



100 MILLION LOVE SONGS,
ALL RIGHT HERE IN THE
FIRST CHAPTER



THE FANTASTIC VOYAGE BEGAN ON A SANDY BLUE PARADISE for fishermen and their children renting snorkelling equipment to daytime tourists in 1973. This is where and when Bumi was born, his face all small and crinkly, brown and wide-eyed wonder at the implausibility of being plucked from his mother's womb while she lay bleeding on a dirt floor silently and stubbornly refusing to cry out at the pain of birth. He was the Bugis boy with a Javanese name chosen by his Javanese mother. She had, for the most part, let her own traditions slip away as the years and the island colluded to make her their own. Rilaka became her new motherland, its Buginese language her *lingua franca*. Her firstborn's name was a tribute to that natal part of her, and because it meant 'earth' in her faraway mother-tongue, it honoured the place of his birth in a multicultural chorus.

From the beginning Bumi's eyes pierced harder than any other, glowing while his father forced him to try football, glowing brightly at the chance to help the man count market money from mainland fish sales. By age four he'd humbled his father by becoming a faster and more accurate

bookkeeper. He also spoke better Indonesian, a skill his father exploited for price negotiations with mainlanders. By age five he bored of accounting and took to engineering.

Bumi's father, a wiry man with surprising strength and audaciously self-granted authority, went looking for the boy late one evening after he failed to come home for supper. On their tiny island of a hundred people, any lost child not found in five minutes was assumed drowned. Yusupu was not worried. Bumi was no likely drowning victim, the first five year old potentially smarter than the sea.

Yusupu found Bumi on the far sloping side of the island where no one had ever bothered to build or settle. It was simply too far away from the others. In recent years it had become a place where the women gathered to make clothing when they wanted to get away from the tourists.

Bumi was there cursing a foul black streak the likes of which Yusupu hadn't heard in all his years on boats, not from his father or grandfather, nor any other man he'd known.

"Bumi! What's wrong?" he shouted, half in anger and half in concern.

"I can't get it tied!" Bumi retorted, pointing in frustration at a small tangle of netting and thirty empty plastic pop bottles. "My fingers are too small!"

"Why do you want to tie them?" Yusupu asked. The sharpness in his voice was all but gone.

"You tie them at one end to make it float. Then you can leave it and go play," Bumi explained. "Then you come back and you have fish. So you have more time to play with me, Daddy."

Yusupu was not an exceptionally hard-working man, but he did spend six hours a day at sea—six hours Bumi felt would be better spent playing with him. While flotation nets have existed in fishing cultures for centuries, Rilaka's more labour intensive methods worked to keep the men out of the women's hair for six hours a day, and vice versa, and to make physically strong, hardy men for an island left naked in the exposure of rain and merciless sun.

Like most human innovations Bumi's idea had unforeseen impacts. The lighter workload and greater cash flow that came their way (once

Yusupu caught on and got to tying what Bumi's little fingers couldn't) resulted not in more play time with his father, but less. And the time he did spend with the man became much less pleasant.

Though Yusupu and the other Rilakan fishers had never before felt any need for alcohol, which was taboo, it was free time, and the rum that helped pass it, that changed Bumi's father. On finding themselves with unprecedented time on their hands, and not having any particular desire to return to their families, Rilaka's fishers began visiting a little bar with a live musician near the seaport after the catch was sold. The toxins in the liquor put the inexperienced drinkers in a collectively ill mood, and most of them disliked the numbing effect of too many drinks. Only Yusupu's stubbornness pushed him forward until he had drunk more than his fill several nights in a row. His cohorts would keep him company and switch to coffee after just one glass of strong rum. Yusupu drank every night, long after the others had tired of alcohol.

It seemed to Bumi that when Yusupu drank, all the man's frustrations bubbled to the surface. The first time Yusupu hit him forever changed his understanding of pain. There was no desire in it at all, just deep disappointment.

He had stayed up late, determined to see his father before dream-time. He had refused to come home, afraid that sleep would overtake him if he got too comfortable. Instead he stayed by the shore playing long after the tourists had returned to the mainland and the other children had gone to sleep. He drew pictures in the sand with a stick to pass the hours after sunset, past midnight even, bleary-eyed and obsessed with the single thought of his father. When the boats finally returned Bumi ran to them and watched open-mouthed as the other men helped his father over the gunwale. Yusupu retched and spit into the sea he'd always told Bumi was sacred.

"Daddy!" Bumi cried, thinking Yusupu was hurt. He ran to him, pushing through the other men to offer a hand.

Yusupu looked down at Bumi and sneered. "What are you doing up?"

Bumi swallowed and looked up at Yusupu, who pulled back at his matted salt-and-pepper hair. Even hunched over, Yusupu towered over

the boy like a giant sea creature lurching onto the land. “Waiting for you,” Bumi said.

The men laughed and one tussled Bumi’s hair. “He misses you,” one of them told Yusupu, who smiled a bemused smile, took the boy up into his arms, and carried him home.

Yusupu kept smiling until he had crouched in through the door of their little house. Then he put Bumi down and took him by the arm, looked the boy in the eyes, and said, “Don’t you ever embarrass me like that again.”

He gave a half smile and slapped Bumi’s face. Bumi’s lips quivered and a tear came to his eye. “Are you going to cry now, Son?” Yusupu asked. “Are you going to embarrass me further?”

Bumi swallowed hard, sucking a head full of tension down his throat. His body was shaking, but he didn’t cry. He shook his head solemnly ‘no.’

“Good,” Yusupu said, jerking his head to the side. “Go to sleep.”