

WHEN THE SKY WAS BLUE

Written by  
Rachel Choi

PRODUCTION DRAFT (BLUE)  
27 July 2021



**1. INT. LEAH'S BEDROOM - MORNING**

A precious collection of rocks and sea shells on a shelf.

Colourful sketches and water colour paintings pinned up on the wall. \*

Well-worn copies of 'The Little Prince', 'The Magic Faraway Tree' and 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' on a bedside table.

MORNING SUN RAYS stream through the windows. LEAH (11) lies in bed, her eyes softly open.

LI-JING (O.S.)  
(calling out)  
Leah [come on, we're late!]

\*

[Note: All Mandarin dialogue in brackets.]

Leah doesn't move, barely even blinks. Her gaze fixed and determined, she draws out the moment.

LI-JING (O.S.)  
(calling louder)  
Leah!

**2. INT. FAMILY HOME - LATER**

Dressed for church, LEAH, her sister CLAUDIA (14) and their mother LI-JING (early 40s) hurry out the front door of their home. \*

It is modern, clean-cut and self-conscious.

To the side, there is a small fish tank.

TITLE: WHEN THE SKY WAS BLUE

**3. INT. CHINESE RESTAURANT - MIDDAY**

A bustling yum cha restaurant with a blend of traditional Chinese decor and tacky theming, bathed in fluorescent lighting.

It's a hot summer's day and the air conditioner is barely working. Beads of sweat on foreheads and upper lips.

A TROLLEY laden with small plates of glistening fried goodness weaves in between chairs and round tables strewn with a mix of Chinese dishes.

It arrives at a table where LEAH is with LI-JING, CLAUDIA and her father FEI HONG (late 40s) along with family friends JOSEPHINE (early 40s), her husband and their sons MICHAEL (13) and NATHAN (3). \*

\*  
\*  
\*  
\*

LI-JING sits next to Leah, deftly selecting dishes from the trolley. The WAITER places the dishes on the lazy susan.

Li-Jing points at the food with her chopsticks.

LI-JING (O.S.)

Leah, [come on, eat].

Without a moment's pause, Li-Jing impatiently piles food in Leah's bowl.

Leah's hand instinctively reaches out in objection but pulls back. It's not worth the hassle.

Leah cups the rice bowl in her hands. She picks up her chopsticks and carefully pushes aside strips of beef and gently picks up morsels of vegetables and tofu.

Leah looks around, observing:

- A couple kids run around the table while their mother tries to tame them.

- Nathan sits across from Leah where his father has successfully used a tablet device as a distraction and pacifier.

\*

Then, withdrawing into her own world, Leah shuffles food into her mouth, stubbornly keeping a fixed gaze downwards.

Leah eats slowly, intentionally.

The HURRIED CLINKING OF BOWLS AND PLATES AND LOUD TALKING across the restaurant rises to an intrusive hum with inescapable snippets of conversation fading in...

JOSEPHINE (O.S.)

...did you see what Pastor Wong's daughter was wearing today? [It was inappropriate, disgraceful.]

LI-JING (O.S.)

[Oh no, I didn't see.]

JOSEPHINE (O.S.)

Pastor Wong should be careful. [As Zengzi said: to put the church in order, you must first put the family in order].

\*

(then)

Oh Michael did so well in his piano exam - we were so surprised. Apparently he did better than Joyce's son - I forget his name - but he's been playing since he was young and we only got Michael into piano a couple years ago.

\*

\*

\*

LI-JING (O.S.)  
[That's wonderful.]

JOSEPHINE (O.S.)  
How about Claudia? How is her piano  
going?

Leah pauses eating with chopsticks in hand. She reflexively side glances at her mum, then back at her bowl. Feigning disinterest, she listens closely.

Li-Jing remains her usual composed self.

LI-JING  
Oh, that was Leah. Claudia plays  
violin - beautifully. Next time we  
have a dinner, I'll have her play  
for you.  
(noticing the teapot is  
empty)  
Ah- [Waiter! Hot water!]

JOSEPHINE  
I see. Was?

Leah takes a deep breath. Coolly and purposefully, she gets up and exits before she can hear her mother's response.

Li-Jing doesn't notice her daughter has left.

LI-JING  
Leah wants... she is doing art  
classes instead.  
(uncomfortable)  
She likes drawing, painting and is  
interested in photography... it's  
important to her.  
(beat)  
Actually I think that Zengzi  
teaching means something a bit  
different...

Across on the other side of the restaurant, Leah swings through the doors that lead to the bathroom, almost like she's skipping through a portal to safety.

#### 4. INT. CHINESE RESTAURANT, BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

LEAH sits on the toilet, body slumped, deflated. We hear the short trickle of her pee - there's not much.

She needs a moment.

Or two.

Leah emerges from the cubicle, fortified.

She washes her hands and holds them out under the dryer. Patting them dry, she looks up to the bathroom mirror.

Leah stares intensely at her reflection.

Suddenly, she brings her two index fingers to each side of her nose and pushes upwards, making it pointier.

She scrunches up her face and shakes her head sheepishly.

**5. INT. CHINESE RESTAURANT - MOMENTS LATER**

Across the CROWDED RESTAURANT, LEAH confidently meanders between the tables. She approaches the FISH TANK and slows down, taking small, careful, deliberate steps.

We follow her face as she bends down until her eyes are level with the large fish's.

It's a beautiful spotted TIGER OSCAR. Its mouth gaping open, \* tilting to the side as it treads water.

Leah's head tilts with it, curious and watchful.

Leah goes to tap the glass but changes her mind. Instead she holds her hand there against the glass for a minute.

She gently drums the pads of her fingers against the glass.

Leah smiles softly, sweetly and then ruefully. A kindred spirit.

**6. INT. CHINESE RESTAURANT - MOMENTS LATER**

LEAH sits back in her chair at the table and eats. In between bites, she pushes her food around.

Toying with her chopsticks, she accidentally drops them.

Leaning down with her chin to the table top, Leah feels around underneath. No luck.

She jumps beneath the table's flowy white table cloth and immediately spots the chopsticks. She grabs them and looks up.

ANOTHER GIRL (about her age), sits cross-legged under the table on the other side, scrawling in a book.

The girl appears to be hiding and at first looks alarmed at being found out.

Leah and the girl, both almost frozen in place, exchange seeking glances. Then they smile.

Leah goes to say something when LI-JING swiftly pulls her daughter up.

LI-JING

Aiya- you're not a child anymore.  
[Quick, get up.]

\*

Mouth closed, biting her bottom lip, Leah breathes in sharply. She's crushed and trying not to show it.

She exhales slowly.

**7. INT. CAR (MOVING) - AFTERNOON**

FEI-HONG is driving and LI-JING is in the passenger seat. LEAH and CLAUDIA are in the back with BAGS OF ASIAN GROCERIES wedged between them.

TAIWANESE POP MUSIC plays from the car speakers.

Leah gazes out the closed window, daydreaming, watching the street light poles and trees flash past.

LI-JING (O.S.)

I got lots of gai lan - it was  
really cheap today, did you see how  
cheap? We can have it steamed  
tonight with oyster sauce, or maybe  
stir-fried is better...

No response. Li-Jing casts a glance over at her husband.

LI-JING (CONT'D)

And the fresh fish too with extra  
ginger. [What do you think?]

Still no response.

LI-JING

[Husband? Where are you?]

A long pause.

FEI-HONG

(snaps out of his stupor)

Hmm?

LI-JING

[Nevermind.]

Li-Jing gazes out the window.

In the reflection of the side-view mirror we see Li-Jing biting her bottom lip with a hard, vacant expression on her face (echoing the same as Leah's from earlier).

She's tired of not being heard.

LI-JING  
(to herself)  
At least the sky is blue.

The upbeat music swells, almost as if Fei-Hong intentionally increased the volume.

Leah looks out the window too, checking the sky.

**8. INT./EXT. CAR (PETROL STATION) - LATER**

A busy petrol station. The CAR pulls up next to a petrol pump, still playing TAIWANESE POP MUSIC with aircon blasting, all of which cuts off when the car turns off.

LI-JING and FEI-HONG jump out and shut their doors at the same time like a well-practiced routine.

Li-Jing heads to petrol pump. Fei-Hong to the station building.

They leave behind LEAH and CLAUDIA in a vacuum of stifling silence.

Leah turns to Li-Jing, who stands on the other side of the car window filling up petrol. Her back is half-turned as she listlessly watches the numbers go up on the pump.

Suddenly Leah thinks of something and pushes the button for the window. It doesn't move.

Leah urgently taps the window.

She bangs with her open palm.

Outside the car, Li-Jing is deep in her own thoughts. Unable to hear anything above the noisy petrol station, she completely fails to notice Leah.

Leah hits the window once more, twice.

She stops, giving up.

Back inside:

CLAUDIA  
What's your deal?

Leah sits back in her seat.

LEAH  
(self-conscious)  
Nothing.

## 9. INT. CAR (MOVING) - LATER

From her seat in the back next to CLAUDIA, LEAH stares at the back of LI-JING'S and FEI-HONG'S heads.

Leah can tell it's all business chat. She's not remotely interested but for waiting for an opening in the conversation.

Her gaze shifts between their respective directions.

FEI-HONG

The project needs that DA.

LI-JING

I know.

FEI-HONG

(hardly listening)

Our company needs that DA--

LI-JING

I know.

FEI-HONG

--and it's due soon. When will the plans be finished?

LI-JING

(sighs)

Soon.

FEI-HONG

When? What's taking so long?

LI-JING

(tense)

[You're driving me mad.] It'll be ready when it's ready.

A pause.

Leah readies herself.

LEAH

Ma?

LI-JING

What?

LEAH

Just wanted to ask something.

(a beat)

About that girl at lunch. The one about my age? I saw her--

LI-JING

Ah that's Auntie Josephine's neice.  
[A strange girl] you know, but  
nice. She's from Townsville, up  
north.

(then)

She might be moving here to go to  
your school actually.

LEAH

Really?

Leah smiles to herself, pleased. She's completely oblivious  
to the tension between her parents that continues to hang in  
the air.

**10. INT. FAMILY HOME - AFTERNOON**

We see more of the family home now. Hints of Chinese-style  
decor (traditional tea pots on shelves and guóhuà (ink  
paintings) on walls) but otherwise feels like a display home.

A façade to hide the mess of the smells and the sauces.

LEAH, CLAUDIA, LI-JING and FEI-HONG enter, all carrying BAGS  
OF GROCERIES.

Leah, with a bag in each hand, walks with bounce. She's  
beaming, thrilled at the prospect of a new friend.

Leah starts towards the kitchen when she sees something  
(O.S.) and stops in her tracks.

She bends down in front of the small fish tank, still  
carrying the bags. Her eyes widen, her heart sinks.

In the background, the rest of her family carry on unpacking  
groceries.

Leah's loss goes unnoticed.

**11. INT. FAMILY HOME - MOMENTS LATER**

With a HOTPOT STRAINER, LEAH carefully dips into the fish  
tank.

She lifts out her DEAD GOLDFISH and holds it there a moment,  
as if to examine how different it looks now lifeless.

She goes to take it outside.

**12. EXT. FAMILY HOME - LATE AFTERNOON**

Rich and warm afternoon light cast shadows on the straight  
and harsh edges of the house's exterior.

**13. INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER**

LEAH and LI-JING are in the kitchen, prepping food for dinner.

Leah swiftly chops daikon. With the knife in her hand, she pushes the chopped pieces aside next to a pile of chopped carrots.

LEAH  
Done. What next?

LI-JING (O.S.)  
[Good. Okay, the fish.]

Leah freezes.

LI-JING (O.S.)  
[Do you understand?] Scale it and  
take out the guts.

Leah stares up at her mother. Desperate.

Li-Jing is confused but isn't interested to understand.

LI-JING  
You must.

Leah shakes her head emphatically, backing away.

Li-Jing places the knife firmly in Leah's hand.

Li-Jing stands extremely close without touching, her body a force Leah can't reckon with, pushing Leah towards the fish at the sink. \*  
\*  
\*

Claustrophobia sets in for Leah. She can hardly breathe. \*

Very reluctantly, Leah lifts her hand with the knife. It's her only way out.

CLOSE-UPS of a knife shaking in Leah's hand as it moves towards the flesh of a snapper.

The terrible SOUND OF SCRAPING SCALES.

**14. INT. DINING ROOM - EARLY EVENING**

Dinner time. The STEAMED FISH is placed in the centre of the table alongside a range of other dishes.

LI-JING, FEI-HONG and CLAUDIA are around the table talking at and over each other rather than with each other.

LEAH is there, observing this all, feeling out of body.

The HOUSE PHONE RINGS and she jumps up, heading to the butler's pantry to get it. \*

Leah reaches the PHONE and before picking up she looks back at her family through the doorway, her chair at the table obscured by a wall.

It's like a picture of a happy family.

She hits the button to answer.

LEAH  
Hello?

YE YE (O.S.)  
[Hello?... Jin-ru?]

Leah is immediately uneasy. She glances up at her family.

LEAH  
Oh Ye Ye. [Hello!]  
(quickly, in stilted  
Chinese)  
Um. [You want dad?]

Leah starts back to the dinner table taking the phone.

YE YE (O.S.)  
[How are you? Is school going  
well?]

LEAH  
[I'm good. School is good.]

YE YE (O.S.)  
[Your mum said you're taking art  
classes now. What are you working  
on?]

Leah reaches the dinner table and her family look at her as she awkwardly scrambles for the words...

LEAH  
Um...[I'm]...making...  
[a]...painting. [Sorry Ye Ye],  
here's dad.

Flushed in the face, Leah pushes the phone at her father. Fei-Hong takes it, bemused and unimpressed.

FEI-HONG  
[Your Chinese is terrible. My  
friend's son speaks better and  
they're not even Chinese.]  
(labouring the point)  
They're \*white people\*.  
(into the phone)  
\*Dad\*!

Leah freezes. She understands him perfectly and lets him know that with a fierce defiant look.

Leah exits.

A long beat.

Leah returns. She's a frontline warrior, fearful and nervous but holding steady with steely resolve. We slowly PUSH IN.

LEAH  
(quiet, almost under her  
breath)  
What am I?  
(voice grows stronger)  
Am I not even Chinese too? A \*white  
person\* in this body. Not here or  
there. Nowhere.

We now see that Leah's been talking to a distracted Fei-Hong who has been listening on the phone to his own father. He missed everything Leah said.

He nods at Leah dismissively.

Leah exits again.

Li-Jing watches her daughter's retreating figure and holds a contemplative gaze there.

**15. INT. LEAH'S BEDROOM - LATER**

LEAH lies belly-down on her bed, facing the wall opposite the bedroom door. Her room is a stark contrast to the rest of the house - eclectic, colourful and cosy.

This is her sanctuary.

Then, we see some of her drawings have been pulled down.

Leah curls up, her body shudders slightly.

Her eyes shut tight.

From behind Leah, LI-JING enters carrying a SMALL PLATE OF CUT APPLES.

She places it on the bedside table, watching Leah expectantly. Leah doesn't move.

Li-Jing looks around, taking in the room. She treads carefully, as if there for the first time really seeing all that her daughter holds close.

Li-Jing runs her fingers along the bookshelf with the rocks and shells.

She notices the discarded pile of drawings and picks one up.

Meanwhile Leah continues to ignores her.

Still holding the drawing, Li-Jing's usually hard veneer, cracks just a little.

LI-JING

Your father wasn't... nice before.

(pause)

And I --

Stuck for words, Li-Jing comes around to sit on the bed with Leah's back towards her, willing her to turn around.

Leah sensing her mother's closeness, freezes up.

Li-Jing stays, watching her daughter's back.

LI-JING

To me, you are enough.

(a beat)

You are even more than I see.

Leah's face softens.

Li-Jing starts to speak again but holds back. She doesn't know what or how else to say.

She reaches out, almost lays a hand on Leah's hair. She changes her mind.

A dull quiet overcomes them. Somewhere in the house, the SOUND OF A TV BLARING.

Li-Jing goes to leave. Suddenly Leah half turns around, grabs her mum's hand and pulls her arm around her.

Li-Jing is briefly stunned. Then she leans into the embrace.

Lying on their sides, they hold each other. Close but not too sentimental.

Then, Leah gets up, pulling her mum with her...

**16. EXT. FAMILY BACKYARD - MOMENTS LATER**

It's that time of day where the sky takes on a deep, cool shade of blue. At the edge of the backyard, LEAH and LI-JING kneel in front of a small mound with a shell resting on top. The fish grave. \*

Candles rest on the ground before them. They both hold THREE STICKS OF INCENSE. \*

House lights shine in the distance. CRICKETS CHIRPING and the SOUND OF NIGHT IN SUBURBIA blends into... \*

MUSIC CUE: TBC

\*

They light the incense sticks. Smoke rises and swirls around in the thick humid air...

Li-Jing shuts her eyes.

Leah looks at her prayerful mother and then back down. She's grateful but lost, not knowing what to make of the moment and unable to fully sink into it.

Li-Jing's prayers are kept short. She too can't quite sink into the shared moment with her daughter. She turns to the house feeling that pull to get on with her work.

She passes her incense sticks to Leah, rises and makes her way back to the house.

Leah is alone.

Holding the incense sticks, she bows three times. A sign of respect.

Then, as if about to plunge into water, Leah inhales through her nose, long and deep.

THE END.