the city.

One of my flatmates had gone away for the break and let you have his bed. In the morning I went to wake you up and was taken aback by the length of your body. When did you get so tall? In my mind you were still my little brother, with a small body I could lift and carry. At ten years old you were about to surpass me in height.

As soon as you became tall, you started to make yourself smaller. ‘Matthew 站直!’ Mum would bark at you, pressing your shoulders back with her paws. For a moment you would raise your head and bring your neck back in line with your spine. It was somewhat of an improvement to your posture, but your shoulders were still up by your ears, maintaining the hollow at the centre of your chest.

I felt a sharp obligation to protect—or at least warn—you about the perils of growing up in Whanganui with our parents. Mum and Dad were prone to saying things like, ‘最好你们俩的性格换一下。你真不像女孩，一整天在外面疯玩儿，Matthew 也不像男孩，赶也赶不了出去。’ | *‘It would be best if you two swapped personalities. You’re not at all like a girl, spending your days outside like a wild child. Matthew’s not at all like a boy, we can’t ever get him to leave the house.’*

I rolled my eyes and looked at you. Your face bore a wooden expression. From about fourteen you had worn this face, with downcast eyes and hard lips and cheeks. I couldn’t tell if

you were internalising their statements, or simply ignoring them. You had never been talkative, but as a teenager you became taciturn in that stereotypical way.

I took to going on long walks around the neighbourhood with you so we could talk freely. The conversation always felt hard. I didn't want it to be so one-sided, me spouting opinions to counterbalance what you were hearing from Mum and Dad, but no matter how much silence I left, you would never fill it. Affirmatives were the most I ever got from you, when what I wanted was a reflection to indicate that you had understood.

Perhaps I was looking for too much. I couldn't put myself back in the same mindset of my teens to assess whether I would have been capable of such a conversation. Your face would be impassive, drained of any emotional response. I could never tell how the conversation was going for you. Did it feel patronising, in the way that any received wisdom does at that age? It didn't seem like you were particularly engaged, but you must have enjoyed our conversations enough to keep agreeing to go on walks. All I hoped to do was to assure you that it was safe to speak to me, and to trust that you would reach out if necessary.

If my friends asked about you, I would often say, 'picture someone who is the complete opposite of me'. It wasn't just our personalities—our experiences were completely different. My childhood one of upheaval and change; I attended five primary schools, one intermediate and two high schools. Your schooling was all in Whanganui.

From intermediate, you were sent to the private school and started going to compulsory chapel every week. After school and weekends were occupied by school activities. If it weren't some sort of sports practice, it would be an extension maths or science class. My public school's focus had been on getting students passing; your school demanded excellence.

Either implicitly or explicitly, I imagine that your school told its students that they were important and would achieve great things. Your peers had iPhones and went overseas in the holidays to spend time with their parents who worked in multinational companies. They strolled through the manicured grounds with an ingrained self-assurance and high expectations for all aspects of their lives.

In Year Eleven you started rowing. Your arms and legs swelled like bean pods, skin pulled tight and shiny. In total you gained about fifteen kilos of muscle. It hung on you like a heavy cloak, a cumbersome frame you were yet to feel comfortable in. The way that you held yourself hadn't changed. You still hunched, shoulders collapsed over your sternum. Making yourself seem small even though you undeniably weren't.

Mum and Dad never had time to hang about at your rowing practices, but they sent me along one Saturday morning. Multiple gazebos were set up on the riverside. Under the constructed shade, white dads flipped patties and white mums brought out containers of baking. I was the only sibling there, and didn't know which category of white parent would be more interesting to talk to.

Boat after boat skimmed past on the Whanganui River. They came in ones or twos, young men pulling in unison. Sitting on the bank, I was too far away to be able to distinguish

you from the rest of the pack. How natural did it feel, I wondered, to perform these long strokes? Dressed in the same black and blue, looking like one of the team.

I talked to a few of the rowing mums and idly sampled cupcakes. They tasted homogenous despite the colour range in their pleated cups. Conversation died away fairly quickly as I didn't know their families or sons, and the types of questions they tried to make conversation with weren't ones I wanted to elaborate on. I folded the waxed wrappers into quarters and then eighths as I looked enviously at the dads behind the grill. It would be nice to have something productive to do with my hands.

At the end of practice the boats were hauled out of the river and stacked in the boat shed. You were silent in the throng of young men coming up the bank. Their banter was a combination of boasting and teasing, the same coarse bellows I remembered from high school. One-upping each other in the number of muscle-ups they could do. Girls' names thrown around like paper into a wastebasket. 'Gay' being used as a pejorative. Ten years had passed since I was last in school, but here this Lynx Africa masculinity was yet to be retired.

As soon as the tidying was done you grabbed your stuff, ready to leave. A chorus of byes came from your teammates, as well as a sharp laugh that I couldn't interpret.

'You don't want to stay and eat some sausages with your friends?' I asked.

You gave me a look. We both knew that lunch would be much better at home.

We wandered towards the parked car.

'So, are you friends with those guys?'

'Not really.'

'I guess they're quite different, huh?'

'Yeah.'

Did you know Dad believes that auspicious events occur every seven years? Well, give or take. At one dinner he marked out the beats of his life to the cadence of seven: going to university in Shanghai, leaving China for New Zealand, buying the shop in Whanganui. There are a few missed beats in there; places where he was too young, or too tied down to seize the opportunity hanging in the air.

According to his rough calculations, 2018 was the next big year. I think he was right. It was a big year for the entire family. Our parents prepared to sell the shop. I went back to university to do my masters. You moved out of home and started your first year of university.

In my head I picture you walking the path I abandoned. You enrolled in a Bachelor of Health Sciences at Otago University, and had a room at Carrington Hall. It was the same degree and hall of residence that I was accepted into ten years ago. Leaving home, you packed your things in the same purple and black suitcase I had used.

Traditionally, the Lu family were doctors. Dad and his brother broke this lineage; they failed to place high enough in the 高考 | *gaokao* to study medicine. Our dad was the smarter of the two, and from practice tests it looked likely that he would succeed. But on the day he got sick and

underperformed, so that was that. At the time, it wasn't possible to retake the 高考 | *gaokao*.

Everyone was granted just one opportunity to improve their future through education. Like his older brother, he had to settle for being an engineer instead.

Of their children, I was the first to secede from studying medicine. I didn't even start the undergrad degree. Simon, our only cousin, got much further. He completed a biochemical engineering degree in Canada as his pre-med requirement. Next came the Medical College Admission Test and interviews. He failed to get in. So he retook the MCAT and the interviews at the next given opportunity.

In total, he failed to pass the day-long medical entry exam seven times. At this point, he was forced to stop because he had reached the lifetime restriction on number of attempts. Maybe if it were up to him, he would still be taking that exam now.

Dad joked that you were the last member of the family left who could become a doctor. I didn't know how seriously you took his words. I suspected that like me at your age, you had no idea what the other options were. Back then, the only adults I interacted with were the teachers at school, our parents, or my coworkers at the Mad Butcher; none of these work options were ideal. I was a smart kid so traditional professions like medicine, law or engineering seemed like the way to go. They were jobs I understood only in the abstract, but no one around me could offer a better definition. It wasn't until after I moved to Wellington I understood the array of possibilities I had at that time, but also the avenues that were never open to me.

For years you expressed ambivalence towards the idea of enrolling in med school. But in Year Thirteen, you doubled down on the idea. I assumed the pressure came from Mum and Dad, but they said it wasn't their influence. They had reassessed your suitability for medicine, and given your introverted nature, concluded your bedside manner would be inadequate. But you were firm in your choice, even though you couldn't explain it to me when I asked.

'I dunno. I think it's interesting,' you replied in your usual taciturn way. Two sentences were about all that you verbalised around your decision. Were you drawn in by the prestige? Was it the social pressure of other med school aspirants in your school year? Did you feel a need to prove yourself? Your motive was a mystery to everyone. Regardless, I was excited to see you leave home. Life was going to change and improve in ways you couldn't have understood at the time.

ABOUT THE WRITER



Rose Lu attended Whanganui High School. She had no idea what people could be when they were grown up until she was a grown-up herself. She also discovered, thankfully, that you can change what you want to do at any time. Her favourite book is *The Idiot* by Elif Batuman because it reads like a series of carefully thought-out tweets. Her advice to young writers is to write what feels urgent, and don't worry about saving your ideas for when you're a 'better' writer. Nothing can replicate the feel of urgency in a book.

An extract from *Read The World: Volume Five*

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