

THE CHINESE ACADEMY FOR BRILLIANT SPAWNS
AND OTHER STORIES

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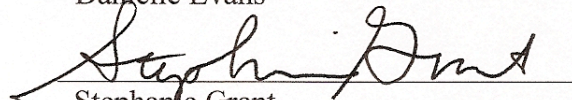
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Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

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DEDICATION

To my family and my teachers.

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ABSTRACT

This book is a linked collection of original short stories that follow a group of people who, in the late-nineties, spent their adolescent Sundays together at a Chinese School in Portland, Oregon. The stories reach as far back in time as the Nanjing Massacre, and, at times, extend into the near future. Each piece tells the story of a different individual, focusing on one or multiple aspects of family, friendship, obligation, love, and desire.

As a whole, the collection explores ethnicity and sexuality. It attempts to investigate the experiences of young Asian Americans in modern society, and to question what it means to be a family.

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CELEBRATION

During the six-week invasion that will later be known as The Rape of Nanjing, the Japanese military issued a three-day truce around New Years, especially warning its soldiers from trespassing onto the Safety Zone, an area a little smaller than four square kilometers, sanctioned for Chinese civilians caught in the crossfire. Before the truce, the Japanese soldiers had been trespassing daily, mostly to find girls and occasionally to find Chinese Resistance soldiers trying to hide among civilians. A few days before New Years, Japanese soldiers had come to fish out able-hands to make banners that said, “Welcome Japan!” and to find smiling faces to march in a parade for the Japanese media crews freshly descended from the sky. It was generally understood among the refugees that the Japanese military needed to keep up appearances until the planes took away the media, so when the Japanese government issued them five large crates of fireworks for New Years, the crowd watched without protest as a few young refugees carried them in.

One of the people standing by was a peasant woman called Li Chunying.

“We shouldn’t accept these,” she muttered to her neighbor, who showed no sign of hearing her. She decided to do her best to avoid the celebration.

On the afternoon of New Years Eve, Li Chunying was napping on her cot inside the Nanjing University dormitory, a coveted spot by many, when she was shaken awake harshly by a woman she didn’t know. The woman had a pale face that belonged to aristocrats and was holding up her big pregnant belly like it was a watermelon.

“*Dajie*, sorry for interrupting,” said the woman.

“What’s wrong?” said Li Chunying. “Should we evacuate?”

“What happened?” said another woman from the cot above.

“Nothing, nothing,” said the pregnant woman, turning around to reassure the room. “I’m just here to talk to Li Chunying about a private matter.”

“I don’t know you,” said Li Chunying, and turned her back to her. She felt a sag in the cot and knew that the woman had sat down.

“But you know Lady Liu.”

“So what if I do?” she said without moving.

“Do you remember that she sold you a saltwater pearl necklace for a *liang* of rice?”

Li Chunying turned around. What did this woman want? She just stupidly declared to the entire room that she had something valuable on her person. Did she want to get her mugged?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. But I’m going outside to watch the festivities.”

Outside, the Safety Zone stank even more from the excitement of the holiday. Li Chunying had been in the Safety Zone since the time it was established a month ago. That was why she was able to get one of the spots in the dormitories instead of the makeshift shelters latecomers had to accept. It was first-come, first-serve. No matter who you were. Li Chunying was from a small village twenty miles south of Nanjing, and

had taken her eight-year-old son with her to the capitol to find safety. Her home village was destroyed in an air raid. She and her son had survived because they had gone to visit her parents in another village while her husband stayed home to work the field. When she returned she had no house. She never found her husband's remains.

The stench must have started then, Li Chunying thought now, as she waited for the pregnant woman to catch up. She imagined the entire world starting to stink the moment she set eyes on the water vat that still stood intact next to the spot where her home used to be: the warm, intimate smell of horse dung, the salty, sweaty smell of pigs, the suffocating car fumes of aristocrats and soldiers, the smoke from bombs that smelled like emptiness. On the road to Nanjing, the dead cows smelled like dead men, and the dead women smelled like dead water lilies decaying at the bottom of the pond.

The stench was also here in the Safety Zone. By now the excrement ditches were overflowing and seemed to hang onto the people in layers. The chilly wind brought in the aroma of fresh air, and the snow helped to refrigerate the dead bodies of Chinese soldiers littered throughout the camp.

Li Chunying felt the tiny hand of the pregnant woman touch her arm. She turned to look at her. The woman had a pointed face that made her eyes look bigger than they were. She had a straight nose and a small, chapped, red mouth. She looked about eighteen, just the right age for an aristocrat woman to be married. So where was the groom? Probably dead. Or she got into trouble with a Japanese soldier. Whatever the reason, Li Chunying didn't want to get involved in that drama. She had her own troubles.

“I’m called Qian Yuyu,” the young woman said. “I really need your help.”

How unfortunate, thought Li Chunying, the woman was out of luck seeking help from her. She had nothing to give anyone.

“How did you learn about the saltwater pearl necklace?” Li Chunying asked.

They were standing near the dormitory entrance inside the Nanjing University courtyard. A crowd had gathered in the middle of the courtyard and from its center a tentative jet of fireworks shot up. *Oooo*, said the crowd. A few people clapped. The sky had stained the clouds to look like a sliced clementine. It would be dark within half an hour.

“I went to Lady Liu,” said Yuyu. “This baby is due very soon. I will have nothing to give it. Not a thing! It’s New Years, and not a thing. I have already failed at so much. I lost its father at the train station. And now I can’t even give it a New Years present like a proper mother.”

“You lost its father?”

“At the train station, before the Japanese sealed off the city. I lost him, and he had my ticket.”

“He left you?”

“I lost him,” Yuyu said. Her brows were furrowed the same way that Li Chunying’s son did when he tried to tackle multiplication problems. “The crowd was too thick. He had to get on the train. It could have been the last train out of the city.”

“Of course,” Li Chunying said. “He probably didn’t know you were missing until the train started moving. It happens all the time.”

Yuyu seemed to relax. Li Chunying felt sorry for her. She asked, “What about Lady Liu?”

“I need her sewing kit,” Yuyu said, “to make new clothes for the baby. Ah.” She held her stomach tighter. “Is it supposed to feel like this? It’s gnawing me from the inside.”

“It’s not gnawing you,” Li Chunying said. “You’re just close.” She had helped with many births in her village. Yuyu had to be due tonight. “Has your water broken?”

Yuyu nodded. “Before I came to you.” She stayed tensed for a few more seconds then straightened a little and said, “I need Lady Liu’s sewing kit, and Lady Liu only wants her saltwater pearl necklace back from you. So, I’m here to make a trade.” She unbuttoned her cotton coat and pulled out a red bundle.

“You should go back to your lodging,” Li Chunying said. “You should lie down.” She was annoyed. Now she felt responsible for this stupid girl. She wished she were more cold-hearted so that she could just leave Yuyu and go back to her own business.

Yuyu shoved the bundle toward Li Chunying. “Look,” she said. “Isn’t this better than your necklace?”

It was a *dudou*.

“Be proper!” Li Chunying said. She took the *dudou* and turned toward the wall of the dormitory to hide it from others. “Do you want everyone to see your undergarment?”

“It’s silk,” Yuyu explained. She leaned back against the wall of the dormitory. Li Chunying didn’t remember if Yuyu’s breath had always been this shallow, like she just jogged around the University.

“Where’s your lodging?” Li Chunying asked.

“It’s silk,” Yuyu said. “Gold threads! Look at the embroideries. How delicate they are!”

It was true. The gold threads the woman had talked about not only ran along the sides of the *dudou*, but they outlined a dragon and a phoenix intertwined together. Multicolored threads filled in their bodies, detailing scales and plumes. Little puffs of golden clouds filled in the background.

But no matter how valuable the *dudou* was, it meant nothing to Li Chunying. Her pearl necklace, on the other hand, was from a time when she felt like she could afford to try to make herself happy. She had traded for it when she had just arrived at the Safety Zone. Her son had spotted it on Shanghai Street, where many people set up their bazaars. He had said, “Mama, look! Are those pearls real? It looks like a rich person’s jewels. When I grow up I’ll buy it for you.” He had taken to saying that lately, “When I grow up I’ll buy it for you.” First a wooden-paneled fan that he saw his playmate’s mother wield, then a pear tree in the neighbor’s backyard that started bearing fruit. Li Chunying traded for the necklace. She traded because when she tried it on she fell in love with the smoothness of the little beads beneath her throat; it made her feel delicate, like someone else, from a different time, perhaps; it made her feel as if she didn’t belong here,

in the Safety Zone, without her husband, among strangers who had turned ugly and old from war. She had been selfish. She had thought she could afford a *liang* of rice, when she should have saved the food for her child. Not that he had ever gotten too hungry. He died before food became sparse.

Li Chunying asked Yuyu again, "Where's your lodging?"

"On the other side," she said. "I'm fine. Look at my merchandize. Do you want to trade?"

No, Li Chunying didn't want to trade. On top of being stupid, Yuyu was also aggravating, like a bird that would not stop pooping in the water vat. No wonder her husband left her.

Yuyu squirmed again. Li Chunying sighed. There was no doubt that she would have to deliver the baby. It was human courtesy, like picking up and returning a handkerchief a stranger had dropped nearby.

Yuyu said, "*Dajie*, let me lie down on your cot."

"No," Li Chunying said. "I will never get it clean again. Where do you live? Never mind, I will gather up some rags for you."

Back in the dormitory, Yuyu lay on a heap of cloths up against the corner of the room. Li Chunying opened the window for air. Outside, one of the bigger firecrackers was being set off. *Boom*, it went, and people cheered. Li Chunying envied those people; they were still carefree enough to be able to get in the mood for a New Years celebration. The room had evacuated outside for the show except for the old woman, the one that ate

rice like a turtle. Li Chunying had never heard her speak. Her vocal cords were probably as withered as her limbs. She probably couldn't have made it down the stairs even if she wanted to brave the cold. Now the old woman lay in her cot by the window looking out at the fireworks.

Li Chunying placed the *dudou* on the floor next to Yuyu, who pushed it away. Li Chunying checked Yuyu's dilation. She was already palm's width. They sat in silence and waited, watching the approaching night darken everything like the oxidation of a cheap coin.

Li Chunying's boy had died in an air raid. It was an accident. That morning she was taking him to see one of his friends who lived near the southern border of the Safety Zone, under a propped-up sheet. According to the rules of the Safety Zone, the Japanese military were not supposed to bomb inside. This aerial restriction was mostly adhered to, but that morning three bombers zoomed close and started bombing the area just outside the border. A shell landed inside and wounded about thirty people, killing two, including her son. Her son had survived so much, and she had failed to protect him from something that wasn't even supposed to happen. It was an accident, she told herself and kept telling herself everyday, though she didn't know if it made her feel better or worse.

She watched Yuyu clench for another contraction, and said, "Don't worry, you are going to be a good mother." She really didn't know if that was true, but she hoped so. At least someone should be a good mother.

"Are you troubled, *dajie*?" Yuyu asked in between breathes.

“Not more than you,” Li Chunying said. “Look at you, thinking about a New Years present even before the baby’s born.”

“It’s necessary,” Yuyu said. “Everyone gets a New Years present if it was the only present during the entire year. It’s just common sense.”

“Yes. You’re right.” If she were in Yuyu’s situation she would also want to prepare a present. But she wasn’t sure if she’d go the length that Yuyu had. What was a present to an infant if the same could buy food for a week? But she admired Yuyu for her stubbornness, as if she knew for certain the right thing to do.

The crowd outside was getting rowdier. The firecrackers went off like cannons. At one point, Li Chunying helped Yuyu shift positions so that the girl could watch the fireworks out the window. The baby came in the dark, before the other women returned to the dormitory. When it came, it did so smoothly, like the way ground pork slipped out of the hand into the shape of a sausage. The moment it was out, it cried. This birth was perhaps the least dramatic one that Li Chunying had ever witnessed. She placed the baby—a girl—into Yuyu’s arms.

The baby was crying and Yuyu rocked her, saying nothing. Li Chunying left her to it. The old woman by the window had not moved in a long time. Her eyes were closed. Li Chunying scooted over and put a finger under the old woman’s nose. The birth left her oddly unemotional, and she didn’t want this crone to die, not right now. She felt a slight pulse of warmth on her finger and relaxed. This was a night, she thought, when nothing happened. She was not going to give up her saltwater pearl necklace; it was

the last memento of her son. Though, she supposed, she could talk to Lady Liu, see if she would trade for something else. None of that mattered though. Not to her. Her husband was still dead. Her son was still dead. This strange young aristocrat was still depressingly clueless. And Li Chunying herself was still in the Safety Zone. The war was still ablaze.

From behind her Yuyu laughed, a strange shrill sound. Li Chunying turned and saw Yuyu in the slanted moonlight. A milk-filled mother, queen of the rags, her lighted face was the moon in the room.

“Oo oo oo,” Yuyu cooed to the baby, “You are so complete! What’s your name? I suppose we’d have to wait until we get to Shanghai, then your father will name you. Oh, my dear child,” she said in a voice of utter delight, “your spineless, cowardly, stinker of a father will be so disappointed that you’re a girl!”

CHILD PSYCHOLOGY

In her personal statement to the Psychology PhD program at Sheffield, England, Ying wrote about her daughter, even though she disliked talking about her and avoided doing so whenever she could. In this case, Ying had to write about her daughter because their relationship, or the lack thereof, was a special leverage she felt she had in getting into the program. But also, she wrote about their relationship because it was the true reason she wanted to study Developmental Psychology, and in her mind, that truth was so huge that she could not circumvent it to make up another reason for her interest.

Her daughter, Harmony, was eight years old. She lived in Milwaukie, Oregon, with Ying's parents, calling them Mommy and Baba. Lately, on numerous occasions, Ying had been blindsided by the memory of handing Harmony over to her mom—the heady smell of baby powder, Harmony the length of Ying's forearm, squiggling like a fish, her eyes slitting open as she passed over—and had to reaffirm, sometimes aloud to herself, that Yes, she had made the right decision by coming here.

Harmony's father was Eddie Rocha, a smalltime manager at a convenience store in Milwaukie. Ying met him when she was about to graduate high school, but she made him wait. Eddie was as short as Ying and three years older. At the time, he had a scanty moustache in the shape of a trapezoid. Ying told him it made her sick, though, secretly, she wanted to rub it with the tip of her index finger to see if it felt like pubic hair. Eddie

waited two years. By the end of the second year, Eddie had graduated Oregon State, and Ying was pregnant with Harmony.

For personal reasons, Ying wrote in her personal statement to Sheffield, I gave up my daughter to my parents to raise as their own. I tried to visit more frequently, and at first she cried for my milk, but now she knows me as Ying, a sister. Studying Developmental Psychology could help me understand Harmony on a deeper level. It's the only way that I see of being as much of a mother as I could.

She supposed this was true on some level. That is, she did want to be good to Harmony. A more pressing reason for applying to Sheffield was that she needed to get out of Milwaukie. The other day, Harmony explained the digestive system, “Inside here is a magic wand.” Harmony pointed to her stomach. She was bouncing on the living room sofa, holding onto Ying’s arms as railings. Ying’s mother sat on Harmony’s other side. “You chew and swallow,” continued Harmony. “The magic wand covers everything in brown stuff, and then you go potty.”

The women laughed and laughed.

“All right,” said Ying, still chuckling, “get down from the sofa, honey. You shouldn’t jump on furniture.”

Harmony gave one last bounce and plopped down, leaned back against Ying’s chest.

Being near Harmony was turning Ying into a mother against her will, luring her into going through the actions, and she needed to get out of there.

It was never a question of whether Ying loved Harmony. But she loved Eddie too, and look how ill fitted they were. Not that it was the same sort of thing, and not that

Ying felt overly inept—all parents, she felt, were at first inept—but that she did not want to be a mother. It wasn't the responsibility or the worry or the work or even the money, it was that some people just were not mothers, and she was one of them. In the end, wasn't it better for a child to be with parents who wanted to parent her?

Ying was accepted into Sheffield with a substantial scholarship.

At the beginning of the term, the Department of Psychology threw a meet-and-greet for faculty and postgraduate students. Ying put on a nice dress and high boots. She curled her hair.

The meet-and-greet was in a ballroom near the Sheffield student union. When Ying pushed through its double doors she could see people talking, filling out space, already loosened up, having descended upon the food tables. The music was the low beat of some rapper she didn't know, and the lighting was yellow, like high school prom, which reminded her of Eddie, which reminded her of Harmony, which reminded her of the tremendous reason of why she was there in the first place. She shook her head to clear it and put a hand to her forehead.

From behind the drinks table, the bartender asked Ying what she would like, speaking in the British accent she wasn't yet used to. He was in all white and a black bow tie. His thick brown eyebrows made his nose look thick too. He didn't raise his head when he talked to her, just rolled his eyes upward, looking at her from under those eyebrows.

The ballroom was warm and Ying untied her coat. “I think I’m in the wrong place,” she said.

The bartender pulled out a beer from the ice bucket and held it out toward her.

“I don’t mean metaphorically,” she said, and let out a huff that was suppose to be a chuckle. “Is this the meet-and-greet for Psychology grads?”

The bartender set down the beer on the tabletop. “You’re fine.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your dress,” the bartender said, lowering his voice and leaning forward, smiling. His breath smelled like warm beer; he must have been sneaking, which made Ying want to pat him on the cheek. She was smiling when he said, “Don’t worry about it. These fancy dress things are too posh for their own good anyway.”

Was she not “posh” enough? Her dress was one of her nicer ones and she loved the way it cinched under her bust and made the girls look nice and tucked in. But it was green, which was normally eye-catching on her but, under the dim lights, she realized it was the color of a slug. Ying felt her breath shorten, and she said loudly, “Just a coke.”

The bartender looked taken aback. His smile dropped, and he straightened and served Ying her drink in a chilled glass. She took it and walked away toward the food tables, holding up the glass like it was her meal ticket.

The Psychology people were easy to talk to. Half an hour later, she was joking with the group she had joined, mostly people from outside the UK, talking about what it

was like to be new to Sheffield. The program director came over and greeted them. He complimented Ying on her proposed project. Someone asked what it was.

“Developmental psychology of children who are adopted by other members of the family.”

Someone asked, “Whose family?”

“The child’s family,” said Ying.

“But, you mean, without the child knowing? You mean, the child is still in the family?”

“Yeah,” said Ying. “The child is still in the family. But she, or he, calls someone else Mom and Dad.”

“And believes so?”

“Yes, she believes another couple gave birth to her.”

Talking about her proposed project was calming, like displaying dirty laundry and then stepping back to talk about how dirty it was with everyone else, as if it were art.

Ying was a self-aware person, more so than average, she felt, and knew that she was in England to escape. But was escape bad? It was true that in adulthood, escape, unless contained in units of weeklong sessions, left an aftertaste of selfishness and irresponsibility. But in talking about her project, Ying finally felt like it was possible, or would one day be possible, to compartmentalize what had happened, to create a space for Harmony, and even for Eddie, so that she might be at peace.

She needed the distance, and she liked it here.

The head of the department was talking to someone else in the group and everyone looked engrossed in that conversation. Ying looked around the room and noticed the bartender slouched against the wall, checking his phone. A server came up and relieved him for break. The bartender hurried out of the ballroom. On impulse, Ying excused herself and followed him out.

Outside, the bartender fumbled with the lighter. Ying didn't smoke often, but she sauntered up to him.

"Can I steal one of those?" she asked.

The bartender took a puff from his flame and then held the flame out to her.

"No, I mean, can I bum a cigarette?" She felt rejected, and she didn't want to smoke anymore. "You know what," she said, "never mind."

She started to return inside and the bartender called after her, "Good idea!"

Was he gloating over his rejection? Ying wanted to jump down from the steps and crush him with her elbow. She turned to give him a look of disdain and was shocked to see him smiling.

"Whoa!" he said. "Nobody killed your mother."

"Were you joking?"

"What part? I'm pretty funny."

"Were you joking when you said that it was a good idea? Like, were you joking when you said I dressed unfit for the occasion? Do you joke? Or are you just an asshole?"

“Right,” he said. “Well, I apologize for that, the dress, I was mistaken. You look lovely. It must have been the lighting. And it wasn’t the brightest thing to say. That color isn’t genuinely... Sorry.” He shook his head at himself, gave a little laugh. “You look super. I’m really sorry for offending you.”

He was cute, in the cliché way of a bumbling Englishman. Ying nodded her acceptance and started up the steps again.

He said after her, “Let me make it up to you.”

“That’s original,” she said, half joking now.

But he was holding out a cigarette.

“I quit,” she said.

“Just now?”

She shrugged. “I quit.”

“Hey,” he said, “then let me buy you dinner.”

“There’s free food inside.”

“A drink?”

She chuckled. “You’re the bartender.” She started ascending again.

“Hey,” he said, “I meant ‘good idea’ as in, it’s a good idea to not smoke. Not that it’s a good idea to stop hitting on me.”

Ying let out a nervous laugh. “I wasn’t hitting on you.”

“Come on,” he said. He offered the cigarette again. “You’re not that good.”

Ying considered, then she walked down the steps and accepted it. He lit it for her. Inside her purse, her phone beeped. She checked and saw it was an email from Eddie.

An email from Eddie? They hadn't talked in months. She wasn't in the mood for his craziness and put the phone away.

"You know what they don't have here?" the bartender said.

"There's nothing they don't have." The smoke was gritty.

"There's definitely one thing they don't have here."

She was still thinking about Eddie, and she needed to stop.

"All right, show me," she said.

After the bartender—his name was Bret—finished his shift, Ying took him back to her place and had sex. It relieved some stress. Afterward, he put on his jacket and pants and went outside for a smoke. Ying was glad he didn't want to smoke in her bed, like some cheesy French film. He was gone for a while, so she got up and took a hot shower. She listened to the old showerhead spew water through its calcified holes, and thought about Eddie's email.

The first time Eddie left, she was seven-months pregnant. After she gave the baby away, he came back, begging, saying how sorry he was, saying he got cold feet, but he loved her, baby, please. The second time he left, Harmony was three. When he came back, there were scents of incense laced in his clothes. Half a year ago, Ying finally kicked him out. He left without a fight. Ying applied for Sheffield.

They agreed to take some time before talking about what to do with Harmony.

Now, in the hot shower, Ying was afraid that he wanted to take Harmony away. He might bring it to court. Ying could see him doing that. If he did, he might get full custody. He might pass something against her, a restraining order—were those possible to mothers who didn't want to be mothers? You hear about those stories all the time: mothers drowning their children in the tub, mothers abandoning babies in the trash. Would he argue that she was psychotic? Ying started to worry. She felt that, even with all her faults, she did not deserve to never see Harmony again.

She got out of the shower and sat in her towel in front of her work desk, the only desk in the room, and stared at the darkened screen of her phone.

Bret returned with two take-out curries from the corner shop.

“For my lady,” he said, stacking away the papers on the desk, putting the phone on top of them and laying out the food in front of her. “You’re not a vegetarian, are you?”

“No,” Ying said. “I believe in the food chain.”

“What’s wrong?” he said, digging into his own carton. “Would you have been upset if I didn’t come back? Was that what you were thinking?”

“Not at all.”

“Maybe a little?”

“No.”

He shrugged. “Okay.”

“Thank you for the food.” Ying reached to stroke his arm but found herself patting his back. She opened her own carton. “This is very good. Thank you.”

“So,” he said, “obviously, you are Moody Judy. Why don’t you confide in a stranger? I’ll leave if I’m bored, I promise.”

“You mean Judy Moody?” she said, chuckling.

“Whatever my niece reads. So,” he said between mouthfuls, “I’m a curious cat. Tell me a dinner story.”

“Early-morning story.” Ying laughed.

“Early, early breakfast.”

She told him about Harmony and her parents. She told him about Eddie. Just the facts. Hit and go. She said them in a happy-go-lucky tone, as if reporting the events of a slightly intriguing evening. She told him about the email.

“This phone?” Bret said. He picked it up. “This one here?”

Ying gasped playfully and made a grab for it. “Give it back.”

“It says your mom called.”

“She did?”

“About ten minutes ago. You were probably in the shower. Bugger, how do you go to email...”

“Bret!”

“What is this contraption? I definitely didn’t touch that.”

Ying sighed.

“Well, here it is,” he said. He held the screen of the phone in front of Ying.

The email was short and formal.

Ying, it said. After much thinking, I’ve decided to stay silent about being Harmony’s dad.

“Well, aren’t you gracious,” said Ying.

“What?” Bret turned to phone toward him. Ying grabbed it out of his hand and stood up. Bret went back to his curry.

I’ve talked to your parents. They said they’ll “discuss” it with you but I’m telling you now. I’ve thought about it a lot, and I should see more of Harmony. Your dad said that you’re out of the country. How long are you staying? I think I would be a good influence for her. I could be like a second dad. Like a cool uncle or something. Like, a cool guy her parents know. She’s just a kid, you know? When you come back, I’ll be civil with you, I swear. I swear I’ll be nice to you, and Harmony will be happy to have me there. She’s always happy to have you there. I saw her today, when I went to talk to your parents. She misses you. –Ed

“Don’t you do that,” said Ying.

“You’re talking to your phone,” said Bret.

“Okay, you’ve got to leave.”

“Can I at least finish my breakfast?”

“No,” Ying said, but she sat down and waited.

After Bret left, Ying called Eddie. It went to voicemail. She hung up and called again.

On the third ring, Eddie picked up.

“How’s the other country, lady?” He sounded chipper, the way he did when he came back from a run.

“What time is it over there?” Ying asked.

“Seven thirty.”

“At night?”

He let out a breath. “You got my email?”

“Eddie,” Ying said, “you can’t...”

“I can’t? I can’t what? I can’t see my own kid? Can’t get close to my own kid?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Well, what did you say?”

But it was true, she didn’t want him to get close to Harmony. Partly, Ying didn’t want Harmony to come to depend on Eddie and then have him disappear on her. Eddie had a way of creating co-dependency. He had a knack for it. But, also, Ying was envious. She didn’t want Eddie to become closer to Harmony than she was. She didn’t want him to be more of a family with her family. She felt encroached upon.

She understood the facts of her situation. She had cast herself out. She had no ground to forbid Eddie from seeing their daughter.

She said, “You know you’re not big on commitment.”

“What does that mean?” He sounded angry. “What does that even mean?”

“I’m not talking about us,” Ying said. “You’ve left her before too, remember? You’ve walked out on her before she was even born. You’ve done it twice. For her sake, think about what you’re about to do.”

“I’m going to enrich her life, is what I’m about to do.”

Ying picked up a pillow and whacked the bed. She put her hand on her hip. “Don’t talk like you’re a gift to humanity.”

“All right,” said Eddie. “I get that. All right. I’m trying to better myself, and I see how that sounded. I’m trying to do something good here.”

Ying considered this. “Are you?”

“Besides,” Eddie said, “I don’t need your permission. I’m telling you because it’s the good thing to do.”

“How considerate,” Ying said. “You’re going to break her heart,”

She expected him to deny this, but he was silent. She waited, her heart tight, her breath seemed to have left her body. She realized that she wanted him to deny it. She wanted him to be serious, finally, about committing to some sort of relationship, and to apply himself to building something. She wanted him to say, I am coming back, and I am staying.

Eddie said, “I know you want me to promise something. If I do, you’d say that my promises don’t mean anything. So what can I say? I’ll try my best. I don’t know what else you want me to do. But anyway,” he said, “I’ve got to run. I’m sure we’ll talk later.”

He stayed on the line until Ying said, “Uh huh,” and then he hung up.

Ying put down the phone. Her hands were shaking. She went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water. She thought, Every time I make a big life decision, it always leads to a larger decision. When will I ever “cruise along?” When will I ever “be settled?” She realized that the more she pushed back against being with Harmony, the worse she felt in her own skin. She was ashamed. She was dirty. But more than anything, she felt like she was purposely hiding from someone she loved, for no reason at all, it seemed. She wondered if this was how Eddie felt when he decided to come back into Harmony’s life.

She put the glass in the drying rack, went back into the room and called her parents.

Her dad answered and quickly passed the phone to her mom, who asked why Ying wasn’t asleep. Was everything okay? Ying said yes, and her mom went on cheerfully describing the trivia of the past two days, leaving out Eddie’s visit. Ying knew that her mom was paving the road to tell her about Eddie, not knowing he had already contacted her. As much as Ying and her dad were incapable of talking to each other about anything beyond the mundane, Ying and her mom had always been strained, as if tensed for attack, in the way that alpha cats were when they circled each other, on guard. Ying thought that perhaps the strain came from them being too much alike, both pessimistic and frigid in her demands, except, maybe, when it came to Harmony. On Ying’s part, she wished she were strong in the way that her mom was, like a tree that refused to uproot in

the storm, instead of the way she was, like a traffic light that refused to turn green. Her mom was still chirping away about her day minus Eddie, and Ying began to snifle.

“Ying?”

“Eddie emailed me.” Ying rubbed her eyes and told her mom about the conversation.

“Are you saying that you want to come back?”

“If I defer a year, I might lose my scholarship.”

“I’m not talking about deferment,” her mom said. “What, you think you want to defer?”

“I’m just saying, mom.”

“You going to find a job back here? Would your old one even take you back? What are you going to do for a year? You’re almost thirty.”

“I’m twenty-seven!”

“And that’s not close to thirty?”

“I’m not like you, mom. I’m not even sure I want to get married, ever.”

“Well, that’s your choice, honey.” That was what she always said.

“Please, mom, I don’t need you to judge me. Not right now.”

“I’m not judging. I’m just trying to help. Don’t twist my words. I’m your mother. It’s always for you.” She breathed. “Okay. You’re your own woman. Either stay there or come back. Don’t do anything you know you’ll regret.”

Once, when Ying was still in middle school, she needed some art supplies for a school project and searched the attic. Inside an unmarked box, she found her mom's high school yearbook along with a few leotards, a cassette tape from Ying's dad marked To Tara, an expensive-looking empty bottle and other old memorandums. Ying had combed the yearbook for her mom—Tara Fong then, instead of Mrs. Tara Chai—and learned that she was a homecoming princess, on the dance team, and, it seemed, very popular. This surprised young Ying, who didn't feel popular at all, and she wondered why her mom never talked about those days. She thought about asking her but quickly decided against it. The box was sad. Its relics looked abandoned. The box scared Ying; it made her think that one day, she, too, will get old, and that she, too, could be composed of an unmarked box hidden in the attic.

Young Ying had felt profound with her enlightenment. She tucked away the box and did not tell her mom she had seen it. She firmly believed that she would not end up so boring, that she would live to her fullest potential, that she would never stop trying to be more and more and more.

Now, Ying said her mom, "If I come home, I'm not going to live at home."

Her mom asked, "Do you want to be in the Psychology program? Be honest with yourself."

"You know what I should do, don't you, mom?"

Her mom sighed. "I know what *I* would do, but that doesn't say much as to what *you* should do."

“What would you do?”

“I’m not going there. This is your decision.”

“It won’t affect my decision.”

“I’m not going to say. Do you, or do you not, want to stay in the Psychology program?”

“Yes,” Ying told the truth. “I think I really do.”

She didn’t know if she wanted to be a psychologist, and even though she was ecstatic about the program, it wasn’t the reason she liked it here. She wanted to be someone whom others knew how to care about. She liked the clean slate, not because everything in Milwaukie was bad, but because she liked the choices she now had in defining herself. Love, Ying thought, is not a requirement but a choice.

“What about Eddie?” she asked her mom. “What if he comes by and bugs Harmony?”

“He’s pretty nice to her.”

“You tell me when he says he wants to be there. He still works, right? So it’s mostly weekends.”

“Why do you want to know? He’s Eddie, you know,” her mom laughed, in a way that said, What a lost cause. “You could try reasoning with him.”

“I think he should see her.”

“I don’t think Harmony’s going to get hung up on him too much,” her mom said.

“She thinks he’s just a family friend. You know how kids were with family friends.”

“I want to be there when he’s there.”

“How are you going to get back here so often? He comes almost every weekend.”

“Everything is paid for here. I’ll get a job for plane tickets.”

Her mom tiskied. “You give him too much credit.”

“Probably,” Ying said. “But maybe change is possible with anybody.”

Ying got a job as a salesperson at a new teashop downtown. The manager said she could be co-management material, but right now, she weighed loose tealeaves, answered customer questions and tended the tea bar. The teashop was popular with older women and with youths who liked Starbucks. Sometimes, Ying saw kids come directly from the Starbucks across from the way or stand in the middle of the road trying to decide which way to turn. Two or three Fridays a month, she caught a redeye to Oregon and stayed until Sunday afternoon. Once required seminars are over, Ying told her family, visits will be much more flexible. But even as it was, Ying was seeing her family more often than she did when she lived in Milwaukie.

Whenever Eddie visited Harmony, Ying made sure to be there too. It was only a few months before she noticed a dip in enthusiastic about the details of Harmony’s life, though he still showed up on schedule, and Ying still told herself to have hope. She was, overall, hopeful. She felt herself settling into her role as a big sister and felt, for the first time since high school, unburdened. The family she had created was the family she wanted.

One day, when traffic was low in the teashop where she worked, she saw a few kids come out of the Starbucks across the road. They dropped a soccer ball to the ground and passed it back and forth between them. A man drove up and waited as the kids piled in. He looked like someone she knew, but when he turned his face toward her, the impression shifted, and he was a stranger. Later, when Ying was making an order of Oolong tea with honey, she remembered whom the man looked like: the bartender. It was probably the generality of the hair and the white work shirt.

She let herself wonder about the bartender, whom she hadn't seen again, and whose name she was already unsure of. She imagined him working events similar to the meet-and-greet, sneaking booze and bored out of his mind. Maybe, during those events, he often picked up women. She liked that idea. She liked to think that whoever he was, the night they spent together was already submerging deep into his memory, so that she could take claim of that brief window of time, when she started to become what she will become.

THE MYSTERY SPOT

I don't believe in Jesus. Just like I don't believe in Buddha, even though I carry around a wooden Guan Yin statuette in my backpack. I have an excuse: it was from my Mom, who had sincerely asked me what she should reincarnate into so that we could be together after she died.

"A Great Dane," I said.

"A dog?" she said. "That's pretty disrespectful."

"Sorry," I muttered, and patted her hand just in case she was actually mad. Her hand was clammy and the skin felt loose as if she were really old, instead of just forty-five. "Great Danes are good," I said. "They're loyal. Better than humans!"

She smiled and sighed dramatically.

"At least," she said, "a cute dog. A Bichon Frisé, or a Chow Chow, or some kind of Terrier."

I said, "Then you might as well be a cat."

She laughed--she thought cats were demons--her chest heaving but the sound caught in her throat like she didn't have the strength to push it out. She wiped away a clump of fine brown hair from her mouth. "Go study," she said. She was worried about my upcoming SATs. It was still months away in October, but she had been worrying since freshmen year. Now she made me do a practice test every weekend but it wasn't helping. I wasn't

concentrating. Sometimes I would pick a letter and bubble it down the entire column to speed up the process so I could do things that actually mattered. My family was big on game nights. We had three people so one of us always switched between teams. But as the year went on, Mom became too weak to jump around, so game nights turned into movie nights, with the staple meal of homemade gumbo and Costco pizza, large, with everything. In June we moved the party upstairs to my parent's bedroom where Mom now rarely left.

Mom died in August. When school started again, Dad started inviting this blonde lady to our house after dinner on Sundays. She asked me to call her Emily but her name was Mrs. Young. I used to walk her neighbor's dog. She was a Born Again, only a few years older than me, newly married, and was scared of the German Shepherd I walked. When I passed her house, I often spotted her squatting in the midst her multi-colored flower bed, her head bent, her shoulders tense, as if always cognizant that without her, the garden would spoil.

At our house, she wore a Jesus-fish necklace and was hell-bent on saving our souls. She preached sitting on our sofa, holding a cup of hot tea and eating cheese slices that Dad had bought especially for her. I usually sat through her visit, even though Dad told me I could leave if I wanted. Something about her made me itch. She exuded an aura that said we were all drowning and only she knew the direction of dry land. Mom had told me that in Buddhist mythology, there was a god that controlled water called the Water Dragon King, "so really," I told Mrs. Young once when Dad was out fixing a

broken sprinkler, “if Moses parted the Red Sea, then he was in cahoots with the Water Dragon King. Only, I want to know what sort of deal they struck. Cause I hope Moses didn’t have to sell his soul.”

Mrs. Young sat there for a moment just looking at me, her teacup mid-raised. She probably didn’t know that the Water Dragon King didn’t take souls, nor that I mashed myth into religion, but she seemed horrified by what I said and slowly lowered the teacup as if she might break it. I took a piece of cheese, Gouda, her favorite.

“I don’t think,” she started slowly, “that I did a good job of explaining what happened.”

“You did,” I said, keeping my voice sincere. “It’s just that Mom told me about the Water Dragon King a while ago. You know, before she died.”

I let it sink in, bit into the Gouda, watched as she paddled for solid landing even as she sat entirely still, the AC stirring her curls. But she recomposed herself way too quickly, her face relaxed into a smile. She actually put her hand on mine.

“Genna,” she said, “do you want to talk about her?”

“Talk about who?” I said.

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, but I’ll be here whenever you’re ready.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. I pulled my hand back but she kept hers on my knee. It felt like a hot plate and I wanted it off; I was terrified that it might burn me--absurd, I knew, but I couldn’t help it.

“Okay,” she said, with all the understanding in the world, which made me want to curl my fingers around her neck and squeeze. So to get her off my case I said the first thing that came to mind. “I had a sex dream,” I said. It was a lie.

Mrs. Young took back her hand and placed it on her lap. I let out a breather.

She said, “Okay,” and looked into my eyes, giving me a chance to expound.

I didn’t want to back down, so I started talking about a vision of getting into the backseat of a Mercedes and going at it with a guy from school. Mrs. Young listened to all of it and then said, “Have you been temped in real life?”

“Hell yeah,” I said.

“Have you acted upon it?”

“That’s the plan,” I said, to peeve her.

I heard the back door slide open. Dad had fixed the sprinkler. He headed for the bathroom and once he shut the door, Mrs. Young searched through her purse and grabbed a handful of individually wrapped squares. She took my hand and pressed them into my palm. Condoms. I imagined her purse full of them, assorted colors and sizes. They definitely weren’t for her; they were for the damned like me.

At school, I found my best friend Nate on the basketball court. His girlfriend, Olivia, was on the sidelines eating chicken fingers and guarding Nate’s wrapped burrito. Nate was playing one-on-one with my other buddy, Daniel, a scrawny guy with a rather

cute face. As I approached them, I kept thinking about Mrs. Young's hot-plate hand. I walked onto the court.

"Me and Nate against you," I told Daniel.

They let me in without complaint. Nate winked at Olivia. I thought he was hinting to her about how easy they were being on me and I chucked the ball hard at him. He caught it no problem. He dribbled toward the net, faked a left around Daniel, went straight down the middle and shot. He missed the net entirely and the ball went out of bounds. He jogged after the ball and passed it to Daniel, who walked back to half-court. They were very mild, as if the game didn't matter. Olivia clapped and cheered vaguely, "Come on, you can do it."

"Come on," I cried, and Daniel dribbled in. I was on his case right away. I had only played basketball handful of times, including PE. Both Nate and Daniel were much better than I, but Nate had left Daniel entirely to me, hovering around us like an off-course moon. Daniel was having an easy time keeping the ball out of my reach. He backed up toward the hoop, chuckling. I was practically hugging him from behind, and when we got close to the hoop I was so afraid that he would shoot that I slapped his arms like a flailing fish.

"Foul!" called Nate from his orbit.

"Dude, chill," said Daniel. He stopped playing and held the ball under his arm. I knocked it out and raced after it. "Mine!" I called, got the ball and took a shot. It

bounced on the rim and then went through the net. “Woo!” I said, and threw my hands up in triumph.

Nate, Daniel and Olivia were all looking at me. Lately people have been looking at me that way too often and I was annoyed.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing,” said Nate.

“Let’s do something tonight,” I said, surveying the three of them. “The Mystery Spot. Us. Tonight. Movies and booze. All in?”

The Mystery Spot was a tourist attraction less than an hour away where all four of us had been to countless times. The admission was only five bucks and there was actually a gate with a wooden door, but we found a low chain-linked fence around the back, behind one of the piles of fallen redwoods, and ever since then we had talked about sneaking in at night. The place was supposed to bend gravity. The main attraction was a three-room cabin that had slid down a hillside. The cabin was slanted, but that didn’t explain the odd angles that people could hang from the bar in the ceiling, or the way people looked like they were slanted forty-five degrees when they stood on the top of a few steps of stairs. The cabin also made me dizzy, which the tour guides had said happened to the people more keen to the supernatural. We had wanted to expose the hoax. But tonight I secretly hoped the place would still work. Thinking about the cabin standing there, defiant against the rules of physics, gave me a strange sort of comfort.

Near two a.m. we parked the car in the visitor's lot and walked into the redwoods. We climbed the fence. It was easy. The only thing really locked up was the gift shop at the bottom of the hill.

The cabin was the same as always, wooden and bare. We went through the cabin to the inner, windowless room where it was almost entirely dark. Even though all the doors have been taken down, the doorways were at an angle where moonlight couldn't quite reach us. We knew that there was a nook on the right side without steps or bars, and we huddled over. Nate took out his laptop and put on *Shaun of the Dead*. "Beer me," I said, and Daniel handed me one of the few good ones.

No one cared about the movie. Soon after the opening credits I heard giggling from Nate and his girlfriend's corner, so I tapped on Daniel's arm, and he followed me into the next room where the floor slanted us toward the side of the door-less frame, but we stayed inside, scampering down to the corner. We were laughing and I spilled some beer. I went down on my knees to try to mop it up with my jacket but it had already rolled away and the floor was smeared. It was my first beer so it must have been the cabin making me dizzy. I was delirious that The Mystery Spot was working and I whispered to Daniel, "I'm attuned to the supernatural."

"I believe you," he said. He kissed me on the lips. I let him go about it, so he kissed me again; this time he stayed and started roaming his hands all over. I draped my arms over his bony shoulders and wondered how far I wanted to go. I thought about the

condoms Mrs. Young gave me. They were still in my jeans pocket. I had never done it before but Daniel was an okay dude and, well, I could do worse.

Daniel started to nuzzle my neck, more like a vampire than a lover, and had somehow slithered his hand up my shirt and was squeezing my left boob, making little noises like he was into it. He smelled like skin. I touched the back of his neck above the T-shirt. His skin was surprising smooth. I tugged at his T-shirt and he took it off in a hurry. I hugged him; I wanted to feel his back, to feel the smoothness extend down his body. I wanted something to change. I wanted to have sex with Daniel Delauney and it had better be good. It had better be absolutely, out-of-this-worldly, fantasti-fuckin-ly good because I wanted to get high on that goodness.

I took out one of Mrs. Young's condoms. "Look at you," Daniel said. I broke the seal and held the condom cold and limp in my hand. Daniel was already butt-naked. His penis looked odd at that angle but his thighs were surprisingly muscular. I handed over the condom and he put it on. We lay down. A disorienting gravity was pulling on us and we yielded to the cabin. When he got to it, it was over quick. I wasn't even sure what happened and he was huffing like he had just played a sudden-death round of basketball with Nate. He thumped back against the floorboard.

A few months before she died, Mom had sat me down and talked to me about sex. It was really awkward. She told me a lot of details. Now I can't even remember most of what she said. That made me furious. It wasn't that Mom was fading from my head, it was just that she existed so strongly as a clump of ideas that it was hard to get beyond

them—the idea of her as the mother, the cook, the nag, the Buddhist, warmer of cold feet, controller of allowance, clean freak, the woman who worried way too much. It was like this when she was alive, but now that she was gone, she could no longer fill in the details. She could no longer change.

I was still breathing hard. The cabin was cold on my back and I got this odd feeling in my chest, like I was harboring something sickening and dead.

The next day after school I drove over to Mrs. Young's house. No one was home, so I sat in my car on her street and waited. I didn't know what I was going to say when I saw her, but it felt important. I felt on the edge of something.

Around six she pulled into her driveway. I got out of my car and jogged toward her. She was getting out of her car and she dropped one of her paper bags of groceries. "Fuck," she muttered.

"Mrs. Young," I said.

She spun around with eyes real wide. She looked like a mess. Her eyes were skirting around like she hadn't gotten sleep. In the orange light of day I could see the wrinkles around her mouth. She looked so small. "Can I help you with that?" I pointed at her bags.

She declined, saying they weren't heavy, which seemed like a lie. I wished she would at least put them down, but she just stood there with her arms tensed around her groceries, waiting for me to speak. The odd feeling I had was ballooning up in my throat.

I wanted to puke it out, but I was afraid. It didn't feel dead anymore, just dormant. I imagined it curled up into a furry ball, an eight-legged freak, and I could almost feel its sad little talons scratching at my thyroid, trying to find a way out.

I said, "I can't believe in Jesus." I swallowed and continued, "But if Dad likes it, it's okay by me."

"Good, Genna," she said. "Let's talk about this on Sunday."

"I'm also going to college," I said.

"Was that ever a question?" she said. Dad had told her about my upcoming SATs.

"Maybe," I shrugged. "I'm just saying." I felt silly. I didn't know why I couldn't stop telling her things. I said, "I think that some things you want to be true are not very good. Like Hell. I don't want to believe in that. Or Heaven. I think I would rather believe that we can find what we want right now. I want that to be possible."

"I believe what's true," said Mrs. Young.

"You have to know something about Mom," I said. "She went to China and lived there for, like, ten years, when she was young. Then once my Dad visited her there. They had been going out for a few years. Long distance. And that time when Dad visited she got pregnant. I'm not confessing," I said. I had her now; she put the groceries on the ground. "Mom believed what she believed," I said. "And if Dad wants to believe in Hell, well, I guess I can't pretend to understand his reasons."

"Have you talked to your dad about any of this?"

"About what?"

“Have you asked him why he is turning to the Faith?”

Inside her front window the curtain fluttered. I thought I saw the flick of a broad man-hand. And Mrs. Young suddenly felt like a stranger, not intimate like an enemy. I ignored her question and said, “Look, I think you’re okay. I’m okay with you and Dad being friends. But it doesn’t mean I’m not going to try to persuade him against certain things.”

“We want what’s best for those we love,” Mrs. Young said. “I admire you for what you’re trying to do.”

Talking to Mrs. Young was like sticking pins into Jello; nothing changed, no one bled, which I supposed was why I wanted to bounce things off of her, both literally and figuratively. Anyway it wasn’t really her I needed to talk to.

When I got home the kitchen was warm with gumbo. Dad was standing by the table, ladling the gumbo into two bowls. It was the kind with sausage, the kind I didn’t care for, but he had also ordered a large mushroom pizza. I walked into the kitchen and Dad didn’t protest when I hugged him. We sat down together at the table.

“I want to ask you something,” I said.

FLING

One summer, I took this girl out to Portland, and when we strolled by a shop window she leaned on me real sweet and said, Look, Liuming, that dress is *stunning*, by which she meant she would look banging in that dress, and she was right—she understood the curve of her own breasts like a seaman understood the globe. This girl was white, but she had this friend, Lila, who was also Chinese, and when this girl and Lila came to my house, Mom assumed the girl I had mentioned was Lila, even though I had only dated white girls. It didn't matter. I stopped calling breast-girl back.

Lila had just moved to Lake Oswego with her family and was going to my high school in the Fall. She was an easy girlfriend. She didn't need to phone everyday and she didn't hint for clothes or flowers. She had this stare that looked like she was readying herself for a photo even when she was just looking at me. It made me want to please her.

That summer was real hot. Lila and I ranged the downtown streets with our hands stuck together. She was real pretty all dressed up in contrasting colors. We'd nurse our frozen yogurts and jabber at each other.

She was stubbornly naïve, as if the truth could set her free. But she cared for me, I knew, and I did become indebted to her. She could have saved my life if the guy hadn't been just a cyclist. We were meandering along NW 6th turning left across Burnside when

I heard a loud chime. Lila rammed her body against mine and I stumbled sideways a few steps. The cyclist spun Lila around and then crashed onto the curb.

“Jesus!” I said. Lila was down the ground holding her foot. I grabbed her arm and she said, “Ow,” so I let go and rushed toward the cyclist. He had sat up and was taking off his helmet. I rushed back to Lila.

“At worst a sprain.” She waved it off.

“You okay?” the cyclist called.

“Are you?” called Lila.

“Jesus,” I said.

The cyclist stood up slowly and moved his joints.

“You okay?” he called again.

Lila let me help her up.

“No harm done.” She rubbed my arm and pecked me on the neck.

She was brutal in her certainty. “If you’re ugly, study harder,” she said. “If you can’t accept death, don’t get a dog,” she said. If I wasn’t sixteen and sick for breasts that she did not have, I might have admitted I was in love.

Before school started she returned my Pulp Fiction T-shirt and Jay Chou CD, and I held them as she walked me to my house.

“All right,” she said. “This is as far as we could go.”

I knew what she was about and I begged, “Don’t be so insecure.”

“We’d look like siblings dating,” she said.

“And why’s that?”

“You know why.” She ruffled my hair. Her eyeballs glittery in the sun.

“I need you to say it,” I said.

She said what I expected. “Asians aren’t my type. Nothing personal.”

“I was your type all summer.”

I thought she hesitated, but then she shook her head and said, “School is something else.”

I must have been real angry because the next thing I knew I was in my bathroom trying to breath normal, my palms pressed to my eyes.

On the first day of school I saw her by the lockers. I thought about going up to her but she was talking with a lacrosse player named Tommy Anderson, running her fingers through her hair as if absentmindedly, and I left her to it.

GO BIG

At Orson Upper School for Young Women, there was a rule where if anyone over five-five fell below a hundred pounds she would be required to attend Healthy Living after school on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. There was a sliding scale of acceptable heights to weights, but in the January of my last year at Orson I was five-six and floated just above ninety.

To be branded a Healthie was synonymous to wearing too many diamonds--it was flaunting, and at Orson there was a unified contempt against Healthies that even at the time we knew was powered by envy. It was also embarrassing, not because people thought we had eating disorders, but because Healthies were the ones who got caught. There were ways to avoid getting tagged. There was this Theater geek, Tracy, who was Orson's anorexia queen but always managed to weigh in just over a hundred.

Weight had never been an issue for me; I had always been thin. But that semester I was training viciously at the tennis club, hoping to finally seed first in varsity singles in March. Ever since seventh grade I'd dreamt of Wimbledon, the grass court beneath me, Serena opposite me, the crowd anxiously shifting in their plastic seats all around the stadium.

Which was why when I was tagged for Healthy Living my heart sped up, and I almost puked.

If I wanted to be able to try out for sports I had to follow school rules. Healthy Living was tucked behind an old art room in the back of the building. That first Monday when I walked in I thought I stepped through a time portal back to the fifties. There were no Smartboards or projectors, a tall, engine-red cabinet stood along the back wall, and all the tables were pushed together in a way that formed islands, like it was elementary school. There were a handful of girls there already. They looked familiar, but I only really knew one by name, Bethany from Pre-Calc. She smiled up at me like we were better friends than we were, so I sat down next to her.

The counselor was a large lady in a pink tweed jacket and a corporate-looking skirt. She was called Ms. Shultz, and asked me to introduce myself.

“Jacqueline Vance. Tennis player.”

Some girls giggled, and I sank down a little in my seat.

There were nine of us in all and we took turns sharing our food diaries. When it was my turn Ms. Shultz said, “Why don’t you pick a meal you’ve had this week and tell us about it?”

I hesitated.

“It’s okay,” said Ms. Shultz. “How about today? What did you have for lunch?”

“I was just thinking about which meal to pick,” I said.

From the back corner the girl in a jacket that said Juicy across the chest said, “It’s not that hard.”

“I had pizza,” I said, “with mushrooms. And tater tots, and a lemonade.”

“Great,” said Ms. Shultz. “All this will go into your food diary, which will start with today’s breakfast.”

“And Doritos,” I said.

“Sheez,” said Juicy girl.

“And I stole some of my friend’s chicken nuggets. I didn’t know if you wanted that.”

Ms. Shultz asked me to stay after class to get to know me one on one. We chatted about classes until everyone left, then she asked me how I felt about my first session.

“I liked it,” I said. “But I need to talk to you. I shouldn’t be here.”

“Why do you feel that way?”

“I mean, this is actually a mistake. I don’t have an eating disorder. I mean, you heard what I had for lunch. Does that sound like an anorexic to you? And I didn’t even know we were supposed to share, so how could I have preemptively had a gigasmo lunch?”

“I hear you. But this isn’t a psych ward, Jacqueline. High school is stressful. And a lot of girls just want to talk.”

“Please, the season starts in four weeks. I need to be out by then so I don’t miss any team practice. I’ll seed low.” I actually teared up.

Ms. Shultz said, “We’ll keep a close eye on your progress. We don’t require our students to do anything except attend and share their diaries, but most girls want to talk

about their experiences. No one is getting graded in here. The only thing we ask is honesty. Do you understand, Jacqueline?”

I understood. She was trying to peg me, and was probably leaning toward bulimic or compulsive liar.

“If I get over a hundred,” I said, “can I leave?”

“Then you’ll be up for examination.”

“How would you know I’m over a hundred?”

“You can ask for a weigh-in. But no more than once a week.”

The next day I ate lunch quickly and went to find Tracy. She was sunning on the soccer field with a bunch of her Theater friends, sipping on lemon water. I called to her. She turned toward me lethargically, the way she always moved. Her feather hair waved around her shoulders. She gave me a knowing smile.

“The rite of passage,” she said.

A few of her friends moved so I could sit down next to her.

I asked her what she meant, and she said, “You want to know how to weigh-in. You all come to me. But once you’re tagged it’s not that easy to get out. That’s why you should’ve been more careful in the first place.”

I wanted to say that I wasn’t trying to lose weight, just training, but I didn’t want to offend her when she seemed so willing to help, enjoying her moment, in fact. So I said, “I wasn’t thinking about it.”

She considered. I could feel her friends' attention on us even though they weren't looking. Tracy put down her water bottle, pushed herself onto her feet and said, "Let's walk."

The soccer field was next to the backyard, a four-acre forest that was popular for smoke breaks and "fresh air" during joint dances. We weaved through the exposed roots. Tracy lit a Pall Mall and then tilted the box toward me. I didn't smoke and told her so. She shrugged and propped up the cigarette near her lips, taking drags between giving advice. What she told me wasn't too inventive. Sew weights, chug water for two weeks to add water weight. "And when push comes to shove," she said, "you can add an extra pound with Ben Wa balls."

I must have squirmed because she sighed and said, "You really are hopeless."

"What if you get under all that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you said weights are five and water is five, and then the extra one makes it eleven. But what if you get under eighty-nine?"

Tracy looked at me like I was the one with the problem.

"Just covering my bases," I said.

"What do you do to lose weight?" she asked, a hunger in her eyes.

"I practice tennis everyday," I said. "It's discipline and control."

"Yeah, control."

“No, I mean it’s the amount of energy I burn up during practice. I want to be a good athlete. And losing weight... It’s not on purpose.”

On the second Friday, Dad left for a business trip, so Mom decided to accompany me to practice, taking away the last of my personal space. At least the viewing benches were separated from the courts by bulletproof glass. My group tennis coach was the one I had years ago for camp. She was a perky bobbed haired woman with tensed shoulders, and she was tougher than I remembered. She kept yelling, “Pick it up! Pick it up!” which to my surprise made me anxious. I didn’t want Mom to read her lips and get the wrong idea about me, especially when I was killing myself on the court.

On the way back she took me to Baskin Robin’s. I got a double scoop in a waffle bowl, and she got a kid-sized vanilla. The wind was getting warmer but Mom was still in her down-feather so we sat by the window near this Dick and Jane family. Their girl was drawing on the table with melted ice cream, and the boy was licking his bowl.

“How do you think you’re doing?” Mom asked.

“Oh this is nothing,” I said, wiping my hands on my tennis skirt. “I don’t know why I’m still sweating. Must have pushed a little too hard.”

“You’re getting up at night.”

“I get hungry.”

She tilted her head. “Are you sleeping?”

“Yeah.”

“Cause you know sleep is very important. If you can’t fall asleep we could get you some Ambien.”

“Say no to drugs.”

“Jacqueline.”

“What?”

“Jacqueline?”

“Oh, my god.”

“Are you pregnant?”

“Oh, Christ.”

“You haven’t had your period for three months.”

I peeked sideways at the other family. The mom flicked her eyes my way and then pretended she didn’t. “Can we go home?” I said.

“Just answer yes or no, Jacqueline.”

“No, okay? It’s normal for athletes. Our fat count gets low.”

My hand was trembling like I was cold, but I hadn’t stopped sweating. The leftover bite of my top scoop fell onto the table. It made no sound. I tried to scoop it back up but Mom said, “Jacqueline!” and wiped it up with a napkin, then reached across the table and tucked a sweaty strand of hair behind my ear.

I chugged water for a week and then asked to weigh in.

“You know we’re now supplying disposable undergarments for weigh-ins,” said Ms. Shultz.

“I’m not comfortable with that,” I said, and dropped the request.

The coach asked me to stay behind after the group lesson. We chitchatted until the other players left the court.

“I wanted to check in with you,” she said, a lead that always meant the adult had some concern about my ineptitude. I nodded. She led me over to the resting bench and handed me a paper towel. I wiped my forehead. “How do you like the class?” she asked.

“Great. I mean, I wish it were smaller, but, you know. You’re great.”

“Cause I just want to make sure you feel that you are not wasting your time,” she said, tilting her chin down and looking up at me, all serious.

I shook my head.

She said, “I know you have a big tryout coming up, and you wanted to be under Stevens, but I hope you feel like you could get something out of my class as well.”

I nodded.

“But otherwise, how are you doing?”

I could tell she wanted something from me. Lately all the adults wanted something from me. I could feel their attention like a heat lamp on my back. It wasn’t what I wanted.

“I’m sorry, coach,” I said. “It’s just been so stressful. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not just being lazy, but you’re not even pushing through your shots. It’ll ruin habit, Jacqueline. You of all people should know that.”

I nodded. She thought she had gotten a bite so I let her go on.

“You need to get some rest,” she said. “Hydrate. Lower your intake of sugar and energy drinks. And for god’s sake, put some meat on those bones. Get some energy.”

She reined back. “I’m just trying to help. We all wish you well here. Just, don’t get flustered when the spotlight’s on. You’ll be fine.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll try harder.”

The coach put on a weak smile and patted my shoulder, then dismissed me.

I tried to gain weight. During meals I ate as much as I could, but I kept on losing. By week three I was down to eighty-seven pounds, and I no longer had hopes of getting out of Healthy Living in time. But technically the school coach couldn’t kick me out due to required school conflicts, and although she was annoyed, she told me if I missed parts of team practice due to school I would just have to make it up in my own time. During practice at the club I would feel my pulse beat in my temples, and twice I had to get water in the hall so I could lean against the cooler and let the tunnel vision pass. Then Ms. Shultz pulled me aside and said that from now on a parent or guardian needed to sign my diary entries. I told Mom, and she put her head in her hands and asked me if I wanted to see her therapist. “There’s been a mistake,” I told her. “Shultz thinks I’m lying.”

“Are you?”

“Mom, see these entries? You know I eat everything.”

“I don’t know, Jacqueline. I don’t know.”

She went through the accounts one by one and often paused to ask questions like, “Did you really have a burrito *and* three drumsticks?” and “What did the spider roll taste like?” Then she put her initials next to the accounts she remembered, which was pretty much all of breakfasts and dinners. I was so worn out by the whole thing I skipped practice that night and collapsed onto my bed by seven.

I knew something was wrong. That last week before tryouts I kept getting caught staring into space. I was stressed and wasn’t sleeping. The hour before tryouts I chugged five Red Bulls and joined the line jogging around the courts.

The tryout was typical. We warmed up at the net and did a drill at the baseline, the coach feeding each of us a forehand and a backhand. I didn’t even get into the swing yet, and during the second cycle, I hit down the line and then cross court, and as I was jogging to the back of the line I felt my legs warble, so I stood still, then I couldn’t feel my legs at all, and I fell.

I was unconscious for only a few seconds and woke up to someone calling the ambulance. In the ER Mom kept pressing the back of her hand to my forehead, even though they just said my temperature was a hundred and three. I had an IV for

dehydration and a bandage for a raw knee. Mom went into the hall to call Dad, and I grew tired and fell asleep.

When I woke up Grandma was standing with Mom, talking about me. She saw me open my eyes and came over and hugged my head to her chest so that I was pitched forward with my arms hanging uselessly behind, unable to hug her back. Mom said that Dad wanted to know if I wanted him to come home. I shook my head. There was no use.

The next week Mom kept me home. I didn't even oppose too much because I could hardly go to the bathroom without feeling my muscles loosen, so I got Mom to call coach and convince her to let me tryout another time. Mom constantly tried to spoon oatmeal and veggies and soup into my mouth, but I always took the spoon and ate for myself. Grandma sat in my room and knit winter socks for the family. And despite what I said, Dad came back early, checking in every morning and sometimes standing beside the bed when Mom sat and watched me eat. Later that week my blood work came back. I heard the adults talking about it downstairs. Finally, Mom came upstairs alone with the paperwork in her hands.

“What’s hyperthyroidism?” I asked.

Mom nodded and sat down on the edge of my bed.

“They say it’s when the thyroid gland, that’s here in your throat, makes too many T3 and T4 hormones. That’s why you keep losing weight. We can fix it in a jiffy,

though. Don't you worry about that." She brought her hand up to the bridge of her nose and massaged it. "You've been exhibiting so many of the symptoms. I'm such a bad mother." Her shoulders started to jerk, and I said, "Mom," and she looked up, and I realized she was laughing. "Oh Lord," she said. "You don't know how relieved I am. I was so worried about you."

Everyone sent me cards. They all said, Get well soon! in grandma letters. When I went back to school Ms. Shultz let me out of Healthy Living, but required three one-on-one sessions to make sure that after I returned to a normal metabolism I would have a "healthy relationship with food." The sessions were typical but she knew enough to ask, "Why didn't you tell anyone about your symptoms, Jacqueline?"

"No one would have believed me," I said. Which was true enough, but even as I said it I knew that I had felt privileged to be able to eat like I did and still lose weight, that I could do so easily what others sacrificed so much for and might never achieve. I had indulged in my illness. In fact, the diagnosis took my edge away, and I almost wished I hadn't gotten caught, that I would've figured out a way to keep up appearances. I felt like I had lost a gift.

I was starting to round out. My skin looked brighter, and Grandma said my eyes looked less like a dead crow's. Everyone had told me that switching to a normal diet would take time, that I should wean myself slowly but surely, but I wasn't ever to

starve! I thought it was hilarious that “diet” was now a healthy, even a neutral, word. At lunch, without thinking, I went to find Tracy.

“They’re still watching me,” I told her. We were circling the soccer field.

“I wish I had your problem,” she said.

“You shouldn’t,” I said, because it was the right thing to say.

“Are they letting you try out again?”

“Yes. First is mine. I’m healthy now.”

The sun was hot on my back. We watched people clumped together on the soccer field, drawing out their lunch.

“They tell me I have to watch my intake,” I said, “now that I shouldn’t eat as much as I’m used to.”

I felt Tracy turn to look at me, but I didn’t look at her back.

“It’s not easy,” she said.

“I just want to be healthy,” I said.

“It’s not for everyone,” she said.

“I’m not going to be anorexic. No offense. It’s just, everyone needs a few tricks up her sleeve.”

Tracy patted me on the back.

“That’s what I say,” she said.

I smiled, somehow relieved.

“There you go,” she said, “do that more often. Shows off your cheekbones.”

“What? Smile?”

“You’re stiff like your tennis racquet. Like you’re going to beat some balls.” She laughed.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about her joke, and I frowned.

She said, “Aw, don’t be like that. I’m the one with anorexia.” She said “anorexia” with air quotes.

“Tracy,” I said.

“What’s up?”

I didn’t want to get all righteous on her. Honestly, ever since the hospital, I had been sensitive to my thoughts on food. I caught myself trying to eat less than my assigned portion during mealtimes. I was terrified of the prospect of something I had never needed to worry about: being fat, and then suffering everything I imagined that came with it. Becoming a poor athlete. Becoming invisible.

Tracy was looking at me again and I wasn’t sure if she could tell what I was thinking. She was waiting for me to say something.

How absurd: just when I proved myself trustworthy, I no longer knew the truth myself. Or maybe there was a multitude of truths, locked under each other’s armpits so that you can’t tell which was which, until everything I said could be real. I had been sick. I wanted to be healthy. I still liked being skinny. I wanted muscles for tennis. I wanted to look sexy in my tennis uniform. I abhorred being falsely accused. I liked the attention.

I said to Tracy, “Will you let me know if you notice something?”

“With you?” She tilted her head as if considering what to do with me.

I said, “Will you let me know if you think I might be developing an eating disorder?”

She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully.

“You know a lot,” I tried to appease her. I told the truth, “You could spot signs. Real ones, not just textbook ones. You’re the only person I could trust.”

Tracy laughed through her nose. It sounded like a snort. She patted me on the shoulder and left her hand there for a moment. Then she took it off and clawed her fingers through her feather hair.

She said, “I mean, I could.”

THE CHINESE ACADEMY FOR BRILLIANT SPAWNS

“Hey. You want to see my mom’s costume room?” Asad’s garlic breath prickled my ear. He had to lean in because Mrs. Norbert’s girl had just taken the Lees’ boy’s robotruck, and he was screaming at the back of her head. The potluck was hosted by his parents, the first in a series that the adults in our lives had concocted. Asad and I were the only teenagers, and were thrown together like matching dolls and then promptly left to watch the smaller children. We sat close together on his parents’ overstuffed couch. Asad’s cracked leather jacket rubbed softly against my arm. How foolish to wear a jacket inside his own house; he was so obviously in trying to look tough. Now Asad held on to his paper plate and stabbed at his remaining samosa.

“Your mother’s room?” I snickered. The adults beyond the wall sounded far away.

His parents must have told him about me, much like my parents had told me about him. I wondered how much he knew besides my grandparents moved from China. On the drive over, Dad had informed me that Asad was born in Sudan and had moved to Oregon as a baby. I had thought, just like Samir. Except Samir was in San Diego, and, at that moment, must be basking in the autumnal sun instead of being domed under this horrific Oregon overcast. Then Dad had warned me of Asad’s suave moves. What he had

said was, “From what I hear, he’s had lots of girlfriends already.” “Already!” Mom had said. “Still in high school.” Dad had nodded. “A senior,” Mom had said, sounding nostalgic. Dad glanced back at me. “Remember,” he had said, “you’re young even for a junior.” They didn’t know about Samir.

When I spied Asad from the glass door, he looked nothing at all like Samir. Where Samir bounced as he walked, Asad slouched and didn’t seem to move his arms as he scooted across the living room. Now, up close, his face looked too angular for the slothful way that he moved. He had the straightest nose I’d ever seen. His mom hollered from inside to let ourselves in, and when we did, I could smell whatever it was he had rubbed on himself. Samir never wore any such thing. He said it made him feel like a girl. I found I rather liked the way this foreign smell widened my nostrils.

“Yeah. She’s got these costumes,” Asad was saying. “Some really wild shit.”

“I’ll bet,” I said.

He laughed. “For theater. She designs them.” He tilted his head toward little Lee, who had just remembered he was still angry about his robotruck. “Want to get out of here?”

The costume room was down the hall, on the other side of the large house, though still on the first floor. It was quieter down there, windowless.

The room smelled stuffy from the yards of fabrics and looked like Puff the Magic Dragon threw up in there. But all along the walls hung magnificent costumes. Victorian, Mongolian, matador, newsie, colorful shrouds that could be Native American.

I said, “Mongolians only wore that getup for major celebrations.”

Asad planted himself in front of me and cupped my elbows.

“They’re just costumes,” he said. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You just remind me of someone.”

“That’s not very original,” he said.

Asad was a good kisser, which meant he must have practiced a lot. But it wasn’t as if I cared. I was pretty sure I would only see him at these parties, and kissing killed the bore.

The five times my family moved were all up and down the West coast, so that each time I felt cheated, since I couldn’t even balance the suckiness of being new with a cool, exotic identity. I wasn’t good at being new. I wasn’t good at making fast friends, and I wasn’t good with boys. Or rather, I was good with boys when it came to doing the latest thing (second base), but my inability to make friends with them eventually made things awkward. Samir was different; he was my friend. We used to watch old movies at the indie theater down the street from his house when I still lived in San Diego. But I had tragically left him when my parents dragged me away, forcing me to change schools, change Chinese schools, change softball teams, to leave behind the few friends I had scrapped up and to create a new map of my world. I had protested, like I always did. I had locked myself in my room, refused to eat, refused to get out of our old Honda when,

on August 25th, 1997, Dad pulled into our new driveway in Lake Oswego, Oregon. But my protest was a regimen; I had already given myself over to the calamity.

Wherever we wandered, my parents had always sent me to Chinese school on weekends. They liked to believe that I was smarter than I was. They hoped I would become fluent in Chinese like they were, and that I would start to understand the culture the way they did.

It wasn't as if I were good at school. I hardly got As in anything, which seemed to make my parents antsy, especially my Dad. Mom seemed to care more about the non-academic activities I wasn't good at: softball, being friendly, being able to manage long hair. Though, I thought, with softball, I had a way of sneaking into base if other hitters gave me a good long arc of a chance. There were few chances.

The new Chinese school was in downtown Portland, in a gray cement building near small business offices. The Chinese Academy for Brilliant Students—CABS, as people call it—rented the building on Sundays, including the basketball gym across the small courtyard.

The first Sunday that Dad dropped me off, I stood by the car, chewing my lips.

“If you keep biting, they’ll bleed,” Dad said.

I pursed so I would stop.

“Well,” Dad said, “what are you waiting for?”

“Pick me up at three,” I said.

“They have this dance team afterward,” Dad said. “I talked to the principal and she said you could join. I’ll pick you up at five.”

“I don’t dance,” I said, getting anxious. “I’ve never danced. You know that.”

“You’ll be great,” he said. “This way, you’ll get out more.” Then he softened his voice, in the way that Mom always reminded him to. “It’s always fun to try something new.” He gave an encouraging press of the lips and drove away.

It was clear that all of us at CABS were there because some higher power wanted us to learn about who we were. It was also clear that we thought of CABS as extra, but we played along, for our various reasons, treading light-footedly through the semester. As I sat through my first Language course, I felt that whatever we learned at CABS would be simply another layer we added onto ourselves, like softball or swimming, or debate club, like a talent. But how could I be good at being Chinese? It was possible to improve my language skills, but I had no idea about the other stuff. I wished someone could hand me a checklist.

Maybe that was why I liked the dances. During one of the breaks, I saw Tara show Karen some of the new choreography she came up with. The moves were precise. Huge and theatrical. It was physical, tangible. To learn these dances, I felt, would take the edge off the confoundedness I felt from what I was expected to accomplish at CABS. At least dancing had substantial results. There were numbers, and the numbers were named. You could be good at one number and suck at another. Each number was a new

opportunity. As much as I hated to admit that Dad was right, I wanted to join the dance team.

During breaks and lunch, I got a drift of how the dance team worked. Tara was a senior and the best dancer of the group. Naturally, she choreographed. Karen was the principal's daughter. She created the team and got first approval of any new dance. The two worked on the dances during the week. Apparently, they were friends outside of the island-mentality of CABS, which, as I came to learn, was uncommon, especially because Karen and Tara didn't even go to the same high school. The dances were then shown to the entire group, which all got to weigh in for any changes, though, I was told, none of changes were ever major.

The group was voluntary, and consisted of most of the high school CABS students. There was another new girl, Genna Hao. She had just moved from Nor Cal, but she was a senior, and intimidated me. After lessons, I followed the group across the small courtyard into the gym. Karen motioned Genna and I over and explained the rules.

"You're eligible once you are of age," she said. She talked liked that. "The kids like to ignore us anyway. They have their own team. One of their moms leads them. But I don't think they're serious."

"So, only high school kids?" Genna said.

Karen nodded. "We book events, sometimes. If any booking earns money, then the money is divided among all who participated."

The rest of the dance team was running around the court for warm up. The place smelled like old shoes. Beside the entrance doors, the bleachers were pulled down. Halfway up, a boy sat holding a book. He was looking right at us from under the hood of his faded gray zip-up. I didn't like him. He looked like a thief.

"Who's that?" I said.

"Just Craig," Karen said. "He's in eighth-grade. He's auditing."

"Shouldn't we let him in?" said Genna.

Karen shrugged vaguely. "I don't think he wants to."

"Craig!" Genna called. "Yeah, you. Come join us."

"Genna, you're not the team captain!" I said.

"Aw, that's all right." Karen said softly.

Craig put his book into a backpack beside his feet, then bounced down the rows, each step clanking the entire structure. Everyone watched.

Then Ruby, a veteran, hooted. Some started clapping. Tara waved at Craig, and Liuming—one of the two guys already on the team—called, "Come on down!"

The group was cooling down, gathering one by one near the bleachers. They were getting red handkerchiefs from the props box when Karen said that she had an announcement. "Genna has found us a new venue," she said.

The Gao Sheng Multicultural Award was calling for individuals or groups who resided in the Northwest region and who displayed a deep understanding and sincere appreciation for any culture or subculture. A talent show with a dash of exoticism, was

how we came to understand it. The contest was in January. We had almost three months, which was plenty to learn a new routine. The prize was a whopping five thousand dollars. Including Craig, there were twelve of us on the team. An even split would be about four hundred and sixteen a pop. Also, the founder was Chinese, so we thought we had an edge.

“What should we call ourselves?” asked Ruby.

“How about Spawns?” I suggested. “The Chinese Academy for Brilliant Spawns.”

Mongxin laughed like it was a joke. I frowned at her and she stopped.

“Why not?” said Genna.

“It’s like that movie that just came out,” I explained. “The hellspawn with all those cool superpowers.”

“I had to sneak in,” said Bobby, the other guy on the team. “But it turned out pretty stupid.”

I ignored him. “We could have a Spawn mascot. I could get us devil ears. How great would that be?”

“Adorable,” Ruby agreed.

Karen clapped, and it was decided. We let Karen take care of the application forms. Before rehearsal ended, Tara told us to practice aerobics so that we would be able to go through the dance easily on the day of the contest.

I got into our family Honda feeling proud. The only thing that dampened my mood was that Craig had weaseled his way onto the team, against the rules, just because he was at the right place at the right time.

Unlike our apartments in San Diego, L.A., and the ones before, our place in Oregon was a house, and also close to a patch of woods with a biker's trail. Even if Tara hadn't come down on us about exercising, I would have gone there to run most days after school. I loved listening to the metronome of my breathing, so that even the perpetually gray sky seemed like part of its quiet, separate world. Mom was thrilled I had found this activity. "Great training for softball," she told me.

Running was easily enjoyable. I could feel the mechanics of the body pulling, letting go, the thighs rising in turn, the nose sucking in air in rhythm to the heart.

In San Diego, Samir and I had once gone to a screening of *Dr. Strangelove* in the semi-seedy indie theater down the street from his house. The theater had only two screening rooms. The one that screened our movie was the size of a large closet with rows close together and slanting dramatically. The screen had no curtains and looked like a large whiteboard. It wasn't even centered in the room but off to the left. Samir plopped down next to me. He put down the armrest between us.

He said, "Thanks for coming out."

It wasn't a problem; my parents thought I was at Joyce's.

We were catching the matinee. The only other people in the screening room were three old ladies sitting a few rows below us.

"It sucks that you're moving," he said.

Yes, it did.

He smiled and handed me the rest of his Mars bar.

I sat in silence and nursed the bar. When Dr. Strangelove did his Nazi salute, I gasped and then giggled.

Samir whispered, "Alien hand."

Is it real? Do people have it?

He nodded. "Check out Youtube. Like, possessed."

One of the old ladies glanced back at us. I apologized for talking but she didn't say anything, just considered us for a while and then turned back around. I smiled at Samir.

Two months into the Oregon semester, my progress report from real school arrived in the mail.

During dinner, while I was reaching across for the mashed potatoes, Mom started with, "Watch your sleeve, Olivia." And once she got started, it was a train catching momentum. "Have you brushed your hair today? Have you brushed your hair this week? Tie it back. It's getting into your pasta."

"Manda." Dad patted Mom's hand.

I realized she had been upset for a long time. Not just since she got the progress report, but for days, or even the entire week. She liked to pretend that things were okay until they weren't. Unlike Dad, who made sure you knew when he was displeased. So that I was constantly tiptoeing around those two. Who knew when they were going to blow?

“I’m just doing what you said,” I said to Mom.

“Yep.” She sipped from her water. “I meant,” she said, “it would be nice if you’d stop knotting it in a damp rats-nest. I meant, you should brush it.”

Dad said, “We got your report card today.”

“Yeah?”

“We expected more from you.”

“You always expect more.” I was cutting my steak into the shape of a star and made sure my parents noticed it. It was to show that I was nonchalant. But really I was so scared I couldn’t look at them.

Dad groaned. “You’re so bright, if you just apply yourself.”

“I’m not as smart as you think,” I said.

“The way you’re going,” Mom said, “you’ll get two D’s, Olivia,”

That would be my worst yet.

“What do you need?” she continued, screwing up her eyes. “What can we do to help? We want to help. Don’t we, Tian?”

“Oh yes,” Dad agreed heartily. “Tell us what you want.”

I raised a chunk of steak to my mouth and chewed. Mom and Dad continued with their dinner, lightly, so as to not disturb what brilliance I might come up with to save myself. We were pretending we hadn’t had this exact conversation a few months ago, and a few months before that.

All of a sudden, I remembered the time in the shower when I dipped my head and saw that against my shoulder laid a smooth, black coil, the tail of a snake. I swatted it and jumped away, but of course it was no snake. It was my own hair, which had gotten

so long that the length could fall down my back and then double back to rest on my shoulder. I stuck my head under the water and gathered all my hair into one bundle and then leaned against the wall. I felt ridiculous, but my heart still went on pounding. How extraordinary that my own body could frighten me. For a moment, I had felt that it had a mind of its own. But then, didn't bodies rebel everyday? Cancers, driving accidents, heart attacks, strokes. The hand of Dr. Strangelove.

Of course, I said none of this to Mom and Dad. I didn't even know why I was thinking it. Instead, I said, "I just can't do what you want. It's not like I don't try."

My parents were persistent. They asked for my favorite subject and why I liked algebra but not geometry. They even brought up the dance team at CABS, and said how good I was, and hadn't I not expected to be so good? If they had conducted a stress test, I would have excelled.

When they finally let me leave the table, it was almost nine. My parents clattered the dishes away and I ran upstairs and hid in my room.

That night, I couldn't sleep. Besides that I was worried about failing History and Geometry, the Gao Sheng competition was also coming up in three weeks, and my parents' unexpected praise at my dancing made me even more nervous. On top of all that, after Gao Sheng would softball tryouts, and I cringed at another season of embarrassing strikeouts.

I turned on my lamp and tried to read *The Lives of Christopher Chant*. But that didn't help, so I turned off the lamp and tried to count sheep. Except my sheep started twirling red handkerchiefs and dancing to the competition soundtrack, so I opened my eyes again to stop thinking about the competition.

It was late. The light from the streetlight outside my window hit my wall in defined streaks. If I squinted, I could imagine the streetlight being an alien spaceship, then I thought of Asad's bad pickup line, and of Samir next to me in the semi-seedy indie theater.

I had to get to sleep.

I got out of bed and stalked downstairs to the kitchen cabinet where my parents kept their extra medication. The house was still larger than I was used to, and at night, it felt strange and empty. Quietly, I took out the plastic box and opened the snaps. Among the bandages and allergy pills, I found a new box of NyQuil LiquiCaps. In my room, I took two emerald green liquid pills and hid the rest of the box in my backpack. The pills were like two green cocoons. I washed them down with my bedside water and fell asleep within the next quarter hour.

The next morning when I sat up, I heard a plop to my left. It was my left arm, lying on the comforter, bent back from my socket. I was amused. I must have slept on it weird. I couldn't feel anything and I couldn't move the fingers. The whole thing looked lifeless, and when I tried to move the rubbery mess and still couldn't, I began to panic. I hoped there wouldn't be permanent damage. Dad knocked on the door. "I'm up," I said, and he padded away. I lay back down, hoping it would help the blood pump more easily into the arm. After a minute, I started to feel a tingle. I laughed and then sighed. I was happy the rest of the morning.

That Sunday, Craig was especially heinous. He had become Tara's pet, being a natural and all. We were practicing in groups, each with an appointed leader. Craig was

given rule over Ruby, Genna and me. He was such a hard ass. He kept telling Ruby and me that we were off on this, this, and that. It would have been okay, except he barely said anything bad to Genna, which, I felt, was because she kept sticking up for him. CABS was tiny compared to real school, so personal relationships ruled supreme. But when it was Craig playing favorites, it simply felt wrong.

He was also just annoying because of his Craig-ness. He had started bringing this orange sports bottle to rehearsals, from which he drank constantly. He made so much noise sucking on that nozzle he had to be doing it on purpose.

I brooded the entire session, getting angrier by the minute. During break, we all parked ourselves on the bleachers and took out the snacks our parents had stuffed in our backpacks. Craig took out a bag of pretzels and a book, still sipping from his bottle. I went and sat next to him.

“What’s that?” I said.

He answered without glancing up. “Witch Week.”

On my other side, Ruby said, “I’ve read that! Diana Wynne Jones, right?”

Craig nodded, smiling around me at Ruby. “She’s my favorite author.”

“Lame,” I said. *Witch Week* was in the same series as *The Lives of Christopher Chant*, except two books further in. I couldn’t believe that Craig had the same taste as me in books. I didn’t want to be similar to him in any way—it made me feel contaminated.

“You read this much at school, too?” I said.

Craig shrugged.

“Shouldn’t you be playing with your friends instead?” I said. “You can’t be that much of a loner.”

I knew I went overboard.

Ruby said, “Well, *I* really like those books.”

I said, “Sure, they’re cool. But you know, we’re not talking about the books here. We’re talking about Craig’s potential social life. We’re trying to help him make friends.” I turned to Craig and said, “We all like you here, Craig. But you know you’re not really supposed to be here.”

“What are you saying?” said Craig.

“You’re not old enough. You don’t belong on this team.”

Ruby looked consternated and held tight to her knees. The other Spawns were within earshot but must have been pretending not to hear.

“Olivia,” Ruby said.

I said, “What’s in that bottle, Craig? Milk?”

“Olivia,” Ruby said.

“It’s orange juice,” Craig said.

“Oh! Juice!” I said.

“Craig,” Ruby said, “do you think we’ll win?”

“We’re getting good,” Craig answered. He had been pretending not to be bothered but grabbed onto Ruby’s question eagerly.

“I don’t think we’ll win,” I disagreed.

Tara turned around. “You don’t think we’ll win?”

My face got warm.

Tara continued, “Do you know other people’s acts or something?” Her voice was sharp, like putting a firm stop to whatever I was doing to Craig, but she also sounded genuinely curious.

I was still angry but I wanted to please Tara.

“No, but,” I said, “I know a guy who might.”

It was my parents’ turn to host the potluck and, on Friday, they made me clean all the toilets. Afterward, I showered and put my hair up in a bun, and since I had dried it first, Mom let it be. Asad was sporting his usual leather jacket. When he walked through the door, he smelled so heavily of cologne that I wrinkled my nose at him. He winked back.

When we were all settled with our food and the adults were once again entombed in their own world, Asad and I snuck up to my room and fell onto each other. He moved us toward my bed until we sat on the edge, but I refused to lie down. But kissing Asad had become mechanical. You can’t kiss for a total of hours without being repetitive, and I was bored.

I pulled away but Asad didn’t seem fazed. He got up quite happily to examine the room. He paused in front of my dresser, made faces at me in the mirror until I

laughed. Then he picked up my Star Wars figurines one by one, turning them around in his hand like they were expensive. I thought about the task Tara had put upon me.

“Asad?” I said. “You know how your mom makes costumes?”

“Yeah.” He put down Leia and picked up Jabba.

“You know how she’s one of the judges for this contest thing?”

“Gao Sheng Multicultural? She does it every year.”

“I’ve heard.”

He put down Jabba and turned toward me. “You want me to cheat for you?” His lips curled into a smile.

I laughed and scratched the back of my neck.

“Well?” he prodded.

“Just some friendly nudging in the right direction,” I said.

He looked at me for a minute, then said, “I didn’t know you were entering.”

“My school, I mean, my Chinese school, has this dance team. I sort of told them I’d talk to you.”

“You told them I would cheat for them?”

“They don’t know it’s you,” I said hastily. “I just said I might know someone.”

Asad sat down. His weight made me sink toward him.

I said, “It’s not because we make out and stuff.”

“I don’t know what to say,” he said.

“Look,” I said, “you don’t have to do it. I just had to talk to you because I promised I would.”

I stood and walked toward the door, dismissing the conversation.

“The competition’s a joke,” he said, “you know that, right?”

“It is not a joke!” I turned and put my hands on my hips. “I’ve worked really hard at the dance! We all have. It’s not a joke just because you have no skill to enter with.”

Asad stood up too, tense.

“It’s a joke because I don’t think anyone could really judge what is multicultural.”

“Well, aren’t you the supreme judge of right and wrong,” I said.

“I’m not. That’s the point.”

I could feel my face redden from embarrassment, but I didn’t want Asad to know, so I ran a hand down my face and grunted in frustration.

“But,” he continued, “since it’s a joke, I could help you out.”

“What do you even know anyway?” I said.

“If I wanted,” he answered, “I could get my hands on the apps.”

That sounded way too sissy. I was suddenly struck by the power I potentially wielded. Asad didn’t seem to give a damn either way, and no one else had to know. The money I would win wasn’t even the point. The win itself excited me.

I said, “That’s all you can do?”

Asad smiled. “What? You want me to erase some info? Disqualify some competition?”

“Think bigger.”

“What do you have in mind?”

I said, “I bet you can’t make us win.”

Craig didn’t show up for rehearsal. Nobody said anything, but I knew they all blamed me. I did too. During break, I found Craig and apologized. He said it wasn’t because of what I said. He just had an additional project he needed to work on and had no more time to give us. I didn’t believe him for a second, and when a bunch of us went to McDonald’s for lunch, I bought him a McFlurry. He took it but still didn’t seem happy with me. I didn’t think he believed I was sorry.

As the competition date drew near, Tara never once ask about my knowledge of the other acts. I didn’t say anything about my new plan.

The group seemed to gradually forget my outburst, and when I brought in devil-ear headbands to the last dress rehearsal, everyone seemed super pleased.

On the big day, in our assigned dressing room, all the Spawns wore my devil ears while they waited. With my own pair on, I felt in control and sexy. CABS was going ninth, way before the half-time lunch break, which was when Asad will get into the judging room and exchange our scores. Before that day, Asad had gotten his hands on a

score sheet and ran copies so that he could score us high and then replace the actual sheets. He had also scoped out the judging room, which, he said, didn't even have a lock. Asad would sneak in when the judges were out to their complimentary lunch.

I knew the plan was shoddy. What if the judges discussed scores in the end? What if Asad got caught backstage? What if a judge realized that the Spawns' performance couldn't possibly have won and went back to check the sheets? But I felt powerful, and I didn't care about risks. I ran my fingers over my costume, not that it needed smoothing out. Karen's mom had sewn it, ironed it, and steamed it, like she did for everyone. It was red, for happiness. The front panel wrapped around to the left and was held in place by black, felt buttons. The collar was tall and stiff. Gold sequence ran around the ends of sleeves and pants.

When the MC started introducing the Spawns, we all took off our devil ears and went to the wings. Then Karen walked on stage and briefly described our dance: "a re-interpretation of a traditional Chinese love story—"

When the music started, I entered on cue, jumping in huge steps and swinging my arms parallel to the ground. When I reached my spot, I knelt and started to spin my red handkerchiefs. Each handkerchief had a ring sewn in the middle so that it could spin on our index fingers. Golden tasseled weighed down the rim so that, if done right, a spinning handkerchief could be tossed to someone else and caught still spinning. All we had to do was to bump our spinning handkerchiefs up into the air and then catch them as they came down. I had practiced really hard at this bump. I had practiced while watching TV. I had

practiced while doing homework. I had practiced at the dinner table until Mom told me to put them away. I had gotten to the point where I could catch both handkerchiefs ninety percent of the time. But with the techno beat of “In That Distant Place,” the black, cold vacuum beyond the lights that was the audience, the squirmy feeling that came with being judged, I tossed the handkerchiefs up, and when they came down, I missed them both. One of them dropped by my knee and I scooped it up quickly, but the other slid toward the edge of the stage. I crawled desperately after it and finally got a hold of the tassels. The rest of the dance I did on auto mode, my heart clenched in embarrassment.

When I finally got off the stage, my ears were buzzing and I couldn’t catch all of what the Spawns were saying. I caught Ruby saying something like, “Well, that was fun,” like we had no shot at winning. The thing was, we didn’t. I wasn’t the only one who dropped a handkerchief. During one of the formation changes, I spotted one splayed on the black stage near the footlights. I didn’t know whose it was.

Then, from amidst the buzzing, I heard the MC introduce the next contestant over the intercom, “Craig Xin Chen of Lindell Middle School performing the bagpipe and a *sean nós* dance!”

My jaw actually dropped. The rest of the Spawns looked at each other. The pause wasn’t long. Ruby chuckled, and everyone relaxed, like it was all okay.

But it wasn’t all okay. I felt like Craig had made me into a fool. I had apologized, and he had chosen to try to beat us at our own game. I felt it was my fault for turning him against us. I texted Asad.

New plan, I typed. Would be suspicious if CABS won. Instead: MAKE CRAIG LOSE.

On stage, Craig came on and gave a speech about why he had chosen his performance. His dad was in the military, he said, and he didn't get to see him often. The last time his dad was on leave, he took him and his mom on a trip to Ireland, where Craig encountered *sean nós* dancing for the first time. He said he was immediately fascinated by the dance and the culture behind it, and, in one year, this was what he got. Then he starting piping this song and it actually sounded good. I went to the wings to watch. The Spawns followed.

Craig was in a kilt and a hat with a red yarn ball. The bagpipe looked oversized. Then, over the speakers, a recording caught on. He put down his bagpipe and started dancing.

The little I knew about river dancing came from the clips advertising for DVDs of the Lord of the Dance tour. But Craig looked like he knew what he was doing. He looked fresh and strange and powerful. Why was it that everything he tried turned out right? Why was it that he could pull out something like this at the last minute?

I unclenched my fist from the drapes. I left the Spawns and went back to our dressing room.

The venue had two large dressing rooms, one near each wing. Since Craig wasn't in our dressing room, I went across the backstage hallway to the other. I thought I was going to confront him when he came off.

When I got in, I easily found his gray zip-up, his backpack and his orange sports bottle shoved against one of the mirrors.

The next few things I did automatically. If I had any thoughts at the time, I must have suppressed them. My hands moved swiftly and steadily. My breathing was steadfast.

No one recognized me or noticed when I walked out with Craig's orange sports bottle. I walked back down the hallway, passing two performers in leotards, and returned to my dressing room. Over the intercom, the shrill of the bagpipes accompanied me as I searched through my backpack for the box of NyQuil LiquiCaps, stuffed it down my shirt, and exited the room. I walked to the bathroom and locked myself into a stall. The only other girl in there flushed and then ran the water at the sink. I waited until the bathroom door closed behind her.

There was an intercom in the bathroom. I couldn't tell if Craig was almost done. I didn't know anything about bagpipe music. I put the sports bottle on the ground and counted my pills. There were eighteen total, sitting big and fat in their clear, molded cages. I peeled off the backing to a pair of them and dumped them into my hand. Their casings stank like wet towels.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I must have been freaking out. Eighteen NyQuils! I wasn't ignorant about what they could do, and still, my hands broke off a piece of toilet paper and put it on top of the metal wastebasket on the side of the stall,

then they twisted off the bottle cap and balanced it upside down on top of the toilet paper. I looked down into the bottle. It was half full of orange juice.

I put one of the pills into the overturned cap and went to work on the other. I squeezed it with my thumbnail. The casing was surprisingly tough. I turned the pill around and squeezed again. My nail made indents and deformed the casing, but it didn't break it. I held the pill up to my mouth and bit it with my canine teeth. Still no luck. I took off one of my earrings and palmed the backing as I pushed the wire against the tip of the pill.

The wire poked through with a small pop. I pulled out my earring, bent over the open bottle, and squeezed out all the pill's innards—faded green, sinewy. The color melted into the juice but the stuff clumped on the surface like oil.

Then I did the same thing with the remaining seventeen pills.

When it was all done, I put back on my earring and gave the orange juice a swirl. I threw away the packaging and the deflated casings. I recapped the sports bottle and left the bathroom.

Craig's bagpiping had sped up and seemed to be hurtling toward the end. I hastened to his dressing room and put the bottle where I found it, then I returned to my own dressing room and watched the Spawns come in from the wing.

Asad had left a text on my phone.

It said, *Whatever*. It looked angry.

Genna came up to me. “We’re all going to KFC for lunch. My mom’s organizing it. Want to come?”

I nodded.

“Are you sick?” she asked, reaching out for my shoulder.

“Oh, god,” I said.

I bolted out of the dressing room and down the hallway and then into Craig’s dressing room. He had just returned, wiping his face clean of makeup and sweat with a paper towel.

I looked toward the sports bottle; it was still where I left it. I hurried over and picked it up.

“Hey,” Craig said. He looked at me and then at the bottle. “Yeah?” he said.

“Good job with your number,” I said. “We all watched it backstage. It was really good.”

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m really sorry, Craig,” I said, holding the bottle with both hands. I wanted to put the bottle back and pretend nothing ever happened. But some part of me made me say, “You can’t drink this.”

Craig sighed.

Our exchange sounded casual. A contestant in a fancy opera-like dress turned toward us and then away again, so as to not be nosy.

“No,” I said, walking up to him and lowering my voice. “I put a bug in it,” I said.

“I’m so sorry. I really am. I’m so, so sorry.”

Craig looked around to see if anyone heard.

“I’m stupid.” I said. “Let me buy you another orange juice.”

“Why do you do stuff like that?” he said.

“I don’t not like you,” I said. And I found that it was true. All the anger I had toward him seemed to have disappeared and turned into alarm. “It won’t happen again,” I said.

Back in my own dressing room, the Spawns were already in their street cloths. When I saw Craig again, it was during lunch at KFC. Out of our costumes, it felt like we were back to our regular lives. He didn’t seem to avoid me. I had emptied his sports bottle into the bathroom sink and washed it clean, in case he wanted it back. But he didn’t ask, so I didn’t bring it up.

It wasn’t until the end of the day, when the judges announced the winners—no Spawns, no Craig—that I remembered what I had asked Asad to do.

Eighteen adult-strength NyQuils, I knew, were enough to have caused liver failure. On a tiny guy like Craig, it might have been fatal.

That night, I couldn’t sleep again, but I wasn’t about to hunt for more pills. What I had done had made me feel like a criminal. I kept imagining the police pounding on our

front door and telling my parents they had to take me away. *But he didn't take them*, I would beg everyone. *I never meant for him to take them*.

I hadn't talked to Asad since I texted him at the competition. By all decorum, I should have called and thanked him. But I was preoccupied, and I hadn't been sure if I wanted to talk to him anyway.

But now, I took out my phone and tiptoed out into the garden so I wouldn't wake my parents.

Asad sounded like he had been asleep. But he said he'd meet me half way at the 24-hour Denny's in Tigard.

I had just gotten my permit, so driving alone was a treat. I felt grown-up, and I felt especially solemn as I got out to greet Asad next to his car.

He kissed me on the mouth. It was the only way we knew how to interact. Neither of us wanted to go into Denny's, so we climbed into his car. He waited for me to speak. I told him about CABS and the dance team, about what my parents wanted versus what I wanted.

"To win," he said.

"I just wanted to be good at something," I said, defeated. "So I did something very stupid."

"Craig was borderline," Asad said, "he probably wouldn't have won."

"No, it's something else." I turned toward him. "Do you like me, Asad?"

"What do you think?" He put a hand on my thigh.

“No, I don’t mean, as a person.”

He took his hand away.

“Enough of the time,” he said.

“I’m a bad person,” I said.

He laughed. “There are people much worse than someone who cheats at a stupid pageant.”

“It’s not a pageant.”

“Yeah,” he said.

I said, “I once saw this movie called Dr. Strangelove.” I told him about the alien hand, the hair that coiled onto my shoulder, the morning I can’t move my arm. I said, “I was so mad at Craig, you know. He can be such a worm.”

He chuckled. “You’ve told me hundreds of times.”

I said, “After I texted you, I saw him dance. He was good.”

“Yeah?” He nodded.

“And I might have felt guilty for making him lose. I must have felt guilty. I went to his dressing room to confront him. But I saw his water bottle.”

Asad raised his eyebrows. “Yeah?”

“And I put something in it. I wasn’t thinking.”

He waited.

I said, “I bugged it.”

Asad relaxed, and, laughing, patted my leg. “What kind?”

“I don’t know, the kind with lots of legs? Not a cockroach. I found it in the corner of the dressing room.”

“Was it big?”

“I thought so.”

“You made him drink bug juice?”

“No! I took the bottle back. I told him what was in it. I washed the bottle and I’ll give it back to him.”

“See,” Asad said, “you’re not a bad person after all.”

I wanted to think so. I wanted to think that my stopping Craig from drinking, no matter what was in the bottle, was enough to redeem me.

I said, “It must have stuck with me when Samir told me that Dr. Strangelove’s syndrome was for real. I don’t think I have it, I mean, I don’t have it. But that feeling of being out of control. That’s so scary.”

I was confiding, but Asad said, “From what you’ve told me about Samir, he wasn’t much of a boyfriend.”

“He was a good friend.”

“But you wanted him to be more.”

I started to grin. “You’re jealous!”

“You once said that I reminded you of someone.”

“We’re not even talking about Samir right now,” I said.

“Why do I remind you of him?”

“You don’t. Before I met you, Dad said that you were from Sudan, that’s all. But you don’t look like him at all.”

That must have been the wrong thing to say, because Asad was suddenly angry. “You keep saying that you don’t like it when others expect you to be something you’re not. Well, why should I be the same as Samir just because I’m also from Sudan?”

That did sound bad.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I said.

“And I’ll tell you why you don’t like Craig,” Asad said. “He reminds you of the worst of you and you don’t like what you see. He’s an outcast, a loner. He’s a weirdo.”

“I’m not a weirdo!”

“But you know what, he looked like he’s could be a cool person.”

“I’m sorry I compared you to Samir,” I said. “I was just stupid.”

“Stop saying you’re stupid,” he said.

We sat in the harsh light of the parking lot. Asad’s window was cracked open. I could smell hash browns.

I offered, “You could help me with something.”

“I don’t think I want to,” said Asad.

“I want to make things better,” I said.

“Why do you even care?” he said.

“I care,” I said.

Asad said his mom expected me on Thursday night. I put on a clean collared shirt and tied my hair back from my face. Asad had given me Craig's real scores and I brought those sheets with me. Mrs. Essa was overjoyed to see me. "Asad never introduces me to any of his friends," she said, motioning me over to dining table where she had put out small bowls of fruit. "But, of course," she said, "we already know each other."

Asad was already waiting at the table.

"I'm afraid this isn't a social call," I said, resorting to a phrase I've heard in the movies, since I didn't know how else to start.

I told her I had switched Craig's score sheets. I put the real ones on the table and pushed them toward her. "If there is any way to re-evaluate," I said, "I'd do anything to help get it done." I left Asad out of it, but he admitted his part anyway.

Mrs. Essa's shoulders dropped.

"This is unfortunate," she said. "Well, Olivia, you're forbidden from future contests, of course. And Asad, this is just hurtful. You know I work very hard to organize the event."

Asad hung his head. I never realized that he might have problems with his mom too.

Mrs. Essa rested her cheek on her palm. She suddenly looked exhausted.

"I remember Craig Chen," Mrs. Essa said. "He performed well. Actually, when we were discussing the top twenty, the judges did a double take at their own scores for him. But that doesn't mean that the contestants who won weren't the right ones."

I nodded, relieved.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said. It felt like one of those things that adults said to encourage good behavior, even when the circumstances were bad.

“I’ll be better,” I said, meaning it.

“I hope so.” She looked me in the eye. Then she popped up from her hand.

“Well, how are other things going, Olivia? You’ve been here for a few months now, how are you liking school? Your mom says that you’re trying out for softball. That’s very nice, isn’t it?”

I was glad she changed the subject. She looked so radiant in her forest-green sweater and huge teardrop hoops. She pushed the bowl of cherries toward me.

I picked up a dark one and said, “Actually, Mrs. Essa, I was thinking about trying out for track.”

Neither Mrs. Essa nor Asad batted an eye. And why should they? Asad gave his mom a grin, probably trying to get on her good side so she wouldn’t come down too hard after I leave.

“A noble sport,” Mrs. Essa said.

Before the following Sunday, I went to the mall and got a new sports bottle, the next book in the series by Diana Wynne Jones, and a small carton of orange juice. I put everything into a gift bag, along with a pair of devil ears. I tracked down Craig during the first break between lessons. We went into an empty classroom and shut the door.

I said, “I switched the scores so you wouldn’t win.”

He looked mad and young. He huffed and paced back and forth. “Why did you do that?”

“I was angry with you, because you didn’t seem to try at anything and you were good at everything.”

“That’s not true,” he said.

“I know. I’m sorry. For real. But the good news is, I talked to one of the judges and she said I didn’t affect the final outcome.” I held out the gift bag. “I hope you’ll forgive me. I’ve changed.”

“Why should I believe you this time?” he said.

I couldn’t tell him why, except that I meant it.

He eyed the door and then eyed the gift bag. I could see him struggling to spurn it out of pride, but curiosity got the better of him. When he saw the gifts, he actually got excited. “Hey, thanks!” He shook the book at me. He was smiling, even if not at me, at least at something I did.

I didn’t tell Asad about the pills. I didn’t tell anybody. I liked Asad’s version of me better, that what counted was that I didn’t carry through. We started going for runs together before dinner. We would meet up in Tigard high school and run around their track.

Before softball season started, I declared at dinner that I didn't want to tryout. "I want to do track," I said. "I think I'm good at it."

I wasn't sure how my parents would take the news, but all they did was look at each other, and Mom said, "All right."

Maybe it required faith to wake up everyday believing you were something good.

When I ran, I set my own goals, felt the poison seep out into something manageable. But it was hopeless to forget that feeling of walking down the backstage hallway. My hand clenched around the plastic bottle, my feet carrying me swiftly toward the target, my heart frantic with what was so precisely, even if among other things, glee.

TOMMY'S FLAME

When people ask Ruby where she's from, she usually says Portland, where she was born and where her family lives. But she knew that's not what they're after. Some of them would blink a few times, feign surprise that Ruby would take their question that way, so certain they are in their rightness. Then, inevitably, they ask again, No, I mean, where are you *really* from? They draw out the *really*, like talking to a small child.

This time Ruby had it happen on the way to the firm, through two rolled down car windows. The guy had to yell it. He had to lean across the empty passenger seat and tried to drown out her NPR. "China," she answered, feeling disgusted with herself.

When she got home she told her friend Tommy what had happened. He said, "He's just flirting with you."

"But how gross," Ruby said, "has anyone ever came up to you and asked which white you were?"

Tommy patted her hand. He had to walk around the kitchen table to do it. Then he hugged her shoulders from behind, resting his chin lightly on top of her head.

"Yeah," he said. "Like, are you Jewish, are you German, are you French. Are you British or Australian? I could never tell those apart."

Ruby laughed and patted his arm.

Ruby and Tommy lived together in a two-bedroom apartment in Takoma Park, close enough to both their offices in DC. They met near the end of college, when Tommy had just broken up with his girlfriend. They found out that they both came from around Portland, which made them feel so connected that, without knowing much else about each other, they agreed to be roommates.

They were good roommates. They didn't fight over the TV or the shared bathroom, and Tommy seemed to enjoy, as she did, the increasing amount of time they chose to spend with each other. First to watch certain shows together, then to go out for drinks, runs, skating in the winter, a trip up to Canada during Memorial weekend. He turned out to be a good friend. More reliable, Ruby felt, than some of people she had known for years.

They ended up living together for four years. Lately, Ruby got the feeling that Tommy had hopes of being with her, but she was uninterested and didn't care to hide from him the men she dated. A recent development was that, if she brought a guy home, Tommy would be grumpy the next day. But what was Ruby to do?

Tommy's newest girlfriend was a fitness instructor from Connecticut. She said she could show Ruby some moves if she liked.

Ruby liked the new girl well enough, even though her eyes opened far too wide so that you could see her irises from top to bottom. Her forehead was smooth. Her grins

were thin but genuine. When Ruby saw her at the mall, wading through Macy's purses without Tommy, she said hello and they ended up grabbing a bite in the nearby bakery. Patricia was looking for new turtlenecks. Ruby was looking for a fitted coat.

You can tell a lot about a person by the way they co-shop. Patricia was generous. She always kept Ruby in mind and showed her things she thought she liked, instead of things that looked good on herself.

Ruby felt she owed Patricia what she knew.

"Do you believe in coincidences?" she asked Patricia.

"Of course."

"No. I mean, has Tommy told you about his exes?"

Patricia smiled thinly. "We don't talk about that."

Ruby said, "Then I'm just going to say it. You're Korean, right? His exes are all Asian too, as far as I know."

Patricia shrugged.

"All five of them," said Ruby.

"I heard you liked red heads," said Patricia.

Ruby frowned at the scarf she was considering. "I just thought you'd like to know."

Patricia sniffed. "So he's not an ax murderer or anything?"

"It's just talk," said Ruby.

She supposed she shouldn't have butted in. She changed the subject, and Patricia went along without a glitch. Later, when Ruby was driving home, she realized she hadn't been simply altruistic. She had been curious as to whether Patricia knew, and she had wanted to know someone else's thoughts on serial Asian-dating. She realized that there was a core inside Tommy that made her want to get up close and turn him over and over in her hands. It irritated her.

Tommy invited Patricia on a cruise, even though he was on a freelancer's wage. Ruby didn't see Patricia again before they took off. Afterward, Tommy came back depressed.

"She said she wanted to slow things down," he said. "It's not like I proposed or anything. I don't even know if I want to marry her."

"Maybe it's the cruise itself," Ruby suggested.

One day, Ruby came home to Tommy napping on the sofa. He was sitting upright with his arms crossed and his head tucked in a way that squeezed out a double chin. He opened his eyes when Ruby closed the door.

"Ruby, I quit my job."

"I thought you liked your job?"

"I'm moving to New York. Start building my career in publishing."

Ruby felt Tommy wanted her to say something, so she said, "That's terrific. That's a good idea."

“In high school,” said Tommy, “I was infatuated with a girl named Lila Greenwood.”

Ruby laughed. “Aren’t you cold? Want a blanket before you jump down that lane?”

He waited until Ruby got the blankets out of the cupboard.

He began, “Lila Greenwood was so gorgeous that if you had half a hormone you’d want to be near her. One of those, what do you call them, nymphs. Rumor was that she got a kick out of breaking hearts, but what did we care? When she finally gave me a shot, I took her to this douche-fancy restaurant where I had to wear the tie that my Mom bought me for ceremonies.

“I knew she was using me. I was the next person with a car that she hadn’t made sad or mad enough to refuse to drive her places. She liked the beach. We went there on weekends.”

“How long were you together?”

“Two months, maybe. That’s usually how long a guy lasted. It was just such a good time, with her.”

“You might just be nostalgic, you know,” said Ruby.

He nodded. “Would you believe if I told you I haven’t felt the same since?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Would you believe me,” he said, “if I told you I’m so hooked on this girl I used to know that I’m just trying to replace her?”

“Was Lila Asian?”

“Yes.”

“Patricia told you,” she said. “Look, I’m sorry I told her about your exes, but it wasn’t why she left, was it?”

He sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “What do you think of me, Ruby? I’m confused. What are you concerned about?”

Ruby sighed. She didn’t know herself.

“It’s just weird,” she said, “that you dated five Asian girls in a row, then Patricia. Six Asian girls in a row. It’s not wrong, of course. But don’t you think it’s odd?”

He nodded slowly. “I can see that. I don’t think of it that way though.”

Ruby said, “Who did say you really liked?”

Tommy looked at Ruby. “I meant Patricia.”

“Why did you tell me about Lila, then?”

Tommy shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said. He leaned back into the sofa again. “I don’t know anything. I’m so tired. I don’t want to go fight New York.”

Ruby laughed. “You don’t regret quitting, do you?”

“I won’t tomorrow.”

Ruby waited outside of Patricia’s gym for twenty minutes. When Patricia finally appeared, Ruby ran up and handed her an envelope. The wind was immense and Ruby

hugged her new coat around her. Patricia didn't look amazed to see Ruby, but she looked curious about the envelope. She told Ruby to get into her car, and when they huddled in, she blasted the heat.

"It's an invite to my party," Ruby said.

Patricia read the card.

"It's a party for Tommy," Patricia said. She put the card back into the envelope and handed it back to Ruby.

"A goodbye party," Ruby said.

"We broke up," Patricia said.

"He really wants to see you," Ruby said. "And he's going away. So what's the harm?"

"It's you who wants him to see me," Patricia said. "If he wanted to see me, he would have come himself."

"I'm afraid," Ruby said, "that what I said about his exes made you uncomfortable."

"Do you think what you said caused me leave him?" She sounded amused.

"He really liked you," Ruby said.

Patricia smiled. "Our breakup had nothing to do with you. What you noticed about his exes told me more about you than about Tommy."

Ruby considered. She didn't want to get flustered so she stuck to the goal.

"Come to the party," she said.

“No,” Patricia said. Her smile disappeared. “I don’t want to see Tommy. We just broke up.”

When Ruby was out of the car, Patricia rolled down the window. “Ruby,” she said. “We broke up because he was a wall to me. But I guess that’s ‘cause we didn’t click.” She gave a parting grin and rolled up the window.

Tommy’s goodbye party was a great success. The guests left laughing, and Ruby and Tommy popped open one last bottle and toasted each other on the couch. He was leaving next weekend. But Ruby knew they would not be as carefree again after tonight. She had agreed to help Tommy move out, and Tommy would help make sure the place was ready for the girl taking over his lease.

Some of the guests had helped to clean up, and in Ruby’s wonderfully drunk mind, the place looked so cozy, it felt like a real home. Tommy patted her shoulder.

“Best goodbye ever,” he said.

She giggled. “I’m very happy right now.”

“To say goodbye to me?” he joked.

She giggled again. She had been thinking about how Patricia had felt the same way as she. She had been thinking how glad she was that she wasn’t the only one who felt a tremble at not being able to wrap her mind about the whole of him.

She sipped her beer.

“Did you like Lila because she was mysterious?” she asked.

Tommy's face tensed for a moment. He answered, "I don't know if Lila was mysterious. It's possible she was just selfish and uncaring. So the mystery would be why so many guys wanted to be with her."

"She was gorgeous," Ruby reminded Tommy.

He chuckled. "Except it felt like more than that."

"Because she was too gorgeous."

Tommy shrugged.

Tommy wasn't bad looking. He wasn't breathtaking either. He was tall but awkwardly thin. His cheeks stuck out too strongly, which made Ruby think, as she stared at him, resting her head on the sofa, that he would one day grow into them and claim them as an asset.

She didn't give a damn about Lila, but she was intrigued by Tommy's fascination with her. She believed him that he felt Lila had affected him in some way, and she wondered if, years later, she would look back at her time with Tommy as a similar mystery. She wondered if she would regret not dating him. She wondered if he would affect her in a magnitude that she wouldn't know until all opportunities to investigate had disappeared.

Tommy was staring at his beer bottle and seemed to be thinking. Ruby tried to imagine living with her next roommate. They had chatted online and the girl had seemed quite fun. She was starting grad school for architecture in the city, and told Ruby some stuff about roof corners that were astounding, even though now Ruby couldn't repeat

what the girl had said. They even got into talking about how to decorate the shared living room and dinning alcove. They had talked about putting up curtains. Something wispy that would float up with the breeze.

Ruby looked over at Tommy, who hadn't moved. Already, she felt that he was a guest in her home, waiting for his exit cue. She was eager to get the ball rolling, and realized she was more intrigued by her own mysteries than Tommy's.

AT A REST STOP

She was newly divorced and driving down to Orlando for a physics conference, charging the mileage to a grant. She stopped for gas and bought five packets of jerky in case she couldn't sleep. Around midnight, she was still a few miles out of Lake Helen, so she pulled into a truck stop, folded down the backseat, lay with her feet in the trunk, hugged her purse, and closed her eyes. Her cell phone rang. It was her ex-husband.

He said, "Don't sleep in the car."

She could almost smell him.

"I'm not," she said.

"You're a big girl," he said. "Get a hotel."

He had a way of making her feel like a child, even though he was the one who let cat out in the rain, who forgot their daughter's play-dates, who blamed her for the credit card debts, the misplaced pens, the bore. Though, always before bed, he would tell her he loved her.

"It's a four-star," she said. "Continental in the morning."

It wasn't because of his flightiness or her stubbornness, but somewhere during their decade together she had lost faith in his mysteries.

"Get some rest," he said, in a tone that meant *goodbye*.

"Love you," she said, with a casualness was only the remnant of a habit.

IN WHICH NOTHING HAPPENS

Karen rushed through security to finish her book: she had to stop at the climax--the husband, Tiago, was about to make up his mind whether to leave his wife, and in Karen's mind, the wife's elfish hand sweeping across Tiago's cheek was still resonating through his body, inflaming his heart, and would not stop until Karen sat down and read the final twenty pages. The book was called *Again, Tomorrow*. Karen's best friend, Deanne, had pushed it onto her as a must-read literary heart-warmer. "You said you'd do three things I deem right," Deanne had said, so Karen, who had no taste for make-believe stories, really had no choice.

Reagan National Airport wasn't too bad during October, when people tried to save vacation for the holidays. Karen hadn't taken a vacation since last Christmas, and hadn't seen Deanne for, oh, almost five years. In high school, Deanne was the rebel. In college, Deanne was the golden girl. To Karen, Deanne was always the one who had it figured out. She used to envy her easy fortune, with men, with her IT career, with her figure, and eventually, with children. But Karen had long since resigned to her role in their relationship. The world was filled with two types of people: the ones for whom things worked, and the ones for whom things failed. Karen was the latter, and Deanne was a soft shoulder.

Karen found her gate--D16--and read her book slowly. Despite her initial

prejudice, the author, whose name Karen cannot pronounce, wrote in a way that made her calm. She thought it was the long sentences that seemed to have some sort of rhythm, like the ocean. She made a mental note to bring this up to Deanne.

As she neared the end, she slowed to a crawl. More and more, she realized the ending she was reading. When she finished she called Deanne.

“Love!” answered Deanne. Her voice a hearth.

“I can’t believe it,” said Karen. “Nothing happened!”

“What happened?” said Deanne.

“I read your book.”

“Ah! Isn’t it wonderful?”

“But Tiago didn’t decide! The guy cut it off!”

“Kamakawiwo'ole?”

“What?”

“The author. Kamakawiwo'ole.”

“Yeah. He ended the book right before Tiago decided!”

“Did you know,” said Deanne, “that Kamakawiwo'ole shares his name with a ukulele singer? He’s wonderful too.”

“I’ve never heard,” said Karen.

So they talked about ukuleles for a while. When the gate called for boarding in five minutes, Karen said, “But you’re not off the hook.”

Deanne’s laugh ringed like a girl’s.

“Let’s discuss,” she said. “I’m so happy. I couldn’t get anyone else to read that book.”

At her house, Deanne was icing a cake. Most days she enjoyed putting on an apron. She deemed herself second-wave feminist, a term she learned from Karen back in Oregon State. After Karen moved to New York, they had visited back and forth, but after the kids came, the time went. She was thirty now, and Karen will turn thirty in a month. This cake would be an early celebration, and Deanne bit her lip in concentration as she piped pedals around the rim.

Mason cried from the living room. Deanne heard the squeaking sound of the blow-up hammer and called, “Alice, stop hitting your brother. Do either of you want icing?”

The kids came running. They were in matching outfits of brown giraffes. Deanne knew she shouldn’t be feeding them icing before lunch, and with their new shirts on too, but she sighed and placed the bowl some distance away from the cake and the children gathered around it like birds.

“Is Karen going to bring presents?” asked Alice.

Mason laughed and wiped a hand on his face.

“No, honey. She’s a guest.”

“She should bring presents,” said Alice.

“Let’s see, okay? She’s not expected to.”

“Okay?” said Mason. “Okay? Okay?”

Karen grew jittery as the plane landed in Portland. Outside baggage claim, she saw Deanne climb out of her car and jog up with arms outstretched.

“My brave little soldier,” said Deanne. She said things like that, like she was being filmed for an Oxygen special. When she did this Karen always felt like she had no access to the real Deanne, the one who stayed with her in a car, blasting the heater and wasting precious undergraduate waitress tips, to talk with her about how Bethany and Carl was getting disgusting with their dependency on each other. Karen remembered the car and the fuzzy dice that she played with when she finally said out loud, “I hate it when Carl licks his lips at her.” “Oh my god!” Deanne had agreed. “Wow,” Karen had said. And they giggled because the other felt exactly the same way.

On the ride back they chatted about the area and the suburb where Deanne lives and the children’s school. They avoided talking about Karen’s husband. In fact, they didn’t talk about Karen’s life at all, and it dawned on Karen what a downer she was, having just left her husband. Deanne gestured at the wheel as she related all her news. She really hadn’t changed at all, which made Karen think of souls and how people could have them, even though Karen didn’t believe in any realm but the one she lived in, which sometimes seemed like another tragedy.

Despite everything, Karen was as happy to see Deanne as she had imagined. Nonetheless she felt more alone than ever, watching other cars fall slowly behind them, the bright overcast of Oregon, her old home, so used to being without her.

“When will your parents be back?” asked Deanne.

“Tomorrow.”

“How are they liking Yellowstone?”

“No reception.”

“They love it,” Deanne said. “It was a good choice.”

After Karen left her husband, Deanne came to the rescue. “The first thing I deem right,” she told Karen, “is to do something nice for someone else.” So Karen booked Yellowstone for her parents. They had always said they wanted to go, but a camping spot was hard to get, and Karen called Yellowstone for days, relentlessly, before she caught someone dropping a spot. And that was lucky.

“It felt good,” said Karen. It also felt like a slippery slope. It felt like not enough. She moved to New York to live her life and left her parents with only each other. A camping trip was a gesture, but what could she do that would ever stop her guilt of leaving her family? Of leaving Deanne and the gang and the West Coast, of leaving her old life behind? Wasn’t it good enough?

Now that her husband was out of the picture, Karen felt like she was living through the fork in the path. There were decisions to be made, though she wasn’t sure what her options were. She was treading tenderly. She wanted to do things right.

Deanne was now talking about a deal she got on some clothes for Alice and Mason.

“Let’s stop somewhere,” said Karen. “You’ve turned me into a full-on philanthropist. I want to get something for the children.”

Deanne was sorry to see Karen so indecisive in the toy store. Indecisiveness was never Karen’s weakness. She knew what she wanted, no matter whose advice she went against, even against her mother, even against Deanne. So Deanne felt sorry to see Karen so unsure of herself, her skin below the eyes were dark and loose, the powder on her left lid a smear on her temple, like she had wiped her eyes open on the plane.

“The kids will be thrilled to get anything at all,” Deanne said.

“What’s Alice’s favorite color?”

“Blue.”

“Right. So this one.” Karen put back the pink tiara.

“She already has one though,” said Deanne. “The blue tiara.”

Karen put back the tiara clapped her hands together and meandered down the aisle.

“You really don’t have to,” said Deanne. “They’re spoiled enough already.”

They went to the counter and Karen grabbed two funbags of candy, which made Deanne’s head hurt just thinking about how wired the kid would be tonight.

“Always a good choice,” she told Karen.

When they got home, Deanne found her husband playing dolls with the kids. Alice had changed into her silver princess dress and put on lipstick that she must have stolen once again from her countertop. She was going around changing up plastic pastries

and Mason was calming his gums on the doughnut. Carl got up and took off the cowgirl hat.

“What a sight,” he said, “the twins back together.”

“Good to see you, Carl,” said Karen.

“We’re not twins,” said Deanne.

“Will it be giggling all night?” said Carl. He hugged Karen hello. The kids hid behind him, not matching, but at least clean.

“It’s not college anymore,” said Karen, smiling.

Then she presented the funbags of candy and the kids went ballistic. Alice screamed “Candyyyyy!” and Mason tried to follow suit, cooing, “Candy, candy.” Deanne suddenly remembered a movie she had seen in which a husband left his wife, and when the wife asked, How could you leave the children? The husband said, I just wanted to see if things could have been different. Deanne wondered if Karen could relate. They hadn’t ever talked about the divorce. Talking with Karen about her men was never productive. It was because they were so different; Karen afraid of commitment as much as Deanne depended on it. That was how she saw it anyway, but who could say what really went on in Karen’s pretty little head? As much as Deanne wanted, she never felt like she understood Karen as much as linked souls should.

Karen thought she was getting more buzzed than she should be. They were sitting in the backyard sipping wine and having second helpings of Deanne’s cake. Karen could

hear Mason screaming upstairs and Carl rumbling in response. The scream hurt her head and she wished Carl would shut the window.

“Tiago is brilliant,” she told Deanne, “as in smart, but he’s such a drag.”

“Tara doesn’t think so,” said Deanne.

“Tara’s so broken that Tiago’s like Hercules. Tara, Tiago. The author seems to be hinting at something there.” Karen was proud of herself. “Also, have you noticed the rhythm of the sentences? It’s like the ocean.”

“You liked it, then?”

“Until the end.”

“The way I read it,” said Deanne, “is that it doesn’t matter what he chooses, because I think the story is his wife’s, and that in the end, she has realized that she’ll be okay either way, whether with or without Tiago.”

Karen knew that this was why Deanne wanted her to read the book. It was some sort of moral lesson about divorce. But Karen knew that divorces happened all the time, and she didn’t need to read a book in which nothing happens to tell her that things will go on.

“I think so too,” said Karen.

Deanne sank deeper into the chair like she was satisfied. Karen thought that maybe Deanne’s insistence on three right things was not just meant to help Karen stay out of depression, but to help Deanne feel needed. This notion made Karen giddy, that

they still so evidently needed each other. She placed her wine on the glass table, leaned toward Deanne and whispered, “Can I suggest the third right thing?”

Deanne giggled. “Look at that face! So red and patchy. You haven’t gotten any better.”

“You can drive, then,” Karen said.

Newport Bay was three hours away and when they arrived it was midnight. Deanne parked near the jetty, which was empty and bored-looking. She followed Karen down the rocks and onto the small strip of beach between the jetty and the restaurant.

“It’s warm here,” said Karen.

“It’s freezing!” said Deanne, rubbing her arms.

“Well, toughen up, old gal.” Karen flipped her long sleeve over her head. Her hair falling onto her shoulders with a youthful bounce.

“I’m not looking,” said Deanne, as Karen shrugged off her jeans.

“Hurry up or you’ll be colder,” said Karen, and took off toward the water.

“This is crazy!” Deanne called. Back in the days this was exactly what annoyed Deanne, Karen’s certainty and the seemingly lack of care for what others might or might not want to do. “You’ll get sick!” she said.

Karen splashed into the water. “It *is* freezing!” She laughed. “Come on, Mrs. Carl. The water is as disgusting as I remember.”

Deanne laughed. Karen looked pathetic waving her arms and bobbing everywhere. Deanne thought she was doing that for her entertainment. She took off her dress and placed it flat on a rock, then made a run for Karen. She held her breath as the water came up quickly to her neck. A small wave came and wet her face. “Argh! Oh god.”

Karen paddled over. “You know what that author would say about this.”

“Kamakawiwo'ole.”

“He’d be all symbolic about this.”

“There’s something stuck to my face.”

“It’s a seaweed,” said Karen, and pulled it off. “Rebirth and all.”

“Oh, god. This is cold.”

Karen did a backstroke. “What do you think?”

“This is no rebirth.”

Karen laughed, bobbing up and down. “Move around. You’ll get warm.”

“This is more like a really gross bath.”

“I think,” said Karen, “it’s time for you to do three things *I* say.”

From the look of her now, looking so young and smooth in the water, Deanne thought that maybe Karen was actually happy. It occurred to her that the divorce might be something to celebrate, which made her let out a laugh, though she wasn’t sure if it was out of relief or amazement. And then she felt she might have overstepped with her attempt to cheer up Karen. Or maybe she had helped Karen. Who could know?

Her uncertainty stiffened the air and Karen must have felt it. She stopped splashing and said, “Hey Deanne.”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for picking me up.”

“Yeah?”

“And for a place to crash.”

“And for driving you to your parent’s tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” said Karen.

THE CONTORTIONIST

When Tara still had the choice before her, when she was in elementary school, she was the best little gymnast in Jackson Gymnastics, Mississippi, so said Masha Kozlova, who had stopped by to see her distant cousin, the Jackson Gymnastics principal. That night, Tara waited until her parents went to sleep, then snuck down to the family room and used the dial-up. She watched clips of Masha Kozlova perform her snake act for the previous year's Big Mississippi Circus, on loop. Masha slithered across the blue-lit stage in all sorts of fantastic ways. Tara's favorite was when Masha went for a side split; she would then bend one of her knees so as to drag her body toward it, like a sideways caterpillar, then at the end, she would spring up, effortless, and one of the male supporting dancers would raise her way up toward the circus top.

But Tara was sharp. Everyone said so. She was especially good at math, all through high school, then all through Brown, where she studied physics. She liked physics; boundaries were everywhere, and you only needed to know where to push. She got into Harvard's Physics PhD but opted to go to a school in DC, so she could work entry-level for NASA's headquarter. She liked to feel close to space, the unknown beyond. At the gym, she would push her aerobic limits. At night, she would have dinner with her vegetarian fiancé, who had shadowed her from Mississippi, and when the

weather turned, would lament her left hip, which, twenty-three years in, could already predict winter rains.

Tara didn't believe in fate. To do so, one would need to believe mistakes happened for a reason. Her littered apartment, her fiancé, bland but reliable, the scratch marks her cat made on the exposed side of her corduroy sofa. Her friends tried to teach her a thing called "joy of the moment," but she continued to feel crabby, and even she could tell that she needed some sort of intervention, and at this point, she would go for divine.

On the train to night class, she saw Masha Kozlova half a car up, playing with her phone. Masha was wearing a silver sequined shirt and had her hair in cornrows. When they passed Farragut North, Masha glanced at the station sign and then went back to her phone. Silver glittered from the corners of her eyes. Tara was heading to night class, and needed to get off at Metro Center to transfer to Orange or Blue, but she stayed on, and followed Masha off at Wheaton, almost off the grid.

Masha worked in a small gymnastics studio next to Wheaton mall. When Tara jingled inside, Masha stood from behind reception and handed her a clipboard with forms. She stood tall and firm, in proper alignment. "Here for open house?"

Tara nodded.

"I just need your basic info here and here. May I ask where you heard about us?"

“A friend,” said Tara. Clearly, Masha didn’t know who she was. And now that Tara was here, she didn’t know what she wanted. By now, even if she were to go back onto the right train and head to class, she would have missed half the lecture. She took a pen from the penholder and scribbled her information. “It’s freezing out,” she said. “I’m used to Mississippi.”

“I have a cousin there,” said Masha.

“Yes. I used to go to Jackson Gymnastics. They referred me here.”

“Isha Popova?” She thin brows arched.

“She was my coach,” said Tara, handing back the papers.

“Tara Fong,” Masha read. “Good to meet you. I didn’t even know Isha knew about our gymnasium. We should keep in touch, but you know.”

Tara smiled.

“Now,” said Masha, “Are you here for you or your child?”

“I’m not married.”

“Well,” said Masha, and motioned for Tara to follow.

Masha’s Gymnasium used to be a small warehouse and had been turned into a blue-matted haven with one set of every type of gymnastic equipment Tara could remember. Another coach was on the floor, working with a handful of sturdy little tykes.

“Our gym has five coaches,” said Masha. She went through the figures and rules.

“Do you teach?” asked Tara.

“I have a few students.” Masha opened a white door. “This is our kitchen. There’s the fridge and students are welcome to use it, just label.”

“Are *you* accepting students?” asked Tara.

Masha closed the kitchen door and considered Tara.

“One of my students is leaving in the Spring. But I’m a specialty teacher, Ms. Fong. I don’t teach this anymore.” She waved her arm around the gym.

“I saw your goodbye show,” said Tara. “My parents took me even though it was in Vegas.”

Masha laughed. “That was fifteen years ago!” She looked at Tara with renewed interest, a smile curled up. Fans probably didn’t come regularly for Masha anymore, and she seemed so flattered that Tara felt sorry for her. Masha said, “You should know, you’re not too old to start lengthening muscles, but you are too old to earn a name. Unless you devote yourself everyday. It’s a big decision. You’d have to treat practice as work.”

Tara looked around the gym. The tykes were tumbling one after the other. She craved to be one of them, so young that possibilities still dangled in front like party streamers. She wondered if youth was what she wanted, instead of contortion studies. She wondered if she wanted the choice more than the decision. The insipid quarter-life crisis, Tara thought, and groaned inside. How terribly boring.

She looked back at Masha, who was waiting for her answer with a skeptical smile. And maybe it was because the silver around her eyes reminded Tara of the glory she was

when on stage in Las Vegas, but she thought that, No, it was more than that. She did want to practice daily. She did want to discover the limits of her body. She remembered the calmness she had felt when in Isha's Gym in Mississippi. It had been otherworldly.

She said, "Could I show you?"

Masha told her to warm up. When Tara was ready, Masha watched as she did a backbend. Tara did a side split with a full arch. She did a right split and a full arc and then bent her left leg so that her foot touched her head. She did a handstand for strength. And when Masha asked, she did a few flips and jumps.

The activity had brought back muscle memory that she didn't know she had missed. "I'm out of practice," she said, huffing happily.

Masha ran her hands over her cornrows and rested her palms on her neck. She tilted her head to one side.

Tara was suddenly embarrassed. She felt big and awkward, like a sixty-year old in a miniskirt.

"You want me to put you on the list?" Masha said. Her eyes were soft.

"Yeah," said Tara.

Two months later, Tara got the call when she was in a meeting with her boss, Dr. Ralph Dunning, who had just confirmed her of the standard annual raise, and was taking the opportunity to catch up. He was a serious man who talked slowly and intimidated many of the younger employees, but Tara had always found him kind. At the meeting, he

dropped the hint that maybe Tara will be asked to work on the new project headed by Dr. Cohen, if she continued to show promise. On the metro home, she listened to Masha's message while walking to the metro.

Masha had said, "The opening's yours if you like. Here's what I think. You obviously have great gymnastics basics, but your flexibility is minimal for contortion, and I'm concerned your age would mean slow progress." Masha listed the prices and the hours. She warned that to gain any serious progress, Tara would need to devote to practice as at least a part-time job. For Tara, this was impossible with her current schedule. It would mean dropping her PhD or dropping her job at NASA. Until this moment, she had always felt that her life was stagnant and colorless, and though she still did, now that the possibility of derailing was presented, she suddenly wanted to cling on. Yes, she wanted to train in contortion. But also, she wanted to pursue a PhD for advancement in NASA.

Tara realized she was holding her breath. Masha's message was trailing off, and Tara saved the message. She wondered if she should tell Lucas about her choice.

At home, Tara told Lucas that she was on track for a major promotion at NASA. "You look tense," Lucas said, and Tara said she just didn't want to mess up, which was the truth. But that didn't mean that, at the back of her mind, Tara wasn't thinking about Masha's message. She wondered if Masha was actually picky about her students, like she had said, or if she was simply recruiting the next student on the list, but she chose to believe she had seen something workable in her.

The next day, she went into work. The day after that, she did the same. She didn't call Masha back. Two month after Masha's call, with a blizzard outside the NASA headquarter, Dr. Dunning recommended Tara to Dr. Cohen as an assistant researcher. Tara waited until she got home and burst out in little squeals. That night, she dragged Lucas out to celebrate, blizzard or no.

Sometimes, she would remember Masha's call. It was, of course, too late to call back. When she thought about Masha, she wondered if there had ever been a sincere chance that she could have taken up her offer.

Tara was a good physicist. She kept getting promoted, but she kept in mind to save up vacation days for her wedding and honeymoon. After the wedding, for Tara's twenty-eighth birthday, Lucas took her for a weekend in Vegas. The main contortionist was a twelve-year old girl with a mean backbend that made her into a ball. She moved quickly and hit her marks carelessly, which made her entire being look even lighter than she was.

Tara kept a hand on her stomach. She was four months along and liked to rub her stomach from top to bottom. She was thinking what Masha would say if she went back to her now. She imagined Masha tisking at her, even though she had never heard her tisk. She imagined her saying, "Well, at least you're married." Tara wondered if she was, at that moment, regretting her decision to stay a physicist. But she had grown comfortable over the years, and comfort made her content, so it was hard to tell.

That night in the Vegas hotel, Tara had trouble falling asleep. She had been exhausted after the show, but after they refueled and chatted awhile, she became increasingly restless.

Beside her, Lucas got up to use the restroom. When he came out, Tara asked him to close the curtains. "It's too light," she said.

He did so, and once back in bed, he was gone in a moment.

Tara lay awake thinking about where she put her old memorabilia box, from back when she still did such silly things. She knew she had moved it to their basement, and she remembered moving it from its old place by the furnace to make room for the extra stuff that came from cleaning for the baby room. She thought she had shoved the memorabilia box onto the second shelf in the corner, behind the box of old albums, but she wasn't sure.

In the memorabilia box, wherever it was, were items from school. There was a horrendous afghan that her NASA friend had knit for her, a few Halloweens costumes, and a rock from right after Lucas proposed. There was also a small tin cookie box, in which were some novelty coins and the old cell that Tara had used back in graduate school. She hadn't kept any other cells and had kept that one under the sentiment that it had been with her through five years. Now, Tara realized with amusement, that it was the phone on which Masha had called. The battery would have drained by now. But Tara indulged herself at imagining descending to the basement and taking out the phone, how

fantastic it would be to, somehow, turn it back on, and to have the message still waiting for her.

Not all things became clearer with age, and increasingly, Tara couldn't differentiate between why she wanted to contort and why her logical mind told her was the reason. Tara had come to believe that the logical reason must have been that she was the type of girl who wanted to be capable of everything. Not that she wanted to do everything, but only to be capable of doing so if she pleased. So that, when the option of contortion was taken away from her, she fantasized about getting it back. But, she still remembered Masha on the train, the relaxation the physical movements released into her muscles, like it was what she was meant to do. Now, with a baby stretching out her body, whatever had happened in that period of her life couldn't be more than musing, and she had no regrets. She wanted to stretch out both this moment, with the baby on the way, and the past moment, with Masha visiting Isha at the Jackson Gymnastics in Mississippi, bending down to pat Tara's then-chubby cheek, saying, "Aren't you the best little gymnast I've ever seen!" She only wanted to remain longer than time allowed in this life.

TIME WELL SPENT

Madame Hao swore that she was psychic. She said she knew what her parrot was thinking. She said to her granddaughter on the phone that she knew what she was thinking as well. Her granddaughter, an assistant publicist in America, tried to convince her otherwise, and when she could not, bought a plane ticket straight away. Madame Hao thought her granddaughter must have thought she was going senile, which was sad—how little that child knew about the world.

The day she was to arrive, Madame Hao told the chauffeur how to spell her granddaughter's name for the placard: G-E-N-N-A H-A-O. She thought about going to the airport herself, but it made no sense for such an old lady to wade into the heat. Besides, it was her turn to host mahjong. She told the chauffeur to remember to not stand too close, since Genna had a preference called "her own space."

In preparation for Genna's arrival, Madame Hao told the head maid to turn down the main guestroom, and told the cook to stir fry chicken slivers with as little grease as possible, which was what she remembered Genna liked. Madame Hao herself went around the house with a watering can and watered as well as dusted all the plants. She had to refill the can, there were so many. She changed into her favorite celebration outfit before sitting down at the table with Madame Lin and Madame Qian. They were waiting for Madame Bing, who was always running behind. When Madame Bing finally arrived,

she was breathing hard, even when she reached the women in the drawing room. She was dug her parasol into the carpet in front of her like a cane.

“My lord, it’s suffocating,” she declared. “Why don’t you turn up the air conditioning, Old Hao?”

“Come in quickly and close those doors,” said Madame Qian. “Sit here and drink ice tea.”

“Ice tea!” said Madame Bing. “Don’t give me that stuff. How about a nice chilled bowl of green bean soup?”

“Little Su!” called Madame Hao, and Little Su arrived promptly. “How does Madame Bing still have her parasol? Also, tell the cook to make us all some green bean soup. Make enough for *Genna* too. She might want some when she arrives.”

Madame Hao took off the lid of the mahjong box and dumped out the tiles. They clacked together on the felt table. The women reached in and washed them.

“Your *Genna*,” said Madame Jing. “Why is she coming home so suddenly?”

“How do you say her name?” said Madame Qian.

“*Genna*,” answered Madame Bing. “*Gen-na*. Sounds like Real-Hot.”

“Old Bing!” cautioned Madame Hao, but she laughed along with the other women.

“Those young devils,” sighed Madame Qian.

The women began stacking the tiles and all were quiet for a while.

“What were you saying, Old Hao?” asked Madame Bing.

“I just told her I was psychic.”

“But that is not news,” said Madame Bing, sounding disappointed.

“How could she not know?” said Madame Jing.

“It’s because she feels guilty,” said Madame Qian. “That’s why she’s coming.

Those young devils who leave the country are bound to come back when they mature.

They would find any reason to return. Take my Little Horse for example. He leaves

behind old mama and old baba and gone to marry an Albanian American. That’s what he

says she is. She knows no Chinese, no customs, and talks like she owns the entire

country. But I have to admit she is very cute. Truly like a doll.”

“He comes back though,” said Madame Jing.

“Yes, he comes back. Once every two years. It’s not loyalty. He’s afraid we are going to ascend to the sky anytime, and if he hadn’t visited periodically he would feel too guilty. That’s what I’m saying.”

“Let them be guilty,” said Madam Bing. “What’s wrong with that? Guilt makes them behave.”

“But your Real-Hot is coming back,” said Madame Qian.

Madame Hao laughed. “For three days only. And because she thinks I’m senile.”

Little Su brought in the green bean soup and served it into chilled bowls. She left the rest in the pot, on a nearby end table.

Despite her composure, Madame Hao was truly nervous. She hadn’t seen Genna in six years. The last time she visited Genna in America was when Genna’s mama, her son’s wife, died of cancer. Genna had been a fourth-year in high school, a child, and now

she was working as an assistant publicist in New York. Madame Hao was worried that Genna would not adjust to Shanghai—such untimely heat wave—and would treat the visit simply as a responsibility. Madame Hao didn't want to feel old.

When her son's wife died of cancer, he did not call to tell her. She had to find out through the answering machine, when he, almost a year after the fact, changed the “you've reached” addressees to just him and Genna. By then, him and Genna had left California and moved to Oregon.

Her son—Kailong—had not asked for her, but she went anyway. She did not know how to clean or cook, and felt more of a hindrance than a helper. In fact, she liked things a certain way, and her son, Kailong, tried to gather the effects she needed to not feel perpetually uncomfortable. She needed, for example, to eat certain kind of foods so as to not feel foreign with grease. She needed to wash her clothes with a certain soup so as to not feel itchy. She needed her daily walk, which scared Kailong because she didn't know the roads, and even equipped with a cell phone, he worried that she would not be able to describe where she was. She tried to convince him that the latter was needless worry, though she did feel more secure waiting in the house.

Her visa was only for six months. Even before her time ended, Genna had moved away to college. Everyday, it was just her alone in the small house with Kailong gone to work and her extraordinarily bored. Sometimes, she would dial up a friend in Shanghai, but she was mindful of the charges and never talked too long. It rained. Kailong had ordered a satellite installed along the rim of the roof so that Madame Hao could watch

Chinese TV. But the rain and the clouds interfered. When six months ended, Madame Hao decided she was more needed at home in Shanghai. Her friends had been nagging her to return.

Now Madame Bing cried, “Pong!” and putting down another three tiles.

Madame Hao said, “Good hand.”

Madame Jing said, “The sun’s rising from the West.”

Madame Bing said, “Let me win just this once.”

There was a light tap on the door.

“Come in!” called Madame Hao.

Little Su stepped in and said, “Madame Hao. *Genna* is at the gate. Would you want to meet her at the front door or would you want me to bring her in here?”

The women looked at each other. Madame Hao hurried to the front door and everyone followed.

When Genna stepped out of the car, Madame Hao thought she looked just the same, and felt herself smile so big she kept exclaiming, “Aiyou, aiyou,” even as she rushed outside into the waves of heat and took a hold of Genna’s arms to look at her: “Aiyou! Look at you!” Then she remembered that Genna did not like to be in close proximity with others, so she loosened her grip. Surprisingly, Genna hugged her around the shoulders and pulled her close. She was firm and strong, and had grown a head taller since high school, exceeding Madame Hao. Madame Hao was happy about that. Young people should be tall.

Madame Hao turned to bring Genna inside but Genna went toward the trunk and tried to pull out her own luggage. She cannot do it well because the bag was heavy, but she would not let the chauffer do it, and the chauffer was distressed.

“Genna,” called Madame Hao kindly, “Stop hassling the chauffer.”

Genna’s eyes darted to her, and she let go of the bag.

Genna seemed more comfortable in Shanghai than Madame Hao had been in Oregon. She drank some green bean soup, which she complimented, and then took a long shower while the women played a few more rounds. When she came out, she was rubbed pink like a baby. Still, she had dark circles under her eyes, so Madame Hao told her to go to sleep. Genna said she wanted to wait at least until the sun went down. Her Chinese had an American accent, nasally and continuous, and at times wrongly inflected. Hearing her talk made Madame Hao adore her and pity her at the same time.

Madame Hao motioned for her granddaughter to sit next to her on the bench. She did so gladly, intrigued by the game. Madam Hao called for Little Su and told her to set the table early.

When the warm smell of dinner started to waft through the house, the women finished their game and left in their various cars. Genna had a great appetite, and Madame Hao liked to think that it was not simply because she was hungry, but also because the cook was a great hire.

The next morning, Genna was already in the dining room when Madame Hao made her way downstairs. She was typing on her laptop, frowning in concentration. She had a cup of tea.

“Nainai,” she looked up at Madame Hao’s approach. “I made myself some food and some tea.” She must have meant she hoped Madame Hao didn’t mind. Though from her it sounded childish, like bragging.

Madame Hao went over to the intercom and pressed for the cook.

“Yes, taitai,” replied the cook.

“Please make me and Miss *Genna* some breakfast.”

“Yes, taitai.”

Genna said, “I’ve eaten.”

“He’s terrific,” said Madame Hao. “I guarantee you will like it.”

Genna closed her laptop and leaned forward on her elbows.

“Baba wishes he could be here,” she said.

“He will come in his own time.”

Genna smiled. From below the table, she took out a large box of assorted See’s Candy, Madame Hao’s favorite treat in Oregon. “This is from him,” she said.

“You even knew to surprise me!” Madame Hao grinned and tore off the wrapping. They took turns picking out what they wanted, putting away the box only when Little Su came in with shaomai.

Genna had been a difficult child, according to Madame Hao's visits to Oregon when still in her seventies, and according to her son's descriptions over the phone. In Madame Hao's house, she was especially so. Every response that came out of her mouth was "No." "No, Little Su, I can make my own bed." "No, Little Qin, I want to wash my own underwear." The servants didn't know how to act around her, and Madame Hao had to call an informal meeting to reassure everyone that they were not being inadequate. The only services that Genna relented to were the menus pre-selected by Madame Hao and the driving by the chauffeur. She sat happily in the back with Madame Hao as the chauffeur took them to hot spots around the city. They went shopping on Nanjing Road and at night rode the ferry up and down the Huangpu River, sitting at the helm in VIP, soaking in the view of the lighted architecture. The next day they went to the zoo and saw dancing elephants and threw cucumbers at red-buttred monkeys. A tiger rushed the chain-linked fence and made Genna jump back and laugh in fright.

On both nights, Madame Hao's son-in-law called and chatted with them both. "I didn't even know *Genna* went to visit," he said. He sounded anxious and lonely.

On the last day, Madame Hao needed to rest. She felt very old, and could not take any more adventures. Genna sat next to her in front of the TV. They soaked their feet in footbaths.

For Genna's interest, Madame Hao turned to a Taiwanese talk show, the type that she heard young people liked. That day, the talk show host was showcasing puppies that were groomed to look like other animals. There was one that was made to look like

a little lion. It pranced around the stage, pausing at circular markers, panting and wagging its short tail, its teased out fur puffing out like a dandelion head. Genna loved the show. She guffawed and would not stop. It made Madame Hao remember her son as a young man.

Madame Hao said to Genna, "I'm glad you came back to visit. I hope it wasn't inconvenient."

"Oh, no!" said Genna, taking her eyes off the program.

"You see, I'm doing very well."

Genna smiled at Madame Hao. "I know, nainai. I wanted to see you."

"You're not concerned for my health?"

"Should I be?" Genna said.

Madame Hao shook her head.

"But...nainai, I wanted to ask you. You know how you said you could feel things that normal people can't?"

"I'm psychic."

"Yes, that. I want to ask for a favor."

"You don't think I'm a silly old woman?" Madame Hao asked, smiling.

"Oh, no, nainai. I wanted to see you. I wanted to ask if you ever do séances."

Madame Hao laughed. "Séances are performances. What I know, I know." She patted Genna's hand. "For example, when I was a teenager and still living in a complex, there was a pond by our building. To reach our complex, one had to enter an alleyway and then walk past the pond. I had an incredible sense of hearing. When my baba was entered the alleyway, I knew it in here." Madame Hao tapped her cranium. "I could feel

the hairs in my ear canals stand up. They'd pulse with every footstep. It was the water in the pond that heightened my hearing. I knew every time."

Genna nodded, contemplative. "Can you do things on purpose?"

"What are you asking, *Genna*?"

"I want to tell my mom something," Genna said.

Madame Hao hadn't expected this. Between her hands, Genna's hand felt stiff.

Genna added, "I don't expect ghosts and proof. I just want to have done it."

Madame Hao kept still. She felt that whatever she did next would determine Genna's attitude about the whole thing. She felt important. She wanted to help her granddaughter.

"You should have told me earlier," she said, smiling. She kept her voice calm so the whole event wouldn't feel hokey.

Genna let out a breath, as if relieved that Madame Hao didn't laugh. "We can do this?"

"Is it a long message or a short one?"

"It's not long."

At that moment, Little Su entered to refill the footbaths with hot water. Madame Hao declined and asked for towels. She asked when dinner would be ready. Little Su said half an hour. Madame Hao said, "Good. No need to come get us. Close the door behind you and do not let anyone disturb us."

When they were alone, with their feet wrapped warm and dry in slippers, Madame Hao pulled two heavy oak chairs from the other side of the room and placed them facing each other, in front of the TV. Genna helped. Then she turned off the TV and sat in a

chair. The summer came through the windows and glared off the blank screen, turning it into a dull mirror.

Madame Hao sat down and rested her hands on her knees. Genna did the same. Her face was relaxed and she looked serious. Madame Hao was thinking fast. This was not what she meant by being psychic. What she meant was that she was connected to the world around her. She was proud to be in tune. So that what she was now doing—setting up space, setting up mood—were all an act for Genna. Though, of course, an act could be real if its effects were real. Madame Hao knew that Genna was looking for a closure she could point to. Maybe Genna hadn't even known she needed one until she heard Madame Hao was psychic.

"Have you done this before?" asked Madame Hao.

"Just once, years ago," Genna said. "It was fake."

Madame Hao nodded and told Genna to relax into her breathing. This was, she felt, more of a therapy session than a psychic one, and she truly cared for her granddaughter. She wanted to help her feel better. She wished she could see her more often. She wished her lives (the one in Shanghai and the one that belonged to her son in America) were closer together. She breathed with Genna, and relaxed too.

"You can say it now," Madame Hao said.

"Is she listening?" Genna said.

"The passed can't listen," said Madame Hao. "They've passed."

Genna smiled. She looked around the room. She didn't seem to be looking for anything in specific, just taking in her surroundings, making the circle bigger. She heaved a sigh and said in English, "Well, Mom, I got 1340 on my SATs. It was before

they added that terrible writing section. Thank God. It's not important." She shook her head, smiling at her hands. "It's just that we were waiting together. You were waiting for the results. I thought you wanted to know."

Madame Hao waited for Genna to say more, but she didn't. Madame Hao understood most of what Genna had said. It was difficult because Genna had started sniffing half way through. Now that she had finished, she wiped her arm across her nose and rubbed her eyes. Madame Hao found some napkins leftover from their afternoon snack and handed them to her. Genna took them and turned around to blow her nose.

It occurred to Madame Hao that Genna might have needed to talk to her because she was her grandmother, because she was there in Oregon when Kailong stayed remote. Even if they didn't know each other well, they were family, and family was something one could feel. You didn't need to be psychic to ease into the connection that came from sharing the same genes.

Genna said, "That's all." She smiled sweetly at Madame Hao.

"She would be very proud of you," Madame Hao said, which set off the tears again, even though Genna was smiling and nodding rapidly.

"It's been a long time," said Genna. "I miss her."

Madame Hao didn't know Kailong's late-wife well. She had only met her four times, and lived with her and Kailong for a year when they were still in California and when Genna was eight. So she softly prattled about what Genna would have wanted to hear. They talked for an hour, by the end of which Genna was jabbering about a story of how silly her mom had been one time when they all played charades. When Genna

looked exhausted, Madame Hao called for the cook to reheat their meals and moved them to the dining room.

They chatted the rest of the night, on and off. During that time, Kailong called. Madame Hao let Genna answer first. She waited while Genna talked to Kailong in fast English, like the news broadcasters she used to listen to in Oregon when she tried to improve her language skills.

When Genna passed her the phone, Kailong's voice was faint and far in the handset.

"Have you eaten, mama?"

"Yes. We were late and the cook had to reheat, but it was still delicious."

"Genna sounds happy. Did you two go to the zoo again?"

Madame Hao laughed. "No, we stayed in and relaxed."

Kailong paused and then said, "Mama. I know what you're going to say, but I have to insist again."

"I'm not going to move to America, Kailong."

"Look how happy you make Genna. You'll make me very happy. You need...I want to look after you. I want to spend more time with you."

"Then come back to China."

"You know I can't do that, mama."

"And I cannot live in America."

"I don't like to think of you alone in that house," Kailong said.

Madame Hao sighed.

“Even when your grandbaba was the head,” she said, “it was really I who ran the household. I have made my life here. I eat well. I get my exercise. The air is not too dry. You know I would visit, but, I’m getting to old and the plane makes me sick. Besides, is my time not well spent?”

“It is well spent, mama.”

“You have to think, too,” said Madame Hao, “what if I ascend to the sky when I’m in America? I want to be buried in Shanghai.”

“That is not going to be soon.” Kailong hastened to say.

Madame Hao chuckled. “I am an old tortoise now.”

When she hung up, Genna was smiling sadly at her. She had obviously been listening, but she didn’t try to convince Madame Hao to come with her to America. Madame Hao could hear Madame Bing’s voice: How cold of your granddaughter! But Madame Hao saw Genna as honest, and pinched her cheek lightly.

Genna rubbed her cheek and wrinkled her nose playfully.

Madame Hao wanted to drop off Genna herself. She sat in the backseat holding her granddaughter’s bony hand. She even entered the airport and waited through the check-in line. After which she walked Genna to the security gate and held her at arms length to look at her one last time. She felt very old and wanted to go home to bed, even though there were still two hours before her usual noon nap. Genna hugged her around

the shoulders and Madame Hao patted her small back. She pressed her cheek against Genna's. Then, very quickly, it seemed, Genna retreated toward the security gate, and even before she reached the line, she was lost to the Shanghai crowd.