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# Wake Up the Family

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by

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ABSTRACT

**Wake Up the Family**

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WAKE UP THE FAMILY is a collection of short stories, set in contemporary Las Vegas. These stories share more than a geographic setting; they share common concerns of loneliness, loss, alienation, and illness. The stories are further linked by the repetition (across multiple narratives) of plotlines, images, phrases, and key words. The links between these stories—thematic and otherwise—are meant to encourage a reading of the collection as one extended work of fiction, rather than as a group of separate works. It is hoped that these links will lead the reader to interpret each story in terms of the other (related) stories in the collection, with the result that her understanding of every work is deepened, complicated, and changed, by her understanding of the rest of WAKE UP THE FAMILY. Of course, it is also hoped that all of the stories will be enjoyed, appreciated, and remembered as individual works, for the stories they tell, and, more importantly, for the characters who live those stories.

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Learning Chinese

I was thirteen when I became half Chinese. It began on a Friday in March, the day I came home from school and found my mother on our loveseat instead of at work. It was raining that afternoon, and the house was dark with the outside gloom. I remember: I ran in from the cold, switched on the lights in the kitchen, and then reached for the overhead in the family room. That was when I saw my mother. She sat in front of the television holding the remote control, but watching nothing. She stared at the screen as if she were confused.

"Mom?" I said. "What are you doing home?"

When she didn't answer, or even turn toward the sound of my voice, I went and stood in front of her and repeated myself. Eyebrows raised, I dripped our yellow-green shag carpet a darker green and waited for her response.

"Hey," I said at last. "Are you okay?"

She watched me for a moment, turned her head to one side and then the other, and then she stood and walked away. I followed her to the dining room and the living room, the kitchen, calling her name. My mother ignored me, but I kept talking to her that whole time anyway. Finally, she locked herself in the bathroom and I gave up and went upstairs to my room. I closed the door and sat on my bed, emptied my backpack in front of me, just like every other day, but I couldn't start my homework because I was too worried about my mother. I thought about going back downstairs and trying to talk to her again,

but decided to wait until my dad came home before I did anything else. By five-thirty, I had almost convinced myself that everything was fine. Still, when I heard my dad's car pull into the garage, I jumped off my bed.

My parents were in the kitchen when I got downstairs. Mom stood at the stove with her back turned to Dad; he was at the table, just a few feet behind her, talking about his day. I sat next to him and watched my mother. She took pots and pans from the stove, emptied them onto serving platters and into large bowls, which she placed, one by one, in front of my father.

"Look at all this food," Dad said. "And dumplings!"

Dumplings were his favorite, but a rare treat usually reserved for birthdays or New Years. My father surveyed the steaming pile of pork-filled dough and then smiled at my mother.

"What's the occasion?" he said.

Mom didn't answer, or smile back, or even sigh and tell us how long it had taken her to make them. But her lack of a response was lost on my father, as his hands fumbled around the table. He picked up a set of chopsticks.

"Where are the forks?" he said.

"Yeah," I said. "Where are they?"

The two of us turned expectant faces to my mother. She ate quietly, oblivious, it seemed; her eyes were focused on her plate.

"Oh well," Dad said.

He speared a dumpling with one chopstick, and I fought the impulse to laugh as he brought it to his mouth, swallowed it almost whole. He repeated this motion again and

again (and each time it was a little less funny, and a little more pathetic), until the dumplings were gone. Then he lifted the platter of pork and tofu and spooned a huge red mound onto his rice. That done, he poked around with his one chopstick for a while, but accomplished very little: the pieces were too small; there was too much sauce; there was nothing to spear. Dad looked a bit confused, but it only took him a second to brighten up.

"Chinese food," he said. "What a great idea!"

He nodded at the *mapo dofu* on his plate.

"What's this called again, Honey?" he said.

And Mom was silent.

"Honey," he said.

And still she was silent.

He turned to me at last.

"Is something wrong?"

I looked at my mother, chewing delicate bites of pork and rice, her chopsticks graceful in her hand, and I looked at my father, holding his one useless piece of wood, and then I looked down.

"I don't think she's talking to us," I said.

My father did not respond to this. Instead, he got himself a fork; spent the rest of the meal praising my mother's cooking, and, as if to prove that he meant what he said, eating more than I had ever seen him eat in one sitting. After my mother cleared the dishes, he stayed where he was and kept talking. Watching him, I couldn't decide if he was talking to her or not. At any rate, he asked all the questions, and answered them too. When Mom dried the last dish and went upstairs, Dad finally went quiet. I tried to arrange my face

into a worldly and sympathetic expression, thoughtfully smoothed the corduroy of my hip huggers, and waited for him to ask me what to do. But he didn't. Instead, I asked him.

"Do?" my father said. "About what?"

"Mom isn't talking to us anymore."

"Don't say that," he said. "That isn't true."

"Yes it is," I said. "She didn't say anything at dinner. And she was here when I got home from school and she wasn't talking then, either. Something's wrong."

"I'm sure it's nothing."

"Nothing?"

I looked at my father accusingly, imagining an argument over money, or maybe even an office romance, some TV slight that would provoke this silent treatment. "It's got to be something."

"Look," he said. "Don't worry. I'm sure everything will be better by tomorrow."

But the next day things were not better. I got out of bed at seven, even though it was a Saturday, to see how my mother was before she left for work. I waited outside the bathroom while she showered; then followed her to the kitchen and watched her make rice soup, scramble eggs with soy sauce and green onions. She ate quickly, washed the dishes, and then she sat down. I sat with her, hoping she would start a conversation. But she didn't: we sat together in silence until nine o'clock; until nine-thirty; until ten. Finally, I spoke.

"Mom," I said. "Do you know what time it is? You're supposed to be at work right now. Aren't you going today?"

But she didn't answer me, just sat like she had been. That was when I went upstairs to confront my father. I found him in their room, lying on the bed, reading one of his stupid Westerns.

"Mom still isn't better," I said. "And I don't know why you're up here reading Louis L'Amour when she's downstairs and won't talk."

He closed his book.

"I'm not reading," he said. "I'm thinking."

"Thinking," I said. "Thinking what?"

"Well, that maybe we should take Mom to the doctor. Maybe it isn't that she doesn't want to talk, maybe it's that she can't. Maybe there's something really wrong with her, and she can't even hear us."

"Of course she can hear us," I said. "And of course she can talk. If she couldn't, she'd have found some way to let us know by now. Maybe instead of thinking about dragging Mom to the doctor like she's sick, you should think about whatever it is that you did to make her not want to talk to us."

"Me?" my father said. "How do you know it wasn't you?"

"Yes you," I said. "Because I already thought about it, and I know it wasn't me."

This conversation didn't get us anywhere. Not that morning, or that night, when we had it again, or the next night, when we had it for the last time. That Monday, I didn't go to school, and my father didn't go to work: we stayed home to watch my mother, and hope that she started talking to us again. But she didn't, and she didn't make any sign to acknowledge us when we talked to her, either. What she did do was get dressed and get ready to go out. As she was drawing on her eyebrows, I went to my father. I spoke in a

whisper, just in case, even though I myself was beginning to wonder if she really could hear or understand us.

"Come on," I said. "Now's our chance. It looks like she's going to work. We can follow her there and see if it's just us she's not talking to."

My father agreed to my plan and we got ready to go. As soon as my mother's car reached the end of our street, we got into my dad's car and followed her. But Mom didn't take the road that led to her job. Instead, she drove, and we drove, all over town. After a while, it became clear that my mother was taking us in circles.

"Do you think she knows we're following her and is trying to lose us?" I said.

"I don't know," my father said.

And we continued to trail my mother in her loop around town. About five minutes later, she surprised us by pulling into the entrance of the local high school. She stopped her car at the edge of the parking lot and just sat there; me and Dad parked several cars away and waited with her.

"What do you think is going on?" I said.

"Actually," my father said. "I think she's lost."

"Lost? But we've lived here forever. How could she be lost?"

My father didn't answer me: there wasn't time. My mother had pulled out of the parking lot. She took us down the street and then u-turned and took us back in the direction we had just come from. Then turned us right and went that way for a while before making another u-turn.

"Oh my God, you're right," I said. "She is lost."

"Yeah," my dad said. "So I guess we are too."

After another half dozen false starts and u-turns, forwards and backwards that didn't lead anywhere, my mother pulled her car to the side of the road. Dad and I pulled up right behind her: at that point we didn't care if she knew we were following or not. I could see into her car, and Mom's head was shaking a little, as if she were listening to music, or telling herself no. Then the shaking stopped, and she started the car up again. This time, she drove with more purpose, and without the frequent u-turns and not a single more stop. But she didn't go to the department store where she had worked for seven years. She drove to the Chinese grocery that was a few miles past it, parked her car, and went inside.

My father and I sat outside the 4-Joy Grocery, glad to have come to our destination at last.

"Well," he said. "I guess she's doing some shopping."

"I guess so," I said.

We sat staring, alternately, at the tacky pagoda shaped building, and at our own hands. Ten minutes passed, and then twenty, and still she didn't come out.

"One of us has to go in there and get her," I said.

"And one of us should wait out here in case she leaves before the other one finds her."

My father looked at me and I got out of the car, prepared to search the aisles of 4-Joy forever, if need be. As I walked to the store, I imagined myself peeking out from behind tanks of sluggish lobsters; crouching by the long low refrigerators that held bloody brown innards in open bins; playing some sort of elaborate hide-and-seek with my mother. I saw myself stepping fearlessly into the tiny jewelry store in back, where they sold light green

jade and shiny yellow 24K gold, and asking in my broken Chinese if anyone had seen a quiet (well, for now at least, very quiet), pretty, middle-aged, lady. But I didn't have to do any of this. I saw my mother as soon as I walked into the store, and she wasn't shopping. She was standing behind the counter, ringing up customers. And she was talking to them: in Chinese.

I ran outside to tell my father what was going on in the store, and he got out of the car and followed me back in to see for himself.

"She can talk!" he said. "You were right, she just doesn't want to talk to us."

But that was when I realized that maybe, in a really weird way, I had been wrong all along, and it was my father who had been right.

"Let me try something," I said.

I went out into the store and picked up a few groceries: a jar of preserved mustard, a box of rice candies, a stiff dried fish, and I went to my mother's register. When I got to the front of the line, I put my things down on the counter, and leaned in towards her.

"Hello," I said. "Hey, Mom, it's me."

She stared at me blankly, and I took a deep breath.

"Ma, do you know me?" I said, in my slow sad version of Chinese.

Immediately, my mother's face was normal again, like I remembered it had been back when she talked to us.

"Of course I know you," she said in Chinese. "Why wouldn't I know you? My own daughter." She paused, thinking. "It's the first day of the week, isn't it? Why aren't you at school?"

"There isn't school today," I said. "We have a special American holiday."

I waited for my mother to tell me I was lying, or at least to give me that shame-on-you look she always gave me when I tried to pull one over on her. But she just handed me my groceries, and I started to leave. I had already turned away when she stopped me.

"Daughter," she called. "Daughter, the way you speak today, really, so strange, I can barely understand you."

"I know, Ma," I said. "I'm sorry."

I went back to my father and started to tell him what had happened with my mother. But, halfway through my story, he raised his hand like he couldn't bear to listen to me any longer. Then he walked out of the store. I followed him to our car, watched him pound the hood of that poor Toyota once, and then again, before unlocking the door and getting behind the wheel. I had no choice but to sit down beside him. When I did, he started the engine and eased out of the parking lot. We drove home in silence, and, in silence, went into the house. Immediately, Dad sat himself down in the kitchen to brood. Of course, I sat with him.

"Mom doesn't speak English anymore," he said at last. "What am I going to do? I can't speak Chinese."

He looked at me earnestly, like he actually expected me to answer his question. Even then, I knew I couldn't, but I tried to make him feel better anyway.

"Maybe," I said. "Mom just doesn't feel like speaking English right now. But she must remember how. You can't just forget, you know."

"But maybe you can," Dad said. "Maybe it's some special kind of amnesia."

"Don't think that," I said. "We're going to be okay."

I put my hand on my father's arm, but he shook it off; turned away from me. I stood up and moved so he'd have to look at my face.

"Come on, Dad," I said.

"No."

"Dad."

"Just leave me alone!"

My father glared at me, as if I were somehow responsible for our problems, and, suddenly, my thirteen-year-old's patience was gone.

"Well," I said, in a tone that embarrasses me to this day. "Why didn't you learn to speak Chinese before this? Mom *is* from Taiwan."

My father didn't answer me, just gave me a stricken look that made me regret my words, and put his head in his hands. He looked so sad then, hunched over our kitchen table, and I really did want to help him, but I didn't know what to do. Finally, I stopped trying to comfort him because it just seemed to make things worse, and left him alone to feel bad.

But, when my mother got back from 4-Joy, I was waiting for her in the garage. And, as soon as she stepped out of her car, I was by her side.

"Ma," I said. "Why won't you speak English anymore? You know Dad is really sad about this."

"English," she said. "I don't speak English."

"Yes you do," I said. "You've spoken English all my life. How do you think you talked to me and Dad?"

"In Chinese, of course."

"But I don't speak Chinese. And neither does Dad."

"Of course you speak Chinese," she said. "You're speaking it now. And Father does too, how else would I have married him?"

She looked at me suspiciously. "Why are you being so strange today?" she said. "Where's Father? Does he know what you've been up to?"

Before I could answer her, my mother pushed past me into the house. I followed her into the kitchen, where Dad was still sitting. He looked up at us nervously, and then he stood.

"There you are, Old Man," Mom said. "I need to talk to you about this daughter of ours."

I don't know exactly what she said next, but I picked up enough words—like "not true" and "naughty"—to know that, not only did she think I was being strange, she thought I was telling lies, as well. Obviously, my father couldn't even understand this much, but he knew that, whatever Mom was saying, she was saying it to him, and he did his best to look like he was taking it all in. Finally, my mother finished talking. She eyed Dad expectantly, waiting, no doubt, to hear him tell her how they were going to punish me for my silly behavior.

But all he managed to say was, "Hello, Honey."

Of course, Mom didn't respond to this, and, after one terrible minute, Dad tried again.

"He—llo Ho—ney," he repeated, the words slower now, and louder, too, as if this would somehow translate them. He reached out and touched my mother on the shoulder tentatively as he spoke, but she backed away; stared at him in confusion.

Then she spun around to look at me.

"What is going on here?" she said. "What has happened to you two? First you. Your Chinese is so bad, really, I'm ashamed for other people to hear it. Auntie Lin at the next register asked me after you left today, 'Didn't you teach her anything?' How was I supposed to answer that? And now Father. That wasn't Chinese. I don't know what that was. Is he joking?"

"No," I said. "I told you, he can't speak your language."

My mother looked scared, and then she started talking: really fast, to my father, to me, but neither one of us could understand her. She went on and on, pausing sometimes, asking questions that would remain forever unanswered, and then she stopped.

Slowly, carefully, she said to me: "The two of you really can't understand me, can you?"

"No," I said. "Even when you speak slow like now, it's hard."

My mother's face crumbled, and she ran upstairs. Dad and I heard her on the phone for hours, ranting in Chinese, and crying a lot, but we didn't know what she was saying, and couldn't even imagine who she was saying it to.

The next morning when I came downstairs, I found my mother in the kitchen staring at the wall with red, puffy eyes. I asked her how she was; how she had slept; if she had eaten. But she sighed and would not answer, just handed me a brown paper bag and walked me to the door; pushed me outside. I thought about those swollen eyes and that sad sigh all day, but especially during lunch when I took out that paper bag and found, to my embarrassment, rice balls and a small container of sickly-sweet asparagus juice. "What's that?" my classmates said, and they laughed at me as I ate. But, even then, humiliated before the eighth grade second lunch shift, the only person I could feel sorry

for was my mother. After all, Mom was the one they were really laughing at: she had packed the lunch, not me.

When my mother came home from work that night, I was expecting more red eyes; perhaps even actual tears, but she surprised me. She strode beaming into the house, weighed down with groceries, and calling my Chinese name.

"Spring Scenery," she said. "Spring Scenery! Help me with these bags."

I did; then I helped her unpack the food. The whole time, she talked to me excitedly. She didn't seem to mind that I couldn't understand much of what she was saying, or that I questioned her constantly about the things we were putting in the refrigerator. She made noises of animals and pointed at her own body parts to make herself clear. There were chicken feet and pork intestines and salt fat back; a whole range of foods I had never eaten before, though I had naively believed that the Beef and Broccoli and Pork Fried Rice we ate in my house was authentic Chinese food, because my mother was an authentic Chinese.

"Such strange things," I said. "What are we having for dinner?"

My mother said something about chicken, but what part of the chicken it was, I couldn't figure out.

"Show me on you," I said.

"I can't," she said. "I don't have any of these."

I flapped my arms like wings, but she shook her head.

"No," she said. "I don't have any because I'm a woman, not because I'm a person. It's something that men have."

She opened a red plastic bag: inside were dozens of slippery, tan globes.

Horrified, I understood. "Rooster testicles?" I said in English.

"You know I don't understand you."

I crowed like a rooster and then took two tangerines and put them between my legs. My mother laughed and told me I was right; then she looked at me seriously. "We have a problem in this house," she said slowly.

"You're right," I said.

"But I talked to Auntie Lin at the store and she said she knows a school for you and Father to go to until you remember Chinese again."

I did not argue with her. I did not tell her that there was no Chinese to remember, that when I talked to her now I was using every little bit I had ever learned, or that, surely, she knew my father had never really spoken Chinese, either. I just nodded.

"I met Teacher already," she said. "Actually, he's Auntie Lin's husband. He's very smart. Went to a lot of school."

My mother set to cleaning the rooster testicles; when she finished, she turned to my father who sat watching us, and waiting to use the three sentences of Chinese I had taught him while Mom was at work. She smiled at him and then turned back to me.

"Tell Father."

I told him and he nodded. Then he said, so slowly and badly that it was painful to hear, "Hello, my Old Lady. How was work? I missed you."

"Hello my Old Man," my mother said. "Work was good. I missed you too."

My mother shook her head.

"Father will have to study very hard."

That Sunday, after three hours of Gene Autrey (there was a singing cowboy special on the Western movie block me and Dad watched every weekend), my father and I went to the local high school for our first day of Chinese school. Mr. Lin, or Teacher Lin, as we were to call him, met us a few minutes before class began.

"I have heard of your emergency," Teacher Lin said in slow, heavily accented English. "The school is in the mid-session, but we have decided to take you in this very special case. I teach beginner's class, and you two will go there today so we can test your level."

Teacher Lin shook my father's hand in a stiff, dignified manner, and looked a little confused when Dad tried to bow to him. Then it was my turn.

"Spring Scenery," he said. "Your skin is very white, and your hair is red."

"I know," I said, but Teacher Lin had already looked away.

The beginner's class, as it turned out, was made up of a dozen Chinese American children, ages eight to eleven, my dad, and me. If it wasn't for my dad being so old and so, well, white, I might have died from embarrassment that day. As it was, however, even thirteen and mixed race, nobody bothered to look at me with Dad in the room, stumbling along. The fourteen of us, headed by Teacher Lin, spent two hours practicing the Mandarin phonetic alphabet, which I thankfully already knew, and going over basic conversational skills and vocabulary. We spent the last half-hour practicing a handful of characters. When class was finally over, Teacher Lin met with me and Dad again.

"You," he said to me. "Will be in intermediate class. Your accent is very bad, and you don't know characters, but you will catch up if you work very hard. But you," he said to my father. "Must stay in beginner's."

Dad's face fell then, the thought of being alone with all those children, stuck with a Chinese name– *Li Cha*– which he couldn't really pronounce, must have been terrible to him. But he did not try to argue with Teacher Lin, just shook his hand once more; this time, without bowing.

The next week my father and I returned to the high school, and the week after, and the week after that, until it seemed like we had been going to Chinese Sunday school all our lives. At least it seemed like that to me, but in a good way. Actually, I liked Chinese school. The intermediate class wasn't bad at all, just a room full of teenagers like me—who liked McDonald's and MTV, Michael Jackson—trying to learn their parents' language. But my father had a much tougher time across the hall in beginner's. Apparently, my dad, forty-one and balding, was the slowest student of them all. Respect for elders notwithstanding, his classmates had no problem pointing this out to him, and calling him, when Teacher Lin went to the bathroom or turned to write on the blackboard, a "stupid egg" in Mandarin.

Those Sundays were probably the most humiliating days of my father's life. He feared them all week long, and studied for them, he later told me, harder than he had ever studied for anything before. In fact, we studied for them together: every night I would help him practice his Chinese. This was a difficult job in every way, but the two of us struggled over the four tones more than anything else.

"Ba, ba, ba, ba," I would say, pronouncing each syllable with a different tone: first a high even one, then a rising one, then a low one, and, finally, a falling tone.

"Ba, ba, ba, ba," my father would repeat, but not the way he was supposed to.

"No," I would tell him, and we would begin again. We did this over and over, until my father, by some lucky stroke, managed to get all four tones right in a row, or until he exploded. Many times, he accused "you guys" (who you guys were, I still do not know) of "making them up."

"Four tones, right!" he would say. "They all sound the same to me!"

But then he would calm down and we'd move on to something else.

My mother watched our nightly sessions with curiosity. Every now and then she'd help us with the pronunciation of a particularly difficult word, but, otherwise, we were on our own. Afterwards, she would draw me aside; talk about our progress.

"You speak much better now," she said. "It isn't so hard to understand you. But why can't Father speak Chinese anymore? Why does he have to practice every day and still can't say things the way you're supposed to?"

"I don't know," I said, and I kept studying with my father. In addition to Sunday school and our nightly sessions, we bought books (*Teach Yourself Mandarin*; *Speak Chinese Today!*), and audiocassettes ("...three native speakers teach you the Beijing dialect in the comfort of your own home..."). Inevitably, but slowly, Dad's Chinese improved. By the beginning of the summer session of Chinese school, he could say very basic things to my mother. Anything beyond basic, though, I had to translate for him. This obviously limited their conversations.

"Why do you learn so fast?" he asked me one day. "Why do I learn so slow?"

"You're not learning slow," I said. "You're doing good, too, Dad. You are."

But it was hard to sound convincing, thinking about the way he would watch me talk to my mother. That hungry look of his that told me how badly he wanted to understand

us. And then that look he wore when he realized he couldn't: his disappointment so strong then, I didn't just see it on his face, I felt it inside myself.

"You're doing good," I repeated. "You really are."

My father sighed. "But I want to do better. I want to talk to your mother. I want to talk to her now." He paused. "How *is* Mom? Is she the same as she was before? Is she okay? Does she miss me?"

Dad looked at me eagerly, and I shrugged my shoulders, hoping he would take that to mean whatever he needed to hear. But he kept pressing me for an answer and I didn't know how to give him one. I was thirteen then, so I didn't know how to tell him that, really, Mom seemed happier than she had back when she spoke English. Or that she had told me so many things about her childhood; about our family on Taiwan; about her life before she married, that I had never known before. I didn't know how to tell him that she had friends now, other Chinese ladies from 4-Joy, and that every day she came home from work with stories so funny, they made me laugh and laugh. I didn't know how to tell him all this, but I didn't know how to lie to him about it, either. And so I was silent. I was silent for so long that, as I stood looking at my father, and wondering what to say, I saw his face change from expectation to confusion to fear to panic.

"You too?" he said at last. "Did you forget too? Can't you understand me?"

Then he asked me in Chinese, "Daughter, do you understand English?"

"I understand," I said in Chinese. "Father."

Then, "I understand, Dad," I said in English.

But it was too late, he had already walked away.

For the rest of that week, my dad skipped our Chinese lessons. And then, on Sunday, he skipped Chinese school. Every day after dinner he would go to his study and close himself in until it was time for bed. My mother said to let him be, that he would come to us when he was ready, but I couldn't wait. On Monday night, I went to his study to find out what was going on. I knocked on the door and when my father didn't answer I just opened it and went in. He had moved a TV and VCR into the room, and he sat at his desk watching a black and white Western. His bookshelves were empty, and the floor and the desk were scattered with books about the Old West, and the Wild West, about gunslingers, and sheriffs. On the wall next to the poster of *High Noon* that had always been there were two new posters: both of John Wayne. The condition of the room, the sight of my father still engrossed in his movie, confused me. I had imagined him sitting in his study with the lights out, depressed and lonely; it had never occurred to me that he had been in there having a good time.

"Dad," I said at last. "Why aren't you studying Chinese anymore?"

"I've been busy," he said.

"But you'll fall behind in class. Teacher Lin asked about you."

"Don't worry about Chinese school."

My father stopped the video so the TV was locked in the still image of a lone lawman, stepping out into a dangerously quiet and empty street. He stood.

"Listen," he said. "I'm glad you're here. I need you to do me a favor. I need you to tell your mother something for me. Something important."

He smiled, but there was something about his demeanor that made me suspicious.

"What is it?" I said.

"Well, I have some good news. Some great news, in fact. I put in for a transfer at work, and I got it. So we're moving. To Texas."

"Texas?" I said.

I closed my eyes on my father and saw frame after frame of the movies we two had watched together. Those long dusty roads that went on forever; cowboys, and ranches, and saloons. Nowhere in all of this could I see me or my mother.

"But I don't want to move," I said. "And I bet Mom doesn't either."

"Of course you want to move," my father said. "And so does your mother. Texas is great! We've always wanted to move out there."

The wideness of his smile, the tone of his voice; the brightness of them both—at the time, I could not know they were false—were too much for me to bear.

"Maybe you have," I said. "But *we* haven't! And don't tell me that I want to move. I know what I want, and it isn't Texas!"

My father sighed, and, thankfully, stopped smiling.

"I don't know why you're getting so upset," he said. "We'll buy a big new house and Mom won't have to work. Maybe once we're out there she can start learning English again."

And that was when I understood what this was all about, or at least I thought I did. It was more than just going to Texas because Dad wanted to live out the movies: he was trying to take me and Mom out there so we would become more American again. Unfortunately for my father, that was the last thing I wanted. I liked this new path my life had taken and I wanted to keep following it. Sure, it was bumpy sometimes, but I was convinced it would take me to all sorts of wonderful places that I couldn't even imagine.

That's the only way I can explain it now: how I faced my father that night, how I listened to the quiet hope in his voice; watched him stare at the boring green carpet after he finished speaking, and, still, I had no pity for him.

"I'm not going," I said.

My father sighed, and he slouched a bit, the way he always did when he was defeated, and I thought for one triumphant moment that I had won. I saw the future, and it wasn't in Texas, it was right there in Nevada where we were: that night, me and my father would study Chinese again; and, on Sunday, we would both go to Chinese school.

But then Dad pulled himself back up.

"We're going to Texas."

I stared at my father in disbelief. The man I had grown up with—the one who caved at a word, a smile, from me or my mother—was gone. In his place, standing tall next to posters of *High Noon* and the Duke, I saw a man who was willing to ride roughshod over anything and anyone in his way. I turned to the TV, still caught in that silent moment before the shoot out, and the man on the screen was my father, just waiting for someone to step out and fire. I was ready to fight; I wanted to fight, but even I understood it: I didn't have a gun. If there was going to be a battle, it wouldn't be between the two of us: everything was up to my mother. And, if everything was up to her, like it or not, she'd have to speak the language my father understood.

"We'll see about Texas," I said, and I ran out of the room.

I found my mother upstairs folding laundry, laying it in huge soft piles on her bed. The stereo was blasting Chinese music, a tape of songs that had been popular when she

was a teenager, and she sang along happily. I turned the music down and started straight in.

"Ma," I said. "It's time for you to speak English again. It's time for you to practice, to remember."

"What are you talking about?" she said. "I can't speak English."

"Yes you can," I said. "Just a little bit, just for today, and then you can go back to Chinese, I promise. Please, Ma, you have to. Dad's moving us to Texas! Don't you want to stop him?"

"Texas," she said. "We're not moving there. We're not moving anywhere."

"Yes we are! Dad just told me."

She stopped folding the laundry.

"Why would we go to Texas? What about our house? What about my job? And your school?"

"We'll sell the house," I said. "I'll go to a new school. And Dad says you won't have to work."

"Not work? And do what?" My mother sighed and shook her head. "Don't worry, I'll go down there and talk to him right now."

"Okay," I said, and she was so self-assured that I began to feel better. I touched her shoulder. "But don't you think you should tell him in English?"

She stopped and turned to me. "Daughter," she said. "I can't."

"But why not?" I said. "I told you it would just be for a little bit! It won't work if you tell him in Chinese!"

She was silent and suddenly I wanted to shake her; to shake back the English I knew she used to speak. Or I wanted to throw myself flat on the bed, destroy those neat piles of laundry; burst into tears; kick and scream and cry until everything was okay again. But of course I did none of those things.

"Couldn't you just try?"

My mother looked at me then as if she felt sorry for me; as if she couldn't understand me; as if she were understanding for the first time that I couldn't understand her.

"I can't," she said. "Don't you think I wish that I could? Do you think I like living in this country all these years and not knowing the language? I can't speak it. I just can't."

We stood there looking at each other, and she seemed little, and sad. And that was when I really knew it: my mother would never speak English again, and what that meant, not just for me, but for her, and for my father. After a while, my mother shook her head and walked out of the room. I followed her into the hall, to the very edge of the top step, afraid of the fight that would start when she got downstairs. I stayed on that top step for a long time, and for a long time everything was quiet. Finally, I got tired of waiting, and I went to see what was going on with my parents.

Mom and Dad were at the kitchen table; there was no showdown. I crept to the end of the hall and stood off to the side a little, watching them. They sat next to each other without speaking, but I knew from my father's face that, somehow, it had already been decided, and we weren't moving to Texas. I felt sorry for him, then. I was about to go back upstairs, to leave them to each other, when my father started talking. He went on for a while, making mistakes, and stumbling along as usual, but speaking more Chinese than I had ever heard him speak before. He went on for a while, trying desperately to find the

words to tell my mother something—I'll never know what—and then, in the middle of a sentence, he stopped. He just stopped.

After a few minutes, my father sighed and pushed his chair back from the table. He went to stand at the window; look out at the dark. My mother let him go. And the two of them were silent for such a long time, I wondered how they could ever speak again. Then my mother stood, went to his side, and reached out to him. They stared wordless into the black, and she took his hand, held it so gently, as if there were some part of her that *could* remember: how it felt, all those years, when she lived in a language that did not live in her.

## Wake up the Family

Professor Richard Huang was not a midget or a dwarf: he was just extremely short, even for a Chinese. Exactly how short, Huang kept a secret from everyone, by always wearing elevator shoes, and lying shamelessly about his height. But exactly how short didn't matter. Huang was short enough so that it affected his life in almost every way possible. Naturally, he had devoted a good chunk of his boyhood (those awful years in small-town Arizona, when he was punished daily for the crime of being different) to thinking about why this should be. All he had come up with was this: looks do count, despite the clichés. This conclusion, though not very original, *was* very disheartening, especially to a child. But the young Huang did his best to resign himself to it, as well as to its (even more disheartening) implications. While his classmates dreamed of greatness—big money, big success, even bigger happiness—, Huang kept his own dreams purposefully small. Leave astronaut and President and (most certainly) basketball star to the other boys; Huang yearned only for this: to be normal, just normal, and reasonably content.

Modest though these dreams were (or seemed to Huang), by thirty-seven, he was forced to admit that he had been disappointed on both counts. He was forced to admit that he would never be normal, never be satisfied with his life. At this point (as he was fast, though unwillingly, approaching middle-age), the second problem was clearly the greater of the two, even in Huang's own estimation. The root of it was not so much his height

now, but rather his heart. Oh, that heart of his, it was always at war with his head. That heart of his: it was illogical, it was foolish, it was weak. It wanted more than it could have, and it never seemed to learn its lesson. It beat out of control at all the wrong times, and for all the wrong reasons, regularly betraying its owner by falling for some beautiful young girl or other he knew from the college. Nothing good ever came of these attachments, and Huang never even hoped that anything would. He experienced them always, and from the very beginning always, as something vague, and doomed.

Always, that is, until he met Clara Yang.

Clara was in the first week of her senior year when Huang spotted her, sitting front row, center, in his 9 AM Business Accounting course. That very first moment, Clara had her back to him, so all Huang could see was her long black hair. But then Clara turned, and Huang saw her face, and he felt that familiar shift in his stomach (so full of pleasure and pain), which always accompanied the beginning of one of his crushes on an unattainable woman. Of course, he went on with his lecture as planned, but his thoughts leapt onto a different track. By the end of the hour, he had played out his entire relationship (or lack of one) with Clara in his mind. So it was that, as he watched her pack up her books, Huang was able to see into the future, to the last day of class, when Clara would leave not just the lecture hall, but Huang's entire life forever. Just like that, Huang thought, as Clara stood and started down the aisle. But then, instead of following her classmates into the hall, Clara made her way to the lectern to ask Huang a question. That's when the thunderbolt struck.

As Clara stood looking up at him, so tiny and beautiful, and smelling so strongly of milk and honey that it was a sweetness in his mouth, Huang caught his breath. Weakened

by a feeling that he could not name (it was *that* unfamiliar), Huang leaned against the lectern for support. He stayed where he was long after Clara left him, long after, even, the last straggling students emptied the room, grasping the lectern's edges with whitening fingers, until he finally recognized the strange and devastating emotion that held him in his place. Hope, of all things, it was hope. That one word set Huang free; it started his feet in rapid motion. But, even then, he did not dare let himself know exactly what it was he might be hoping for.

That did not come until later, when Huang was locked into the safety of his own office, and sitting behind the solid bulk of his own desk. Then, he stared into space thinking about Clara, as the sun set on the desert outside his window, giving everything in its reach, all of Las Vegas, including Huang himself, a beautiful red glow. Finally, the room went black, and Huang allowed himself to think it: here, at last, was a woman he might actually be able to win. This one thought proved as powerful as the lessons of more than thirty years, almost half a lifetime. For the rest of that evening and long into the night, the old saying (there's someone for everyone) kept running through Huang's mind. And, for the rest of that evening and long into the night, Huang asked himself, Could that saying be true, even for me? Could that someone be Clara?

After that first class, Huang made sure to look for Clara every week, and note where she sat (front row always, but different seats each time), so he could face her while he lectured, watch her reaction to his arguments and assertions—in other words, so that he could pretend they were having a conversation. As this pretense was difficult to maintain by simply staring at Clara while he addressed the room at large, Huang was soon led to

more drastic measures. When he called on students to answer questions about the reading, he deviated from his usual procedure of choosing at random from the class list, and directed one question per lecture at Clara. How Huang agonized over that one question! It had to be difficult, or the class might think he was favoring his favorite, but it could not be too difficult, or Clara might feel persecuted and grow to resent him. This was a delicate balance to strike, and it was not uncommon for Huang to devote several hours to the problem each week. Despite his efforts, asking that one perfectly-crafted question gave Huang little satisfaction, for he was invariably too nervous to look at Clara when he spoke to her, or when she answered him. Huang couldn't even enjoy the sound of Clara's voice during class, because it was always drowned out by another voice—the one in his head, which demanded that he stop making a fool of himself.

That other voice also came to Huang late at night, to tell him his crush could not lead to anything but heartbreak. In the darkness of his bedroom, Huang was inclined to believe what the voice said: Clara really hadn't given any indication that she thought of him as anything other than a teacher. In fact, she had given no indication that she thought of him outside of class at all. Indeed, Huang had to admit in the early morning hours when, unable to sleep, he was driven to his kitchen for a snack, it was quite possible that Clara didn't even think about him when he stood in front of her, lecturing away. Possible, that is, until two weeks before midterms, when Clara showed up for Huang's usually silent office hours, smiling brightly, and smelling even more strongly of milk and honey than she had that first day. (And, Huang thought, looking even more beautiful and tiny than he remembered her.) For fifteen full minutes, Clara sat in Huang's office, and asked questions so obvious that Huang felt sure they were contrived. He could not help himself:

he doubted her motives for coming. When Clara showed up the next week for Huang's optional midterm review (one of only three students to do so), Huang read it as a definite sign. Surely, he thought then, Clara felt something for him. Perhaps it was only respect, or admiration for his intelligence, but respect or admiration was more than enough for Huang. He told his inner voice to shut up, and, within days, he gave himself over completely to his crush.

Huang even allowed himself a fantasy about Clara, a luxury in which he rarely indulged. In that fantasy, Clara came to his office, surprising him while he was working late. Without saying a word, she closed the door and crossed the room, so they were standing right next to each other. Then she looked up at him, and smiled a small, meaningful smile. Huang (much more bold in his imagination than in life) smiled as well, before breaking their silence.

"What are you doing here, Miss Yang?" he said.

"I came to ask you a question, Professor Huang."

"Then ask it."

"All right," she said. "I will. Why is it that you always call on me in class?"

"Why do you think?"

"Because you feel for me," she said, "what I feel for you."

Then they embraced, and the room darkened.

This did not happen. What did happen was the semester ended and Huang spent most of his winter break trying to decide how to ask Clara out on a date. By the beginning of the next semester, he still hadn't come to a decision. This relationship, such as it was (the longest Huang had had with any of his student-loves), would have ended here, if Huang's

research assistant had not quit, forcing Huang to advertise for a replacement. Within a week, a dozen students had applied for the position. When Huang realized that one of those students was Clara, he understood himself to be, suddenly and wonderfully, in the hands of fate. Disregarding her lack of experience, her unimpressive grades in her Business classes (other than his, of course), and all the other, more qualified applicants, Huang rang Clara up and scheduled a meeting.

The next day, she was in his office. During the interview, Huang sat behind his desk, with his hands carefully folded on its surface. He had not seen Clara in a month, and she looked more perfect to him than ever. He yearned to reach out and touch her: her hand, her hair, her pinky toe, whatever, it didn't matter, so long as it was Clara. But yearn was all he did, and (excepting one moment of weakness when he could not stop himself from sniffing the air to catch Clara's sweet scent) he managed to conduct the interview without showing too personal an interest in the applicant. Then, at the very end, he found himself asking if she had a boyfriend.

"Boyfriend," Clara said, blushing. "Why, have you heard something?"

Huang realized he had made a mistake. "No," he said. "I just want to make sure you aren't too busy for the job."

"Oh," Clara said. "If it's just that, then don't worry. I have plenty of time."

Huang called Clara that same evening, to ask if she could start on the following Monday. So began their professional relationship.

The first time Clara and Huang met, she carefully wrote out her assignment in a small notebook, which she left next to her computer with the folders of data Huang had given

her to work with. Over the course of the week (a very busy one for her, since her boyfriend Rob was in town for a visit), Clara glanced at that notebook often, but glance was all she did. Come Monday morning, the work was still undone, leaving Clara with no other option than to skip her classes and desperately input data into her computer. By disregarding the quality of her work (almost immediately, Clara gave up on trying to type the correct numbers, in favor of typing any numbers at all), she managed to finish the assignment (which should have taken all day) in just over four hours. Ten minutes later she was in the hall outside Huang's office, too guilty and afraid to go any further.

When she finally managed to step inside Huang's open door, Clara handed him her shoddy work with shaking fingers. Then she sat down, and stared at her shoes, while Huang put the disk into his computer. He scanned the screen for several (agonizing for Clara) seconds, before turning toward her.

"Excellent job," he said.

"What?" Clara said.

"Excellent job," Huang repeated.

Clara studied Huang's face carefully. In his eyes she found no anger or mocking (the only reactions that might be justified by the quality of her work); instead, she saw a devoted expression that could mean only one thing. But, surely, Clara thought, she was wrong. She looked away, and then looked back. Huang's eyes remained the same. It was unbelievable, but true: Dr. Dwarf wanted her! While Huang went on to gently criticize Clara's work, she replayed every single one of their interactions to date. Soon, Clara understood not only that Huang liked her now (and indeed that he *like*-liked her), but that he had liked her all along. And that this was the real reason he had hired her. Perhaps,

Clara thought, Huang never even wanted a research assistant, but had merely posted the job in an attempt to lure her, or some other female, into applying! Perhaps all he really wanted was for someone cute to come into his office each week, and allow him to ogle her, without rejecting him!

"Miss Yang," Huang said. "Miss Yang. I seem to have lost you. Is everything alright?"

"No," Clara said aloud, and quite by accident, "it's not. I don't think I can do this job."

At this, Huang jumped from his seat. "What?" he said. "Is it too much work? Can you not fit it into your schedule? Because I can be flexible."

"It's not my schedule," Clara said. "And it's not the work."

"Oh," Huang said. "I see."

"It's just," Clara went on. "It's just...."

It's just you, she thought. The problem is you.

"Well, then, if it isn't the work," Huang said slowly. "And if it isn't your schedule, then it must be me."

Clara started. She began to explain herself, but Huang looked down at her with a face so destroyed that she felt her whole chest expanding, as if it were filled with his sadness. Then she shook her head, making a decision she already regretted, but which she was powerless to change, ruled as she was in that moment by her heart. Oh, that foolish heart of hers, which never learned its lesson, but remained always so weak, so easily moved. That stupid heart of hers, Clara thought, with its excess of stupid compassion. Her heart, which was always at war with her head, and, too often, winning.

"No," she said. "Of course it isn't you. Why would it be you? In fact, it wasn't anything. It was nothing at all."

By the beginning of May, not only had Clara gone into Huang's office each week and allowed him to ogle her without rejecting him, but she had also allowed him to touch her person on three separate occasions. The first time, he patted her arm; this was one and a half months after he hired her. The other two times, which followed the first touch at biweekly intervals, Huang had come up behind her chair and placed his tiny paws (that was how Clara thought of Huang's hands, which were perhaps three-quarters the size of her own, and which always seemed to be in the process of balling themselves into fists) squarely on her shoulders. Of course, each incident had been unpleasant, but the last one had been the worst of all: just before he took his hands from her, Huang had audibly sniffed her hair! And today, Clara was sure, Huang would do it again. For it had now been two weeks since the last time he had touched her, and Huang seemed to Clara the type who would schedule everything carefully, even sexual harassment. Not that she thought of it in those terms; but, whatever she called it, Clara was sure that Huang would put his hands on her shoulders or her arm, or, God forbid, somewhere else, before she left his office that afternoon, and she couldn't decide what in the world to do about it.

If Huang were a normal man (it made Clara feel cruel to use these words, but these were the words she used), instead of being so very short and small and sad, she would never have allowed this to continue. But he wasn't a normal man, and so it did continue, and Clara was forced to explain this, at least to herself. Usually, she chose to name it an act of charity. But there was something about that word that didn't ring true, and,

eventually, she would stop what she was doing, look up from her dinner or her computer or her book, and say, No, this is not simple charity. If it were, then she would be in control of the situation, and clearly it was Huang who was in control of her. But how did he gain that control? Try as she might, Clara could only think of one (awful) explanation: that Huang, who must be aware of his not-normalness, somehow knew she was too kind to rebuff him because of it. That Huang (and this is where Clara's stomach always sank) was taking advantage of the very things that disqualified him as a romantic possibility, in order to make romantic advances on her!

Coming to that conclusion, yet again, Clara decided to confront Huang. Taking her disk in hand, she stepped resolutely to his office to do just that. She was surprised to find his door closed (normally, it was open wide in anticipation of her arrival), and even as she knocked on that door, she felt her resolution wane.

"One moment, please," Huang said.

Clara backed away. That girlish voice, those tiny paws, could she really—

"You may enter."

Clara pushed open the door. Yes, she could. "Professor Huang," she said. "We need to talk." But then she saw Huang's eyes, which were red, and swollen (the eyes of a man who had been weeping), and she stopped. "Your eyes," she said.

"Just allergies. Happens every year."

"Allergies," Clara repeated. She sat down. "I see."

"Yes, allergies," Huang said. "Terribly annoying, of course, but nothing major. So, Clara, you wanted to talk about something?"

"I," Clara said. "That's right, I did. Well, I.... Actually," she said.

Then she sighed. "Actually, I just wanted to make sure about next week. Our meeting is cancelled, right? Because of your brother's wedding?"

"Ah," Huang said. "That. My brother. It's strange that you should mention that, because I was going to bring the subject up myself."

"You were?"

"Oh yes. You see, I wanted to ask your advice about it. Really, to ask for your help."

"My help?" Clara said, shrinking back in her seat. "How could I possibly help with something like that?"

"Well," Huang said, leaning towards her. "A problem has come up. Something unfortunate and unavoidable has happened and, suddenly, I find myself without a date for the wedding. But I'm getting ahead of myself here. Clara, did you know that *I* was engaged?"

Clara had heard of no such engagement, and, truly, the idea of Huang getting married shocked her, since she had never imagined him with a woman. For a moment, all she could think was, There's going to be a Mrs. Dr. Dwarf?!? But then the moment passed, and, as soon as it did, Clara suspected where all of this was heading. She shook her head, both in answer to the question Huang had asked, and the one she feared he was leading up to. "No," she said, again to both questions.

"Oh, yes, I was," Huang said. "And to what a woman! Myung, is her name. Ah, Myung! Beautiful, an absolutely beautiful woman, and brilliant, too. Really, one of those people that is difficult to believe: so gifted in so very many ways, but humble at the same time. I suppose that's why I fell in love with her." Huang sighed. "But all of that is over

now. There were problems between us that just couldn't be resolved. So I ended things with her. Last night, in fact."

Huang paused now, dramatically, and fixed Clara with an unblinking stare that confused her for several long seconds, until she placed it. Then, everything made sense: Huang's look was that of a liar, checking to see if you believed his lie. And, once she recognized that look, Clara knew: there was no fiancée, beautiful, brilliant, humble, or otherwise. There never had been. She knew this not only because Huang was not the sort of man to have such a woman in his life, but because of the way his eyes were fixed on her face. Just as she knew that this was a trap. Oh God, Clara thought, just don't let him ask it. Please, Lord, don't let him ask it, not after telling that ridiculous story.

But, as Clara found, though God may answer all prayers, he sometimes says no: Huang persisted. "You're probably wondering what this has to do with you," he said. "The connection is this: as I said, I no longer have a date for the wedding. I was hoping you might help me out?"

"Well," Clara began. "Professor Huang, it *is* the end of the semester, and I *do* have a lot of work."

"Please," Huang said. "Say no more." He raised one hand then, to stop her; as he did this, a single drop escaped his right eye, and Clara knew that he *had* been crying before. And that now, rejected by her, he would burst into a new round of tears. The thought of that was too much for Clara's soft heart to bear. Against her own will, she heard herself telling Huang to wait. That he hadn't let her finish; that, of course, she would be happy to go to the wedding with him. At this, Huang hopped out of his chair and rushed to her

side, taking her two hands in his two paws. Clara let him. She did not realize until hours later that she had been right, after all; Huang did keep to a schedule.

The moment Clara left his office, Huang closed and locked the door, and returned to his desk to take some Benadryl and bless his good fortune. First of all, he now had, for once, a date to a family occasion. Second of all, he had managed to secure Clara's companionship for four whole days and three whole nights: they were to drive to his parents' home on Friday, and stay until Monday evening. Huang was understandably happy about all this, but he wasn't so happy that he was blind to what had just happened. He *was* aware that Clara hadn't decided to go away with him without some manipulation on his part. But his understanding of this manipulation was not the same as its recipient's. Huang believed he had successfully convinced Clara that he was a sought-after bachelor; a heartbreaker, even, and that this was why she had chosen to accompany him to the wedding. (After all, what lovely young woman *didn't* want a heartbreaker?) That the story he told her to achieve his effect wasn't really true didn't bother Huang one bit.

The next few days, Huang spent in a flurry of happy activity. He got a stylish new hair cut, purchased three new colognes, a new suit, two new casual ensembles, and a pair of new elevator shoes. He shined his new shoes, brushed his new suit, and experimented with various different styling products on his new hair. He also spritzed on the three new colognes, one at a time, allowing each one to "set" on his body, and mix with his own "personal chemistry," as recommended by the saleslady, before sniffing himself, and deciding which to wear over the weekend. Then he sat around his house, wearing his new

clothes, and revising his fantasy about Clara, the one in which she came to his office and confronted him with their feelings for one another.

This revised fantasy actually bore a striking resemblance to the original fantasy. In fact, the only changes were those necessitated by time and circumstance: a modification in the tense of the dialogue to reflect that Huang and Clara were no longer teacher and student; a change in setting to Huang's family home, the location of the wedding. It might seem strange that Huang should still have this same modest fantasy about Clara after nearly four months of acquaintance (eight, if you count the period in which she was his student), but, strange or not, it is true: the room (now in his mother's house) still darkened at the point of embrace. Knowledge of Huang's limited desires (and, no doubt, his appearance), might lead you to believe, as did Clara, that Huang had never actually "known" a woman in any significant way. This was not the case: although obviously not the ladies' man he wanted Clara to imagine, Huang had, in fact, had his one love affair.

It happened his senior year of college. During the first week of classes, Huang fell for an international student from Korea, a freshman named Myung. And, somehow (to this day Huang isn't sure how it happened), they ended up a couple. Within a few months of their first meeting, Huang even imagined he would brave his parents' disapproval (they wouldn't like that Myung was Korean, but they would get over it eventually) and marry her when she graduated. This was not to be.

Halfway through the Spring semester, Myung unwisely told her mother about her relationship with Huang, and the mother told the father, who called the girl and told her that, if she ever wanted to come home, she had to do it at the end of the term, giving up on Huang, an American education, all of it. After one agonizing week, Myung told her

father to buy her a one-way ticket to Seoul. But she didn't have the heart to tell Huang any of this, so she continued their relationship as if nothing were wrong, until her last night in America when she went to Huang's room and, without explanation, stripped off her clothes.

The details of what happened next would stay with Huang forever, but to describe that union now would be both unnecessary, and cruel. So let's leave it at this: neither one of them had any real idea about how to arrange their various body parts, or what to do when, finally, finally, everything had been put where it was supposed (they could only assume) to go. That night was horrible and humiliating, for Huang and Myung both, although neither admitted it to the other. As a result, Huang spent the first days of summer vacation desperately thinking up strategies to avoid a repeat of the incident when Myung returned to the States. His agitation was made worse because Myung didn't call him, as she had promised she would. When he finally did hear from her, through a letter, Huang was beside himself. He ripped the envelope open, only to read that everything was over, and that Myung would not be returning to the university. She explained, in detail, the reasons for these developments, but Huang didn't believe her. Heartbroken and lost in the town where he first learned of his inadequacies from the neighborhood children who kept a running list of his faults—chink, geek, faggot, girl—; heartbroken and lost in the very room where, after a painful talk with his mother, he finally accepted that the growth spurt he had spent so many years waiting for would never start—midget, dwarf, freak—Huang came to his own conclusions. Wasn't what really happened, he asked himself, that, horrified by the night she spent with him, Myung had fled the country?

Huang suffered terribly over this breakup, and promised himself that he would never love again. Of course, he reconsidered this decision when his worst pain was over; and, two years after Myung left him, Huang reentered the dating scene. He did so with trepidation, rather than excitement, because, although he had stumbled into his first love, he understood that, this time, he would have to work for it. What he didn't guess was how hard, or for how long. All told, Huang put in more than a decade. During this time, he endured the humiliation of bars and blind dates; setups by his family and their friends; even the pat (and patently dishonest) self-descriptions of his own personal ads. But, time after time, the result was the same. Huang, with as much hope as he could muster, forced himself to meet yet another woman. Then the moment when she first saw him, and her smile froze on her face; her eyes froze in her head. Sometimes, the woman managed to get past that first moment, but never long enough to build anything real or lasting, as if she, and life, were conspiring to hold Huang to his youthful promise of fidelity to Myung.

Finally, on the night of his thirtieth-fourth birthday, living in Las Vegas by then, Huang could take no more. He got in his car and left the city, headed for one of those Nevada towns where things could be bought that shouldn't be bought. He made the degrading drive with determination, but once he arrived at his destination, he found himself unable to go in. Instead, he stared up at a billboard of a woman who promised him everything he wanted, afraid that even she would meet him with that face he dreaded. At midnight, he turned away and went home. That was the end of his attempts to find love.

Time passed, and Huang (with only his crushes on pretty girls to keep him company) did his best to accept his life as it was. Then he met Clara, and what happened next you

know well: the small madness of his infatuation; his hope that, fed on so little, managed to grow so out of control. But still, Huang was neither so crazed by his feelings for Clara, nor so hopeful yet, that he thought he might seduce her over the course of just one weekend. As he prepared for his brother's wedding, all Huang really wanted was this: one little kiss, just one kiss in the dark, one hidden moment during which his lips could graze Clara's smooth soft cheek.

Thursday started badly, and got worse from there, so Clara was not surprised when the phone rang that night and it was her mother, calling ostensibly to ask about her weekend plans, but really, the daughter knew, to start another fight. Hoping to avoid this, Clara, lately tight-lipped with her mother, decided to tell her about the wedding. She knew well that another mother would be horrified to learn that her daughter was going away with a man fifteen years her senior, and her former professor, to boot, but Clara suspected that her own mother would have no such problems. In fact, the woman was thrilled with the news.

"This weekend sounds wonderful," she said. "And so does Professor Huang. I'm so glad you're finally taking my advice and dating someone Chinese."

She paused. "Does this mean," she said (hopefully, her daughter noted), "that you and Rob have broken up?"

"No," Clara said. "It doesn't."

"Oh. I was hoping you *finally* saw him for what he really is."

In case Clara didn't know what that was, her mother went on to explain Rob's true character, detailing his many faults for her daughter in a list that Clara had heard so many

times that she could have recited it herself, if she had chosen to. Rob was lazy, he was stupid, he was selfish, he wasn't trustworthy, and, most terrible of all, he was white.

"He's just like my father was," Clara's mother added. "He even looks like my father did!"

Clara had also heard this before. And maybe her mother was telling the truth: Rob was the spitting image of her grandfather. But, then again, maybe the two looked nothing alike. Clara had never actually met that grandfather, or even seen a picture of him. All she really knew about the man was that he had somehow ended up in Taiwan, married her grandmother, and then brought her to America where Clara's mother was born. Six years later, he had left them, and never looked back. Unfortunately for Clara and Rob, he had left them for a white woman, and this had somehow warped Clara's mother's mind and heart so that this woman, who was normally nice and kind and open, had gone a little crazy when her only daughter brought home her first serious boyfriend, a boyfriend who was white.

"I know you don't want to believe me, Clara," her mother finished. "But you need to harden your heart. Rob doesn't really love you. Honey, I've seen this before. He's going to leave you in the end. That's the way it always goes. He's going to ruin your life and then he's going to run off."

"I know, Mom," Clara said. "I know, and with a white woman."

After she hung up the phone, Clara tried to forget her mother's words, but she couldn't. And she couldn't stop thinking about Rob in LA where he was working (he said!), and wondering (doubting) if he was thinking about her.

*

On Friday, Clara was still upset by her conversation with her mother, so she didn't notice Huang's new hair, clothes, or smell when he arrived. In fact, she didn't notice anything at all about Huang or the drive, until Huang pulled the car over and parked it on the side of the road.

"Is this it?" Clara said. She looked out at the desolate highway. "This can't be it."

"No," Huang said. "But I have to tell you something before we get there. You can't go into my parents' house until you know this. It's about...well it's something about my fiancée. My ex-fiancée, that is."

Huang paused then, and Clara watched him as he fiddled with the buttons of the radio (which wasn't even on) feeling a strange combination of suspicion and curiosity. What unbelievable story would he make up now, expecting her to believe it? What new and extraordinary charms would Huang add to the résumé of a woman who, Clara was sure, did not even exist? Was it possible that this man was some sort of compulsive liar, unable to even know fact from fiction? Or did he just think that *she* was too stupid to know the difference? But, when Huang finally went on, Clara had to admit that he did not say anything the least bit far-fetched. He did not, even, repeat any of the unlikely things he had already told Clara. Instead, he started with the (rather believable, Clara noted) details of how he and Myung met and fell in love. Then he told her the (rather predictable, Clara thought) reaction of their families to the romance: they were against it, from the start, simply because he was Chinese, and she Korean. Finally, Huang came to the (heartbreaking but all too common, Clara decided) conclusion: how his mother had threatened to disown him if he did not find a woman of his own race. By this time

(reminded, no doubt, of her own star-crossed love with Rob), Clara's disbelief had turned into sympathy.

"But you didn't listen to your mother," Clara said. "Did you? You couldn't do that!"

"No," Huang said. "But we broke up anyway. Myung's father intervened and she left me. That was two weeks ago. Of course, my family doesn't know what really happened. They think I broke with Myung several months back to start seeing someone else. Someone Chinese. That's why I wanted you to come to this wedding. I was hoping...."

Huang stopped, and faced Clara in silence. She looked in his eyes then, and, for a moment, she forgot how short and small and funny he was, and saw only how sad.

"It's okay," she said. "You don't have to ask. I'll do it."

When Clara and Huang finally arrived at the Huang house, they were ushered through the door by Huang's niece, and taken directly to the dinner table, where the rest of his family awaited them. Clara had expected to find here a half-dozen different versions of Huang, but all of the adults, even his mother and sister, stood a full head taller than he did, and of course towered over her as well. Standing among these northern Chinese giants, Clara could not help but feel as if she and Huang were linked in their littleness, like brother and sister, or even like real boyfriend and girlfriend. Clara was so surprised by her own thoughts, that it took her a minute to realize that something terrible was happening: everyone in the family was talking at once, and they were doing it in Mandarin! This was a language that Clara (unfortunately, oh how unfortunately) could not speak, and she was forced to admit this, with great embarrassment. But, much to her relief, rather than criticizing her for this failing, everyone continued to be warm and

receptive after the admission, speaking in English now, with perfect fluency and ease.

Everyone, that is, except for Huang's mother, who went completely silent. Clara assumed then that the mother was an immigrant, and uncomfortable expressing herself in the language the rest of the family spoke for their guest's benefit. But these assumptions didn't survive the meal. Halfway into it, Mrs. Huang turned to Clara and said, in perfect cold English, "Clara, come now, you *really* don't speak Chinese?"

"No," Clara said.

"Really. How very strange," Mrs. Huang said. "But I guess that doesn't matter, not in this day and age. English is quite enough, isn't it?"

"Usually," Clara said.

Mrs. Huang nodded then, as if to agree with Clara, or perhaps to answer her own question, but the look on her face belied the motion. Indeed, her eyes seemed to say what Clara's own mother and father had said countless times: Why in the world can't you speak Chinese? How did you manage to live in a house where Chinese was spoken every day and still not speak it? What is wrong with you?

The reproof in Mrs. Huang's eyes was so strong when she looked at Clara again a few minutes later that Clara expected her to ask just those questions. Instead, Mrs. Huang said, "Clara, you really are such a pretty girl. Your skin is so light. And your nose, especially, is very nice, very tall. So unusual for a Chinese."

The entire table turned to see that nose and that skin, and Clara looked down.

"Oh no, Mrs. Huang," she said. "I'm just average-looking."

"Hardly," Mrs. Huang said. "Your face is very special, very different from most Chinese. Surely, people have told you that before? Surely you must have noticed this yourself?"

Clara did not answer either of those questions; she knew that a third and much more important question was hanging in the air now, and she wasn't sure what to do about it. Not with an audience like Mrs. Huang; not when she was literally surrounded by a traditional Chinese family. Try though she might, she simply couldn't think of anything to say that could turn this moment into something positive. Finally, she decided to go with the truth, regardless of the consequences.

"My mother," Clara said at last. "Well, her father was an American."

"Ah," Mrs. Huang said. "A foreigner! That explains it."

And that was all.

The rest of the evening was, in Clara's opinion, a disaster. Mrs. Huang definitely didn't like her, and the rest of the family, including Huang himself, seemed colder toward her after they learned she was not pure Chinese, and she felt their rejection keenly. That she was not in actuality Huang's girlfriend, and so should not care what he or his family thought of her, didn't matter. What mattered was that everyone believed she was Huang's girlfriend, and apparently also believed she wasn't good enough for him. All this was too humiliating, and Clara ended up excusing herself early from the family room, citing fatigue, but thinking escape. She regretted this decision when Mrs. Huang offered to see her to her room.

In that room, Mrs. Huang helped to settle Clara in with what Clara could only think of as a strange combination of conscientiousness and coldness. She pointed out the location

of extra towels and blankets, showed Clara how to work the controls on the air conditioner, and how to open and close the windows, and insisted, even, on turning down Clara's bed. But she did all this without offering a single smile, or uttering a single unnecessary word. Finally, Mrs. Huang turned to go. But just as she reached the door, she stopped, and faced Clara once more.

"You are not my son's girlfriend," she said.

Clara stared at Mrs. Huang, too shocked to respond. Could it be that she was so unacceptable as to be rejected by Huang's mother, just as the Korean had been rejected? Would Huang be given an ultimatum: It is your family or this mixed race hussy! Was that how Mrs. Huang thought of her? Or was it something worse? Did these Chinese mothers think of nothing but race?

"Is this," Clara said (when she was able), "because I can't speak Mandarin, or because my grandfather was an American?" Then, as an afterthought, she added, summoning more feeling than you would have imagined possible, but then that feeling was really for herself: "I'm sorry if I'm not Chinese enough for you, but such things shouldn't matter. And shouldn't you let Richard decide who he dates?"

But Mrs. Huang shook her head impatiently.

"I didn't say you could not date my son. I only said that you are not his girlfriend."

"What," Clara asked, "do you mean?"

(How, Clara wondered, can you tell?)

"Why," Clara went on, "wouldn't I be Richard's girlfriend?"

"Because," Mrs. Huang said. "I've seen my son, and I've seen you, and you are not his girlfriend. You would never want to be his girlfriend."

"Richard," Clara said, "has many good qualities."

"Yes," Mrs. Huang said. "I can see them, because I'm his mother. But they're not the kind that someone like you can see. No. You are not my son's girlfriend."

Then Mrs. Huang walked away.

Clara dropped onto the bed and turned so that her face was against the pillow. She didn't understand what had just happened, or why. What she did understand was that Huang must never find out what had been said in that room. If he knew that his own mother didn't believe Clara was his girlfriend, it would crush him. Clara, of course, would never say anything to him about it. That left only the mother herself, and, though Mrs. Huang had confronted Clara (the stranger and supposed girlfriend), she could not be so cruel as to confront her own son. Or could she? Clara remembered that woman's cold voice; her certainty when she said it: You are not my son's girlfriend. And she remembered Richard's story; how his mother had heartlessly rejected her son's one and only love just because she was Korean, and she felt sure that the mother *would* tell her son, and the first chance she got. Oh, poor Richard, Clara thought, poor poor Richard, whose own mother could not believe he had a pretty girlfriend. Then Clara thought of *her* mother, who was always warning of imminent abandonment, and she found herself weeping, and she didn't know if her tears were for herself, or Huang, or for both of them.

What hope can there be for either of one us? she thought. What hope, in this world, when even our own mothers don't believe we are lovable?

Huang went to his room shortly after Clara went to hers. He wanted to be alone so that he could gloat over the hit Clara had made with his family. Not only had everyone

been taken with her personality, but Clara was far more attractive than any other woman in the house that night, and probably ever. And it would not be forgotten that it was he who had brought her here. From now on, he was sure, his father and brother, his mother and sister, his entire family, would look at him differently. And this was just the first day of the visit! There was still the rest of the weekend to look forward to, including the wedding itself, where, Huang knew, his date would outshine the bride without even trying.

A knock sounded on his door, interrupting Huang's pleasant thoughts. He sat up in bed, just as a voice called his name. "Richard," the voice said.

Was it Clara? Huang wondered. Could it be?

"Richard, wake up!"

It *was* Clara! Huang was confused. He couldn't understand why she had come to his room, or why she would want to wake him if she thought he was sleeping. But his confusion didn't last: he soon decided that, true to his fantasy, Clara had come to declare her feelings for him. Rather than reacting with happiness, or excitement, as he had imagined he would at such a visit, Huang felt nervous. He didn't know what to do, so he pulled the covers over his head, and lay as still as possible, silently willing Clara to go away. She didn't go away, but knocked again, and again, louder each time, as if she were not content to wake Huang, but must wake his entire family. The sound of her fist on his door seemed to Huang, even as he hid under the covers, to be the loudest knocking he had ever heard. Huang lay there, listening to that loudest of knockings, until he realized that Clara would not give up. Only then did he get out of bed and switch on the light. He

turned it to its dimmest setting (one which would, he hoped, discourage late-night visitors), pulled a robe over his pajamas, and opened the door.

"Richard," Clara said.

"Clara," Huang whispered. "My father and mother are just next door."

"Well, I need to talk to you," Clara said. "In your room." She started to advance into that room, even as she said the word, but Huang, feeling weak and nauseous, blocked the way.

"Please," she said. "It'll only take a couple minutes."

Looking past Clara into the dark hall, Huang weighed his options. He could refuse her entry, but this might lead to an unpleasant (and loud) scene. Or, he could let her into his room and talk to her, but it was late, and he didn't really want to do this, and such a visit in his parents' home, with his parents not twenty feet away, was inappropriate to say the least. Huang sighed. All things considered, it would be best, nauseous or not, to let her in. He took a single step back, and Clara, as if fearing he might change his mind, hurried into the room.

"Whatever," Huang said, "could it be that wouldn't keep until morning?"

"Richard," Clara said, and her voice saying his first name sounded different to him, almost tender. But Huang didn't rejoice over this tenderness, he panicked, and backed away: first with an ouch into a chair, and then with a thud into the wall. All he could think about was the last time a young woman had come unbidden to his room, and the disastrous, humiliating consequences. He wanted no part of this, whatever it was.

"Richard," Clara said again. Then she started toward him. Huang, though wanting to escape, could only watch her separate the distance between them. He was amazed by how

slowly she moved, and how graceful she was; so slow and so graceful that she seemed to be gliding, really, and not walking at all. Then she was still, just inches away, tiny and beautiful, and all milk and honey and sweetness as always, but, for once, Huang didn't care.

"Miss Yang," he said feebly. "What would my mother think if she saw you here?"

Clara smiled at this, and Huang was forced to wonder what sort of woman Clara was to smile in the face of such a threat. She even, Huang thought, seemed to like the idea.

"Miss Yang," he said.

"I know," Clara said. "Your mother will hear me and come rushing in. Well, let her come." She smiled again, and reached for the chair Huang had knocked over; pushed it aside, so that it hit the wall with a sound that Huang could only think of as terrifying. Then she put her arms around him, and Huang stopped thinking; he stood absolutely still in her embrace, his hands heavy on either side of his body. Then he found his arms around her.

And as Huang held Clara, and she held him, the room filled with a soft, sweet light. But Huang didn't see this, nor did he see the woman watching them from the hall. He did not see the look on that woman's face, nor did he see the way that woman, his mother, put her hand to the door, closed it so gently, letting the room go dim, once more. All he knew was his fear, a terrible fear which, he understood then, had always been with him, since before his countless rejections in love, and before the day he lost Myung; since before the first time one of the neighborhood boys had screamed out his failings, for the entire world to hear; since before the day he was born, even, ever since that very first moment, when his father entered his mother, and the gods had decided he should be, and

be short and small and funny and yellow, and, as if all of this were not enough, that he should be born in a small town in America.

Then Clara put her lips on his, and Huang's terrible fear left him, if only for one, blessed, moment. So it was that, when Clara stepped away, Huang was able to look in her eyes, and see them for what they were: two tiny shimmering stars, trying, desperately, to light the dark inside.

## Last Night

When he first heard her voice on the telephone Tang didn't recognize it, but his knees weakened anyway, and his pulse raced out of control, his whole body responding to Deirdre's very first words. Hours later at the bar waiting for her to show, Tang remembered this and was overcome with embarrassment. But, even embarrassed, he understood: it was right that his body should know Deirdre before his brain did. After all, he never could think straight when it came to that woman. Which would explain why he agreed to meet her here tonight, though there was no reason for them to see each other, not after all this time and the way things ended between them. And it would explain that terrible disappointment he felt, when, finishing his second drink, he realized she might stand him up.

Tang knew, of course, that it would be for the best if she didn't show; that he should leave himself, get up and go home to his wife. But he didn't leave. He ordered another drink, which he let sit untouched on the table in front of him, staring at that whiskey now, instead of the clock. After a while, water beaded on the glass, dulling the amber liquid, which was cloudy anyway by then from melting ice. Those beads of water on the glass, tiny, and incredible, Tang thought, they seemed to come from nowhere. And then, from nowhere as well, there was a hand on his shoulder.

He turned and Deirdre was behind him, leaning down to kiss his cheek. Then he felt her lips soft on his skin, and he felt too many different things at once to understand or

fight. One beat later, though, when she sat down opposite him, Tang felt nothing but annoyed that she should show up like this, two hours after she was supposed to, and so casual and easy, despite everything.

"You're late," he said.

"Very," she agreed. "But I still think you owe me a nicer greeting than that. It has been seven years."

Deirdre reached for Tang's drink as she said this; downed it like a shot, before leaning back in her seat and looking at him with a challenge on her face. She was confident, of course, the daughter of a rich man and a beautiful woman who received her inheritance from both ends early in life; she had always been confident. But maybe she was too confident, now. At thirty-three, Tang had not expected her to look the same as she had back then; he had known that the perfect fresh skin and those wide, innocent eyes must be gone by now, existing only in his memory. But Deirdre had changed more than she should have. Her face itself was different: that aquiline nose off just a little, though Tang could not have said how; the fine bones of her cheeks obscured as if their beautiful sharp edges had been rubbed away by time. Thinking of these changes, and knowing without thinking of the other changes, so humiliating for a woman, that had to come for Deirdre (for all of us) with age, Tang felt a rush of emotion he neither expected nor welcomed. He pushed it away.

"Actually," he said. "February was eight years."

"Okay, then, eight years. That's even more reason to be sweet to me."

"Is that why you brought me here? To be sweet to you?"

"I think you know why I brought you here," Deirdre said. "Don't you?"

Tang didn't answer: earlier, on the telephone, he had avoided asking Deirdre what this meeting was for; all afternoon, all evening, he had refused to ask himself the same thing. But, he had to admit, Deirdre's meaning was clear from the beginning. He had understood it in her tone of voice, and in the silences between her words, though she had chosen not to speak it, and he had chosen not to think it. Now, Tang was forced both to understand *and* think Deirdre's meaning, as she took her index finger and ran it along that soft skin, so vulnerable, of his inner wrist. Tang watched that finger: it moved so slowly up and down, and then again, and again, until he pulled away.

"Why are you making this so much more difficult than it has to be?" Deirdre said.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do. But, if you want, we can play it like that. I'll tell you all about my stupid life and you tell me all about yours and we can both get very drunk and pretend that things just happen."

"Or?"

"Or you come home with me right now and we do what we're going to do anyway."

"Deirdre," Tang began, but then he stopped. When he went on, it was in little more than a whisper, which he hated himself for, but he went on anyway, "You know," he said. "I'm married now."

She shrugged. "Caught the ring. Not that it matters. I mean, it doesn't matter, does it?"

Tang looked away from her, down at the glassy wood surface of the table, he ran his finger along that smooth shiny surface, like Deirdre had run her finger over his skin, considering. Images tumbled into his mind, blocking out what was before him. His grey

stone house, that beautiful old house, which was always cool in this desert heat, always welcoming, and safe; the perfect place to close your eyes at night and pretend at death. Then his wife, Shuang-lin; and that face of hers: pretty, but always just a little sad. His sad, pretty, wife, so forgiving of all his failings; so devoted to him that he almost, just almost, loved her. Last, Tang saw his office, that dark unremarkable room, where he did his unremarkable job; a job which gave him only a quiet satisfaction which wasn't passion, or even joy, but which was still powerful. These smooth pieces of his smooth existence: Tang saw them all. Such smooth pieces, they fit together so well; he had to regret upsetting any of it.

But then his mind cleared, and all he saw was this table, this bar, this woman he was with. He stood, perfectly calm now, perfectly decided, he thought, to let this night take him where it would. Deirdre was already on the move by then, pushing her way through the crowd and out of the bar. She didn't turn to make sure he was following, didn't even look for him until they reached her car. Then, she took his hand and squeezed it. But when Tang moved towards her, she stepped back, smiling at him with something on her face that stopped him. It looked like triumph, he thought, but it was gone in a second, and in the dark Tang couldn't really be sure what he had seen.

Deirdre behind the wheel, they raced across town, swerving in and out of traffic, moving always and moving fast, until they reached the Strip, where they joined the line of cars inching along. Tang watched Deirdre uneasily now: lit up by the gaudy lights of the casinos, everything about her seemed brighter and younger—a dangerous change. He turned away, adjusted his seat: moving it forward, leaning it back, and then settling down

in the same position in which he started. Then he fumbled in his pockets for his cigarettes, only remembering when he could not find any that he had given them up last month, a concession to his wife.

Deirdre turned to him. "Something wrong?"

"Just wanted a smoke."

"That one's easy enough. In my jacket."

Deirdre made no move to get the cigarettes. Finally, Tang reached for them himself. He slid his fingers into the pocket closer to him, but all he felt was Deirdre's hipbone, hard under his hand. This intimacy unnerved him, but he was determined not to show it. He leaned across her to try the other pocket, this time pulling out the pack. Without asking, Tang lit two cigarettes, giving one to Deirdre. She put it in her mouth and took a deep drag.

"So," she said. "Did you call your wife from the bar, or did you call her this morning when we made our date?"

"Excuse me?"

"To tell her you wouldn't be home tonight."

"I didn't tell her that."

"Oh. Then she must be missing you. A shame to worry her. Maybe we should ask her to join us?"

Deirdre took another drag off her cigarette, watching him and hoping, Tang knew, that he would look away. But he kept himself steady: met her gaze while she inhaled; held her gaze until she turned back to the road. When she did this, Tang noticed for the first time a too-smooth patch on the back of her neck, almost like a burn: the remnants of

the tattoo she had gotten at twenty-one. That scar took Tang by surprise; for a moment, all he could do was look at it, feeling something close to disappointment. Then he closed his eyes, and tried to picture the dragon—not fierce or mysterious or Chinese, not like the one he had tattooed on his own neck, which was still there under his collar, but childish and Western, and sweet, drawn by Deirdre's own hand—that used to be on that skin. Instead, he saw only the scab that was there in the beginning, glossed over with Vaseline, Deirdre's red hair pulled away from it, but slipping down in tiny strands to get caught in that greasy mess. For some reason, this memory made his whole body expand: his chest filled with smoky air; his arms opened in an unconscious embrace.

But then Tang pulled himself closed again. When he did this, he forced himself to look at the woman by his side. To focus on the skin of her neck and to see it as just a scar, and know it as nothing more.

"I don't think," he said, "that will be necessary. I think we can leave her be."

"Oh Tang," Deirdre said, laughing just a little. "You used to be the sweetest, most thoughtful boy in the world. You would never have left a woman to wait for you without calling, back then. But, back then, you would never have cheated."

"Well maybe I've changed. Or maybe you didn't really know me."

"Maybe I didn't," Deirdre said. "After all, I never imagined you'd come back to Vegas. And like this: turned into a buttoned-up accountant with a little wife at home."

Tang thought that what Deirdre really meant was that she never imagined he'd do anything after he left, because she hadn't thought of him since, but it would never do to tell her that. "No," he said. "I didn't think I would do any of that, either."

"Things happen," Deirdre said. "Life happens."

Her voice held no memory of why he had left, of what she had done to make him leave, but, as she spoke, she reached over and put her hand on his thigh, and her touch was knowing. Those fingers seemed to confess, and even to be sorry for all that was past. They awoke in Tang old, humiliating longings: the desire to tell Deirdre he had loved her, and to ask her why she never loved him.

"The first time I saw you," he said instead. "Was through glass. I looked through a window one night and you were dancing on the sidewalk. It was freezing out and there were Christmas lights everywhere, but all you were wearing was this tiny dress, all white. Even your feet were bare."

"Really," Deirdre said. "Was *that* the first time you saw me?"

Tang nodded.

"But you always said the first time was that night at Ace's. The night we hooked up."

"I know I did."

Tang waited for Deirdre to say something that acknowledged what he had just admitted, but she was silent. They were on the highway now, and both of her hands were on the steering wheel; she was absorbed in her driving. Watching her, Tang began to feel lonely and foolish. He had to wonder why he would come along for this ride, why he would go down this path again, with this woman, no matter for how short a distance, and after all this time, too. But then the car stopped, and Tang felt only a sweet tightness in his stomach: anticipation. He pulled himself up and out into the cold darkness, going around the car to meet Deirdre.

They rode up the elevator in silence, both facing ahead. Tang stared at their

reflections in the polished surface of the brass doors, hating what he saw: how flat and dull, golden and stupid and still they were. But he didn't look away. Then the doors opened and the hallway burst out in front of them, embroidered tapestry and quiet. Tang was the first to move, but Deirdre was just a second behind. They made their way to her condo, together.

At the door, Deirdre stopped. "You remember the place. Don't you?"

Tang nodded: he could see no point in pretending that he didn't. She wouldn't believe him, and he would only make himself look the fool if he tried.

"I remember." He took the keys from Deirdre's hand. "Allow me."

Tang unlocked the door; pushed it open. He led the way inside, stepping through the hall and the kitchen with a fast-moving confidence he hoped Deirdre would believe. But when Tang made it into the living room, he had to stop. Nothing, he realized then, had changed. Not in this room, not in the rest of the condo, either. Everything—the bright rugs, the beige couch and chairs, the tables of smooth glass stretched across Oriental vases and urns, Deirdre's child-like paintings, all that vivid color and unsure form—everything was exactly as it had been. For a moment, Tang felt a strange sense of returning, and an uneasiness he did not want to examine.

"Why," he said then. "Why didn't you change it? You always said you hated it."

"What?"

"This furniture. Everything. You always said you'd change it. You said you hated it. But it's all the same."

Deirdre shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I did hate it. Maybe I still do. But at least I know it." She paused. "There's something to be said for knowing things, Tang.

Something sweet, something comforting, about everything connected with the past, no matter how ugly it was or is."

Tang looked down. "Is there? I don't know that time improves anything."

"I see. So it's like that, then. That's too bad. You know, Dear, it didn't have to be."

"Like what?" Tang said.

But Deirdre had already turned her back on him, and, before he could ask again, she had disappeared down the hall that led to her bedroom. Tang was left to stand where he was, wondering if her words were serious, or if they were just one of her seductions. Then, giving up on understanding Deirdre, he took off his coat and sat down. A phone was on the table in front of him; Tang picked it up to call his wife. Then he realized that nothing she said would bring him home, and decided to save all that—her questions, his lies—for later. He would save his apologies for later, too, when he could see Shuang-lin's tears; witness her slow, sad way of accepting them; when her pain could be real to him. In such a relationship as theirs, Tang thought, where love is on one side only, it was easy to turn cruel. His wife's forbearance kept him from that—at least it had.

Tang thought suddenly of his childhood—those long quiet days, and those heavy, sad nights, all that violence just under the surface—, and he found himself shaking his head. He had hated his father, then, and feared him, too, but he had not understood the man at all. Tang understood his father no more when he grew into a man himself, not even in these last few years, when they two had started to become the same person. But, now, Tang imagined his father on a night not so different from this one, in a room not so different, and for reasons that were not so different. So *this*, Tang thought, looking about himself, is how infidelity begins: with a casual disregard; with a strange absence of

emotion, rather than with abandon or malice or guilt, as he had always thought it would. So this is how you hurt a woman; how his father had hurt his mother: it was how he hurt his wife. Tiny crack after tiny crack and then a blow like this one, not because you wanted to break her, not even because you wanted so badly to do all those selfish things you did. No, you did all these things, this damage, only because you could. A disappointment, really—life, himself—, but here he was, and he was ready to do it. So let it begin. "Deirdre," Tang said.

She didn't answer, so he called to her again. Then he stood and traced the path she had taken across the carpet.

The bathroom door was open just a few inches, lighting the area around it. Tang stood just outside that light in the dark of Deirdre's bedroom, unsure of whether he should go on. Finally, he moved forward, until he could see into the other room. Deirdre stood at the sink with her back to him, her head bent over something Tang couldn't make out. She had taken her jacket off, and her white arms were bare to the elbow: Tang watched them, amazed, just as he had been the first time he had taken off her shirt, by how light her skin was, by the map of veins so blue on her forearms, by the movement of her muscles just underneath that pale skin. Then Deirdre turned a little, just enough for Tang to see what she was doing, for him to see the needle in one hand, the way the fingers of her other hand were spread wide. For a moment, the parts of her body didn't add up, but then they did, and Tang felt just as much shock as if he had come home to find Shuang-lin engaged in this same act. But Deirdre was not his wife, not so innocent or naive or so girlishly good it was sometimes laughable, and, Tang imagined, she never had been. Still, she was

not the kind of person to do *this*.

That kind of person, Tang thought, This. There was something about the whole thing, apart, even, from the drug, which, Tang was sure, was one he would not even want to name, that made this act more than it was. There was the needle, good God, a needle, and this the same woman who had once been too terrified to give blood. There was the way she had run straight to the bathroom to do it, unable to wait until he was gone and she was alone; unable to wait, even, until she had set him up with a drink, made a proper excuse for her disappearance. And then there was the secrecy of the whole thing, that pathetic secrecy of the needle in the web of her hand, as if the secret made it any better, Tang thought, as if the secret made it any less real. All these things added up to something so unbelievable that Tang really did not believe it, until the metal pierced Deirdre's skin, poked into the narrow space between her fingers. Then, Tang had to look away. His eyes traveled the room, focusing on the clutter of orange pill bottles and the blue box of tampons on the counter; the ridiculous fluffy green carpet on the floor, too innocent for its surroundings.

When he turned back to Deirdre, he saw her lift her face and look in the mirror. In the harsh bathroom light, they both stared at the woman, strange and haggard, trapped flat under the glass. Deirdre shook her head at that cruel image, and put her hand to her cheek, and Tang felt sure she would weep. Instead, she reached for a bag and slowly, carefully, began to make up her face. Tang watched in disbelief as Deirdre smoothed out her features, turned her face familiar again, made it even pretty, so that in the end Tang felt the desperate beginnings of desire stir in him in a way that made him ashamed. Then Deirdre brought her hand to her mouth and licked away a tiny drop of blood that had

dried there, the last evidence of what she had done. This last gesture struck Tang with its childishness, it's innocence killed all desire he felt for Deirdre, leaving him to remember, by contrast, the terrible power of his need for her, so long ago. But then how much of that was real, he wondered, and how much of it was just being young?

Not wanting to answer his own questions, Tang turned and, stepping softly, left the room. He knew, suddenly, and surely, that whatever Deirdre wanted from him was more than he had in him to give. He needed to get away before she tried to claim it. More than that: he needed to get away before she saw him. Oh anything, he thought, as long as he didn't have to look Deirdre in the eyes and pretend he hadn't seen who she had become.

In the end, Tang got no farther than the door. He put his hand to the knob, but unable to turn it, he went to the window. That same window he used to look out of, standing with Deirdre in his arms, all those nights when he saw nothing but what he wanted to see: the future spread out shiny and bright ahead of them. But that was so long ago that he didn't even think of it now. That was a lifetime ago. In this lifetime, waiting for his old lover, and not knowing why he waited, Tang saw only what was really there: the city lights, so tiny, such sad little points of light. Seeing them, he was overcome with pity. Not just for the woman in the bathroom, or his wife at home alone, but for himself for becoming a man who could watch the one in silence and want only to escape, and betray the other with only a small pang of guilt—all this in just one night.

Then he heard the door to Deirdre's room close. Deirdre was behind him.

"Sorry I took so long. Did you miss me?"

"Of course."

Tang smoothed his face blank and turned from the night, walked to the center of the room, where Deirdre stood, waiting for him. She smiled, so easy and casual, that he was sure she did not know what he had seen. He was as grateful for this small blessing as he had ever been for anything. They faced each other and she reached for his hand. He let her take it, and let her lead him to the bedroom. Then, he took her in his arms, holding her more tenderly than he ever had when he loved her.

But it was only a second that they stayed like this. A second before Deirdre stepped away from him; stripped off her clothes. When she stood naked before him, he could see her awkwardness before he saw the sad ways her body had betrayed her. And though later that poor body would make him weep, that awkwardness was more poignant to him: it made him want to comfort her in all the ways that one person can comfort another. He wanted to comfort her, but when Deirdre looked up with that question in her eyes, all Tang could do was turn away. When he forced himself to look at her again, he saw that she already had her answer.

"So it's that bad," she said. "Well. I wasn't sure it was, but now I know."

"Deirdre," Tang said.

"No," she said. "Don't. Please don't lie to me."

"I wouldn't."

"No. Don't even try."

Deirdre reached for her clothes; bent down and gathered them up. But instead of putting them on, she held them in a humble pile in her hands.

"You must want to leave now. So you should go."

And Tang did want to leave; it was the only thing that made sense. But still he stood

facing Deirdre, the both of them silent for so long he did not see how they could possibly speak again. Then he was moving towards her, wrapping his arms around her once more. She went stiff in his embrace, but then relaxed, and leaned her head against his chest. When she did this, Tang could feel her gratitude, as fragile and delicate a thing as this body she now lived in.

"You know you're the only one," Deirdre said. "Who ever really loved me. Just you, Tang. But I ruined it. Didn't I?"

Tang tried to answer, but all he could manage was a shake of his head. He could smell her now, Deirdre's scent, so strong it was a taste in his mouth: the individual notes of the hollow between her breasts, that gooseflesh under her arms, the darkness between her legs. All of this coming together in a song that was a variation of the old familiar song that had never really left him. And Tang could recognize the melody still; that melody, it had, every now and then over these years, played for a few seconds in his blood at the strangest times. Of course he could recognize that melody still, but there were notes that were discordant now, and so moving as they had not been before—they cut him in places for which there are no names.

Then Deirdre lifted her face for him to kiss. Looking down at her in the moment before he moved, Tang breathed in and then out; breathed in again. He felt something shift in his chest, right next to his heart, which seemed to him to be either the very beginning of something or the very end, though he couldn't say which. Finally, he closed his eyes, and bent down to do as Deirdre wished. He tried to concentrate on a girl in white, dazzling under blinking Christmas lights, dancing, still dancing, barefoot and all alone, on the other side of a window. But all he could see was a flat mirror-reflection, a

sick two-dimensional woman trapped in shiny glass, caught forever in that cruel bathroom light.

That woman stayed in Tang's mind through the entire sad act that is so poorly named, love, and even after it, while he lay alone in Deirdre's bed, Deirdre in the bathroom again, doing things he refused to think about. When the image finally disappeared, she was replaced by another woman: his wife, her face grey in the half-dark half-light that filled their house this time of night, her eyes anxious as they stared out the window, looking for his car. And, though he tried not to, Tang understood that this last night with Deirdre would stay with him no matter what he did to forget it; it would stay with him straight to the end. This woman he did not know and that woman who did not know him, his wife, were joined forever now in his mind with the girl he once loved: all of them always just out of reach, all three, always just behind glass he didn't know how to break through.

Everything Ninety-Nine

There was something about Lauren that made men look at her. And maybe it was just the way she moved in this desert sun, so slow and deliberate, as if she understood that heat, as if it came from within her, instead of from without. Or maybe it was just how small she was, short and skinny both, like a kid still, little and blonde and just pretty enough so you wanted to protect her, or hurt her, depending on who you were. Whatever it was, it made the men look. All kinds of men. Rich white dudes, just passing through this awful neighborhood; the ones that reminded her of her father when they stopped to offer her a lift "wherever" in their minivans and sedans. *Vatos*, in their wife-beaters and beat-up rides, who seemed to roll up on her from out of nowhere, every time. The quiet brothers you wouldn't expect (the ones she never did, anyway) dark-skinned and still and seeing, always and deliberately, nothing; always, that is, except when they were looking at Lauren. And, of course, the homeless men: those poor homeless men—sad and desperate and angry and sick, by turns—that were everywhere in this damn town.

It was the homeless men who were the most persistent. They stared at Lauren longingly from outside the window of the coffee shop where she worked. They trailed her doggedly as she made her way home at night: five feet behind, four feet behind, three feet behind; sometimes (oh God) close enough, even, to touch. Those homeless men: right up behind her and babbling away; they were always about to declare themselves, but never quite managed to do it, at least not in words that made sense to anyone but themselves.

No, the homeless men never made any sense, but they were always there, like shadows that stretch out in the afternoon. Shadows of real men, maybe, but, like shadows late in the afternoon that look less and less like what they once were, they were so little like the kind of man a woman might marry or love or date or just talk to that they were easy for Lauren to ignore. She could close her face and close her heart and close her head and just about forget them.

All of them, that is, except for *him*. Earl, the madman, the veteran, the one Lauren saw every Saturday when she went out to the Everything Ninety-Nine Cent Store to buy her groceries. Earl was different, maybe because of the way he stood, stock still, on the grassy knoll between the road and the store, wearing those tan and grey Gulf War desert fatigues. He was almost like a soldier standing guard, almost like a man you would have to respect—all he needed was a shower and a shave, a haircut and a gun. Or maybe Earl was different because, no matter what time of day—eight in the morning, three seventeen pm, high noon—Lauren came out to do her shopping, he managed to be there, and be waiting for her, like some sicko Hollywood stalker, and Lauren his own special star.

Yes, Earl always managed to be there, and he always managed to be waiting, and today was no exception: one block from the Everything Ninety-Nine Cent Store, Lauren looked up and there he was, watching for her. She looked up, and there Earl was, coming towards her. His steps were fast and uneven, an off-rhythm music that she couldn't hear but which she could feel beating inside her, one that made her feel off-balance, but which she was determined to ignore. Lauren felt that rhythm inside her, that irregular tap tap tapping that made her want to sway to one side and then to the other, but she kept right on walking like she had been, her movements slow and deliberate, her face a careful mask

that didn't acknowledge Earl's existence on the sidewalk she was walking on, in this city she lived in, on this planet they shared. But, of course, he was there, with that sunburned skin of his, that poor skin and all it must have gone through here in this desert and there in that desert. With that black mark on his cheek, dirt that had worked its way in from the outside and which would not wash away—like so many things in this life, it could not be washed away. There was Earl, here was Earl: with that look in those wild blue eyes of his that shocked and humiliated her the first time she saw it and knew it for what it was.

He stopped in front of her, *right* in front of her, and for a moment Lauren feared he would touch her: run his fingertips along her cheek, or take her hand, do God only knew what, because only God could know what a man like Earl might do. But Earl just shook his head; he left that distance between them—those humble inches, Lauren tried not to count them—intact.

Has there been another one? he said. Since Jesus Christ? One other man who was great in the eyes of God? Just one other man who was even *good*?

Well, Earl said, raising his voice now. You tell me, Woman, has there?

And while he spoke, his eyes were lifted to the sky. Lauren looked with him at that flat medium cloudless blue that surely was not heaven, but even while they looked at the same sky, she knew they were not seeing the same thing. Then Earl stopped speaking and he was just standing there, silent, with those eyes of his that she couldn't meet. And then she was looking down at the sidewalk and then past it to the parched red dirt just beyond. While Earl waited for her answer, Lauren's mouth went dry and she licked her lips, as if to speak, but she didn't. She was just twenty years old and new to Vegas, new to life, really, still a good girl at heart, and still guilty for letting her high school boyfriend and

his friend do that one thing to her, that one time. Oh, her boyfriend Bobby and his best friend: she should never have let them do it, she didn't like it, didn't believe any woman would, didn't understand how they could like it, but they had, and they'd wanted to do it again, always again, and that had been the end of everything with Bobby. In a way, it was the end of everything else back home, too. Lauren was just twenty years old, and young for twenty, too innocent and too guilty at the same time, and though she wanted to say something to Earl, something at least, the words that came to her—where is your family, how can they let you live out here like this, all alone—were not ones she could speak.

Finally, she gave up, and she moved past him. One step, two steps, three steps, four steps, five. Six steps, seven steps, eight steps. And now Earl was following her; Lauren could hear him, feel him, behind her. He was laughing, just a little.

Your father? Earl said. Did you say your father? Your *daddy*? You think he was a great man? You think he was even a good man? Not your father.

No, Lauren thought, and suddenly her father—weak in all those ways he was weak, and soft in all those ways he was soft, and mean in all those ways he was mean, too many of all three, and all of them ways that a man, a family man, shouldn't be—was before her. Her father, with his vague face, and those vague eyes behind his glasses, and how those eyes always looked at you without really seeing you and all those years she spent standing right in front of him, trying to change that. No, she thought. Not him. And then she was speeding up, but just a little, enough not to be caught by Earl, but not enough for him to know that she was trying to get away. Not my father.

She turned into the store, before Earl had the chance to do or say whatever he would do or say next, safe now, because Earl could not follow her inside. Not after three weeks

ago, when Lauren and everyone else watched him slide open the glass doors of the deli section, unbutton his pants, those tan and grey desert fatigues, those wartime souvenirs, and take a piss. That powerful stream that went on and on, too dark to be called yellow, but too yellow to be called anything else. That too-dark too-yellow too-human stream drenching the Sunny Acres Polish Sausage Links, drenching the Country Kitchen Chopped Ham, the Stonefield Lower Fat Bacon, the Farmer John Beef and Pork Bologna, the Carl Buddig Oven Roasted pressed Chicken Breast. That hot powerful stream—there was something almost beautiful about it—its graceful curve through the air—the pure force of it—the tiny precious droplets that splattered off the pink and the green and the clear, the red the white and the blue, the orange, of those packages—that hot powerful precious stream—it went on and on and on.

Lauren watched the whole thing happen, but even as it was happening, it was hard for her to believe it: that Earl was pissing, right there, in the middle of the store. It was hard for her to believe it: all of that food, beaded golden on the outside, and so ruined; all of that food, just ninety-nine cents or less every day. It was only after Earl finished, when that endless stream finally ended, that she realized that, of course, she had seen *him*, that they all had, that she was seeing him now, shaking himself dry. And then two of the stock boys, Mexicans like all of them, little and brown and small next to Earl, and darker than dark even against Earl's tan, had him in hand. They had him in hand, but they didn't have him under control. He struggled in their grip, his pants still undone and that part of him half-hard now, then all hard, so hard he was about to burst out of his own skin, flapping around wildly, angrily, as if looking on its own for a woman. *That* part of him moving as if on its own as Earl twisted and turned and tried to get away. But, somehow—there was

a nod from the manager, Lauren saw it but never could remember it—those two stock boys became three, and then those three were dragging Earl across the floor. Earl let them drag him: he let his body go dead and limp, all of him dead and limp now so that Lauren was amazed at how little he had become, how helpless he seemed and that part of him, too.

Suddenly she thought of other people's bodies: her nephews in the bath, soft and small and soapy and sweet, with that smell of theirs, of babies and little children, that sweet soft smell that's gone one day, just like that, like innocence is gone, just like that. Then she thought of her grandfather, shriveled and sad, a different kind of small, and this seemed closer to the way Earl was now: almost a perfect match. The old man untying his bathrobe and letting himself fall out. Her white-haired old grandfather: senile and sick and flashing his own eleven-year-old granddaughter. Her grandfather naked in front of her and tiny and pathetic and playing with himself and looking at her the whole time with those innocent blue eyes of his that didn't know what the hell he was doing, but, the whole time, too, he was laughing a dirty old man's laugh that proved his guilt and proved, too, that he didn't feel guilty. Her grandfather's dirty sick laugh echoed in her father's laughter—oh, how he had laughed when she told him the story. That same laugh Bobby had laughed, years later, and his friend, too, when she cried before they did it, when she cried after they did it. That laugh: maybe all men shared it; maybe it was born into them. For a second, Lauren thought she heard it coming from Earl, thought she heard that same sick sickening laughter echoing through the stunned quiet store, though he wasn't making any sound at all.

Earl didn't make any sound at all: he didn't utter a single curse; didn't offer up a

single prayer, he just let himself go. Limp and dead, so those poor stock boys had to hold him up under his armpits, hold up his torso, and drag his lifeless legs along the linoleum to get him out of the store. Watching this, Lauren found herself thinking of young boys dragging a fallen comrade from a foreign battlefield. She found herself thinking of two of her uncles, one who had come back a better man from Earl's war that happened so fast you could almost forget it, the other uncle who had not come back at all. And really that war was fast, and really almost everyone had come home, but fast didn't mean something hadn't happened, and almost wasn't everyone—it just wasn't. Lauren found herself thinking of her uncles, the one a father now, loving and strong and kind, a better father, by far, than her own; the other just a memory and a gravestone, a name and a regret; both of them just boys, back then, like Earl had been. Then, for exactly one half of one half of one second, she looked at Earl limp and lifeless and stretched out, and the man she saw was that second uncle—her mother's little brother, died far away and not even a hero's death, but just an accident, like maybe everything in this life was just an accident. She looked at Earl and she saw this boy, her uncle, long-home and long-buried, but then she looked again and all she saw was a black mark staining a dark face, a dirty dark head, both unmistakably Earl's, and she had to wonder that she could mistake this stranger for her own blood. She had to wonder that she could mistake this quiet cool store in the middle of this safe American desert for a crazy hot battleground in the middle of that faraway desert, so long ago. But really it was no wonder at all: of course she saw all that, of course she thought it, what with Earl playing possum, what with Earl wearing those pants.

Then the stock boys got Earl out of the store. And, as soon as he was gone, everyone

came together all at once. Everyone came together and everyone stood around laughing and talking (how could they not) about how absolutely crazy, how downright *loco* Earl was. They all had something to say: the cashiers with their beautiful brown skin and their bleached blonde hair and their dark dark lipliner and shiny light lipstick; the store manager with his potbelly and greasy combover and that face of his that was always bored, except for this once, when he smiled and became, this once, almost handsome; the customers, even—the Koreans and the Filipinos, fresh off the boat; the Mexicans and the Nicaraguans, fresh across the border; that one cracked-out white woman and her Jamaican boyfriend, that wild pair who always fought, not fighting for these few minutes, thanks to Earl; the African family, even, that dark and noble fivesome draped in their beautiful traditional clothes, like statues in stillness, usually, but not still, now, but laughing, now, thanks to Earl, too. Every single person in the store going on about Earl, laughing at him and mimicking him, even, except Lauren who stood off to the side, silent, and thinking too many things, next to a tiny old black lady who was silent, too. That little old black lady, with her perfect posture and proper self, all dressed up in her bright blue going-to-church suit and her hat with that big pink flower on it: her thoughts were written on her face, What a shame, Lord have mercy on us, what a shame.

And then everyone had their fill of laughter and jokes, and everyone started to feel just a little bit sorry for Earl, that poor crazy mofo, so clearly out of his mind, really, you had to feel bad, but only for a minute. After a few shakes of a few heads and after a couple sighs, after exactly one *pobrecito*, everything went back to normal in the store, just like it was right now. Everything went back to normal, except that no one wanted any meat, not for the rest of that day. Lauren herself had not gone near that deli section when

she went shopping the next week, or even the week after, unable to face that aisle, unable to look at those glass doors, unable, even, to acknowledge the place where Earl had done what he did. She had not intended to go there today. But now, after walking slow through every other aisle, even the ones she normally skipped—after looking at, even picking up and weighing in her hand, the votive candles with the stickers of Jesus on them, Jesus, that compassionate white man, one of the few white men in this place, after going through and even fingering the cloth of the crazy selection of underwear, the bras which were all strange sizes, tiny triangles that couldn't hold in anything but hope, and the too-huge harnesses with too-thick straps, the joke underpants that said *lush* on the waistbands and had martini glasses printed on the crotches, after carefully examining the plastic shoes with their five-inch heels and smooth smooth soles, impossible, surely, to walk in, after considering, even, the too-thick generic face creams and the bright over-flowery smelling overstock shampoos, and stopping and staring at and even picking up and reading the twelve-pack boxes of ninety-nine cent condoms and the ninety-nine cent pregnancy tests, which, truth be told shocked Lauren in their cheapening of sex and its consequences, betraying where she came from (a nice solid middle class family, nice solid middle America, she was still living there, at heart, still there, deep down)—she did go.

She did go there: but only after looking at all these things, and forcing herself to think of these things, and not of anything or anyone else. Not of her family, back home, of her mother's worried face, or the comfort there is in being with people you have lived with and loved even if you haven't done either very well. Not of the town she had left behind, a thousand miles away: nights making out in the parking lot of the Dairy Queen, Bobby's

mouth cold and sweet; how it felt to ride in his truck with the radio on loud and the main drag lit up by headlights and taillights more beautiful than the stars in the sky ever were, ever could be. Not of the city beyond the store, this city that was now hers: too bright too gaudy and too shiny and too sharp, too dirty and too real and too sad, just too much, just too there, sometimes, for her to even look at, and so sometimes she didn't look. Not of her apartment, that tiny studio that felt so damn big in the dark, empty right now, but still silently demanding more living to be done within its walls than she managed to do there. Not of Earl, who she had left outside the store, unable to come in after her, especially not of Earl, waiting for her now, and wondering where she was.

She did go there: but not in any purposeful way. She went there: but only because she ended up there, after walking through every single aisle in the store, after walking past every single thing that was for sale. Past the cans and jars and bags and bottles of everything and nothing under the sun, which was of course all real, but somehow seemed all fake to Lauren. Past the potted meat the deviled meat and the cans of seafood that was all imitation: shrimp flavored this and nearly abalone that and fake crab and almost lobster. Past the brightly colored cans of Mexican food with the pretty girls or the voluptuous women on the labels: the refried beans the black beans the red beans the red rice the Ranchero sauce the green chile sauce the tamales the enchiladas. Past these cans of food that would last longer than food had a right to, longer probably than some people in the store with her that day, and then on to the bags and boxes and bags of tortillas and breads, noodles and rice, the bottles and jars of sauces and salsas and dips and ketchup and mustard, the PB and J. Past the junk, the absolute junk, the candy and cookies the chips and the cakes, and on to the dairy case: to the cartons of milk and cream, the tubs of

butter-flavored vegetable oil spread and the low-fat squeezable imitation sour cream, the dairy-free puddings and the dairy-free processed cheese products, and then, finally, on to the cheese products that were actually cheese, but these were processed, too, and all crazy colors (too orange or too yellow, or such a bright pink )—far removed from what they should be, all of them, and just barely recognizable.

It was only after all this, after looking at everything and then loading up her basket with nothing, that Lauren found herself, by accident almost, or maybe by purposefully thoughtless design, in the deli section. She stood there looking at the beef and pork and chicken and turkey, at the ungodly mixtures of all four, thinking about breakfasts and lunches and dinners; of midnight snacks, even, though she rarely had them. And then she thought that she was standing and looking just where and just as he had that other day and then she was thinking about Earl, and all she could see before her was him. And then she was thinking about Earl, and all she could see before her was her own reflection in the glass, red-faced with too-knowing eyes, and she could feel her poor heart beating an irregular rhythm in her chest, one that made her feel off-balance, one that made her want to sway from side to side, and she had to turn away.

Lauren knew, even then, what would happen next.

She let her basket drop to the floor, overflowing with canned imitation shrimp and canned imitation crab and that jar of mayonnaise she had taken even though she still had a little left at home, enough really to last a whole week. That basket, she let it stay right there: overflowing with tortillas and salsa, with hot sauce, the very hottest in the store, with cereal and soda, with not one but two dozen eggs, not a single one cracked, twenty-four chicks that would never hatch. All that life that was dead to bring us more life, left

there on the dirty floor, to be picked up by a stock boy—maybe by one of those three who had picked up and dragged out Earl—, and taken back where it came from, every single item reshelved, every single thing in that basket put back in the aisle where she got it, so that it could be sold, can you believe it, for just ninety-nine cents or less every day.

All that food, overflowing onto the dirty floor, while Lauren ran towards the outside: she wanted the sun, one million degrees, even at this time of day, to beat down on her. Earl, she knew, was out there, and waiting, but, still, she ran through the doors and kept running. Then Earl stepped forward from the shadows to block her way, and she stopped dead in her tracks, almost falling over from the effort of slowing down so quickly from full speed to nothing, just like that. She stopped dead in her tracks; then, breathing hard and loud, and still shaky on her feet, she moved to the right. Earl moved with her. Then she moved to the left, and he followed again. Then they were still, watching each other. The look in his eyes, Lauren realized, was different now. She could meet them for once, and meeting them, she knew that something in Earl had shifted. And she knew that she had wasted her fear before, when she could understand him—those eyes, their meaning—, no matter how crazy his words. It was only now, when she couldn't read his expression, that she needed to be afraid.

Earl, she said.

But he held up his hands as if to stop her words from coming out; as if to catch them if they did. He stepped close to her now, closer than they had ever been before. Suddenly, she could smell him, and it was a mixture of every single thing in her world: her nephew's dirty diapers, all that shit and piss and baby powder, the vomit in her toilet those mornings before she went to the clinic, the blood and cum on Bobby's sheets after

their first time, her mother's Thanksgiving green bean casserole with those crunchy canned onions on top, the coffee grounds she took out to the dumpster at work, and then the dumpster itself, all bitter rotting food, even that dog she found on the side of the road when she was five, that poor dog, it was covered with flies, but it had such a sweet face that she hadn't been able to stop herself from petting it.

*There* you are, Earl said. Kept me waiting long enough, didn't you?

He leaned forward for an answer, but Lauren was silent. She breathed in and then out; swallowed Earl's smell and then spit it out again, wanting, already, to cry.

What? Earl said. Nothing to say for yourself? What? You're *quiet* now? Well, that's a change. You never were quiet before.

Please, Lauren said. Please.

Please *what*? Earl said. Leave you alone? That what you want? Oh, I know all about you. Inside and out. I bet you thought that if you went in there I wouldn't find you. I bet you thought you could hide from me. I bet you thought I wouldn't find out what you *did*. You thought all that, didn't you? *Didn't* you?

Lauren shook her head, mouthed her answer: No.

Then why'd you do it? Earl screamed. Why the fuck did you do it then, if you knew I'd find out? How could you do that to me when I wasn't even gone that long? And he was my friend, too. I'll never forgive you for that, Bitch. You'll die before I forgive you for *that*.

Earl's hands were shaking now; his whole body was shaking. Lauren looked away from him, down at the black asphalt she stood on, cracked and broken from those burning afternoons. Those cracks one inch thick, two inches thick, three. Some of them big

enough, even, to stick a hand or a foot into—the asphalt just couldn't take those afternoons. She turned to see the strips of grass that had been laid down around the store in perfect rectangles, to make it more inviting; like the stores in the suburbs, maybe. That grass: it was too-green and shimmering in this heat, when by all rights it should be dead, growing under that terrible sun, but there it was, so very alive it seemed fake. More than once, she had reached down to touch it, to make sure it wasn't really plastic. Oh, that grass: it was so very green that Lauren had, more than once, ripped a few blades from the ground and rubbed it on her skin to see if some dye would come off on her hands. She lifted her eyes up, lifted them to the sky, the sun so bright in these moments before it set that it was almost like being blinded to look at it: all she could see was red and black.

Then she looked back at Earl. She looked at that black mark on his red cheek, and it was familiar now: a sign she could read; part of a map that would take her back home. She focused on that black mark; followed that map, until she was standing behind the Dairy Queen, next to Bobby's truck; next to Bobby.

I didn't do anything, she whispered. He's the one who did it. You're the one who did it. It was the two of you. You *made* me do it. You *wanted* me to do it. And you know it.

But, even as she was speaking, Earl had his hands on her, steadying himself now by holding on to her shoulders. His grip so tight, Lauren knew he would leave his fingerprints behind on her skin, meaningless blue and green and purple dots that would stay there for days on end, challenging her to connect them in some way that made sense. Earl's grip exactly that tight, and then tighter, while he was screaming down at her, their faces so close that she breathed in the dizzying scent of dying flesh and blood that polluted his breath. Their faces so close, while Earl's hands moved towards each other

trying to come together in a prayer, and then meeting in one, around Lauren's neck, fingertips laced together and still squeezing. Earl, taking Lauren's breath away; Earl making the red of her sunset go pink and then white and then grey. The two of them so very close, then, that his spit ended up on her cheek, on her chin, the tiniest bit on the corner of her mouth, and then inside it, mixed with her own, so that as Earl called her a liar and a whore and a cunt, his words became a kiss whose taste she would always remember.

## Turning

I'm reading in bed when J stumbles into the room to tell me he loves me. He leans down, gives me a kiss, and the smell of whiskey is so strong, it turns him into my first boyfriend, seventeen and drunk, wanting more than I could give. And I can't help myself, I never could, I turn away. When I turn back, there's only J, flashing a smile, wanting nothing at all.

Back to work, he says, and dashes from the room.

I look at my watch. It's four-thirty and J's been drinking for hours, which is bad. Worse is that this is the second time today he's become someone else. The first was this morning: J was drinking his coffee (iced, with milk) and the sight of that coffee, that lukewarm light-browness, and the way J didn't hear me, not a single word that I said, turned him into my father. I was just getting angry, ready to work out everything I didn't when my dad was alive, when J looked up, answered me, and my father disappeared. Back to the grave, Dad, just like that, where the dead, they say, belong. And now me on this bed where I belong, I guess, and J at the other end of the hall, where he definitely belongs. I go back to my book; tell myself I will finish this today, no matter what he does. But I probably won't get much farther: my mind keeps wandering, and, by six o'clock, the drama will begin. At least then, though, at least for a little while, J will remain his own self. His drama is always his own.

At six on the dot, the drama does begin, as if scheduled in by mutual agreement. We're in the hallway now, and J is in tears, thinking about his family. He misses them, he wails. He hasn't seen them in years. This isn't the truth, or not all of it, anyway, but I won't and I don't point out the rest of the story. That J hasn't seen his family because he doesn't want to, not when he's sober at least. Or that he could get on the phone right now and get them to Vegas—one coked-up Mom and one absentee Dad, both aging now and so regretful—by the end of the night, and the only thing stopping it is himself. I don't reach out to comfort him, either. I know enough by now to sit quiet, to sit tight, and let him do his thing. So I do, and he does. For ten minutes, he sniffles away; then, suddenly, the sniffles end, and he is laughing.

Soon, he goes back to his study to write some more, and I go back to our room to read some more. But, before I can finish, even, the page I was on when he started his thing, J rushes into the room and interrupts me. Right behind him is D, his best friend and worst influence.

K, J says, Look, D's here!

I can see that, I say. Before I can say anything else, D waves hello. He looks a little bashful, something he most certainly isn't, so I wonder what is going on. Then J explains that D needs a place to crash. Of course, they want to know if here is okay. And I don't want D with us; don't want the damage of a crash. Really, I don't want anyone around who can see what J is up to, but I shrug and I tell them okay. Why not? I ask, and they really don't know, even though they should.

Great, they say, and, Thanks.

Then they leave the room. They go to J's study, but I can still hear them talking and laughing away. The sound of their voices makes me feel lonely, and I end up following them down the hall. I find them sitting, the one at J's desk, and the other one on it. I sit down, too, on the floor next to J's empty whiskey bottle, and listen as they keep themselves entertained, being sloppy and sentimental and hysterical by turns, as they discuss all the people they know.

Then J decides to take us down memory lane. Hey, he says. Remember last January?

Of course, we all do. Last January, when D was so drunk, for so long, that he didn't realize he'd been fired from his job and kept going to work every damn morning anyway, until a security guard met him at the door—all his shit in a box.

You came here in tears, J says. You were holding the box!

I was in tears, D confirms. I wouldn't put down that box!

He and J laugh at this, but I can't. Now that I can really hear them, what D and J say makes me sad more than anything. It makes me wonder about who we are and how we're living. Why we turn things that are important and sad into a sick kind of joke. Why it is that everything has to be so twisted and exaggerated, like we are incapable of life, and so must content ourselves with a parody of it. As if J and D know what I'm thinking, soon they're a parody of themselves, all but wringing their hands and professing unreal, undying love for each other.

I don't want you to leave ever, D, J says, Not ever. Oh, D, stay here with us, always.

Maybe I will stay forever, D says thoughtfully. Maybe.

Now, me, it's my turn, and I take it. Great, I say. You do that, D. Of course, my tone is all wrong, but they won't let me destroy their performance. D gives me a look that's so

sweet it's sincere, so drunk he thinks that I'm serious. Thanks, he says, Oh, K, that's so good to hear! You're a real friend, K. Maybe my best friend. More than that, K, you're like a sister to me. Just like it.

And these last words are so unexpected that, instead of laughing at him for turning an acquaintance into family, and so early in the night, I forget myself and forget him at the same time; repeat his mistake. D disappears, turned into my sister, and, for a second, I want to go to her and ask what I should do, right now and in general, with J and his drinking, my life. But then the second passes, and D smiles brightly, back to who he was, who he is: my boyfriend's drunk friend, the only person I really want him to be.

Thanks, I say. Then I surprise everyone in the room, including myself, by telling him to hand me a beer. There is one of *those* moments then: where everyone stops, as they try to figure out what is going on. One of those moments, because it is and has been my policy not to drink in this house, so as not to encourage J in his drinking, and all three of us know it. But, after that pause (it might have been a prelude to anything), D only asks if I need a glass.

Can's fine, I say

He hands me the beer, and I gulp it down, and another, then open a third. And now I'm starting to feel it, and I have to admit, it feels good: this night is turning into a party, which is better than what I expected. Better, certainly, than babysitting two alcoholic friends.

Then there's someone at the door.

Who is it? J says.

Before anyone can answer, D jumps to his feet. He gathers his things and tiptoes to the door; opens it wide, revealing his own girlfriend. Oh, he says, in a terrible fake-surprised voice. S! What a coincidence! I was just on my way home to see you.

They leave, I mean they're gone just like that, and I ask J what happened. Apparently, D's girlfriend S kicked him out and that's why he came here in the first place. And J and I can understand why she would do that; what neither of us can figure out is why she came to collect D in the second place, not two hours after their fight. But we don't have time to think about it too much, because soon J is sobbing again, and no longer himself, but me, the way I am some nights after he's passed out. J's sobbing now, turned into me, and I tell myself to let it alone, but I don't. I move closer to him on the floor, and I take his hand in mine, or is it my hand in mine, or my hand in his, and squeeze it. And that does it, the warm feel of that flesh breaks the spell and J is no longer me, because I know better: in this house, no one will ever take my hand in the night to comfort me.

J, I say, it's okay. It is.

But he shakes his head. I'm confused. D's gone and I don't know what to do. I thought he'd stay and we'd just drink tonight and tomorrow I wouldn't and everything would be okay.

You can still do that, I say. And maybe D will come back. I don't say that he says a variation of this every night. Or that, no matter what happens today, he'll drink tomorrow, anyway. I'm not the kind of person to say that, but I do think it: *that's* the kind of person I am. What J thinks, I don't know: silent, he picks himself up and goes back to his desk. I stay where I am and watch him, and he really is working, he really is writing.

More amazing than that: his poems don't show it, that he's drunk, I know this without checking, because they never do.

Twenty minutes later, I'm still watching J, when D surprises us both, no matter what I said: he does come back, after all. He's here for the night, he tells us, S has definitely kicked him out now. He says all this happily, and I think that's strange. I think he should be sad, or at least defiant, but all D seems to feel is glee. Glee's a popular feeling, though, J's overflowing with it now, and once I finish that third beer, neglected when D left us, I'm feeling pretty gleeful too. Oh D has come back! D has come back! Let's pass the beers around! And we do, and I drink mine, and J drinks his, and D drinks his, and now there's only one beer left, so now what?

In the end, they give that beer to me, because I'm a lady and they're both men, and because I've only had four drinks today while they've had plenty. I drink that one beer, made precious by scarcity, J and D watching the whole time. When I have finished and it's a fact, there's no more alcohol in the house for anyone, D gets restless. He wants to go out and get more, but then he and J decide that he can't, because S might be lurking in the streets, waiting for him. Now this is a problem and we all have to talk about it for longer than I can believe. In the end, J gets up to go to the store. I, meanwhile, am to wait here with D, to protect him from S if she comes, a big if to me, but not to D, who would bet his life on it: even now, S is on her way. D's so sure of this that, while J's gone, he sits on his heels, hunched over and hiding, as if S can see up three stories and through walls to boot.

Soon, he's convinced himself that S has stopped J outside the building.

She has him, he says. And, oh God, I feel so very, very sorry for him.

His tone is so ominous, I hunch over now, too, hiding with him, until I think this is ridiculous and wonder what I am hiding from, and what is he hiding from. We're inside and S isn't superwoman. In fact, she isn't even five feet tall, and D, certainly, and even J or I, could fend her off with no problems, if that's what it came down to. But D's nervous rocking unnerves me, until I have to do something to make him stop.

Well, I say, she's scrappy, for sure, but she *is* a little short. I think J'll be okay.

D considers my words seriously. Finally, he has to agree that, probably, I am right. But he keeps on with his rocking and I start to think crazy thoughts like what has this woman done to him and why is he so scared until I ask in a voice that is soft and serious, sincere, a voice I'll laugh at, I'm sure, when I'm sober, What are you so afraid of, D? What does S do to you?

But there are no confessions of reverse domestic violence, no stories about frying pans over the head, or dishes flying across the room; D ignores my question. He creeps to the phone and unplugs it; then he creeps to the door.

Listen to that, he says. Here she comes, up the stairs.

And I'm embarrassed to say it, I do listen, almost start to expect it: S in the hall, angry now that her attempts to call have been thwarted; an angry, cruel S on her way to get us, to get D, to make me give him up, though I said that I wouldn't. But in the end, it's clear, there's nothing to hear. No, D, I say, she isn't. I tell him the walls in this house are thin, and that if she were on the steps it would sound like she was right outside, but it doesn't so she isn't; she can't be.

Oh, he says. Oh, okay. But two minutes later he hears her again. This time, there really is someone coming, but I can tell it's only J because the steps are uneven, clearly

drunk. Then J's here to prove my point: he comes in triumphant with three six-packs and we all start drinking again and J goes back to his desk. D and I shake our heads at this, but then forget him while we discuss a dozen different things that don't seem to match.

Suddenly, D starts talking about serial killers.

I've been thinking about them a lot lately, D says. I have, K, a lot.

I'm not sure how to respond to this so I don't, but I might as well have, because D nods as if I have just made some intelligent, insightful point. He leans closer to tell me more.

It's the incredible intimacy of it, he says. Oh, K, such incredible intimacy. *That's* what I think about. He looks at me meaningfully and I look over at J for some help. He stops writing now, and he turns to us.

What the hell? J says indignantly. Are you trying to get us to go out and kill someone? I thought we were drunks, not murderers!

J gives D a self-righteous look and D turns away, angry now. Looking at me, he tells J that he wasn't talking to him, that he was talking to me, and then he *is* talking to me again, telling me once more that it is the intimacy, the incredible intimacy, that's what he thinks about. His voice cracks as he says this, and he looks like he might start to cry, so I let the conversation drop, and we drink some more, and soon we're laughing about something else. J watches us the entire time, silent, with an unreadable expression on his face. Then he runs from the room.

In a minute, he runs back and throws himself on the floor between me and D.

Stop ignoring me, he says. I'm sorry.

D hugs him now and J reaches out for me and soon we're all hugging, and then J hops up: he wants to listen to music. As soon as he says this, D and I realize that we want to as well, couldn't want anything more. We put on one of my old CDs, and, right away, we're dancing, all three of us together, and I'm back at college with my girlfriends, drinking and getting ready to go out. I'm back at college, fresh-escaped from my parents, just seventeen years old, can you believe it, my whole damn life ahead of me. And this is a change for the better, this turning business finally including me, and I see how nice it is to be someone else, even if that someone else is just yourself, back when you were someone it was okay to be.

But of course nothing good can last forever, and three drunken smokers can't dance forever, and soon we're all tired and sitting on the floor again: boring and complicated and ourselves, once more. After five minutes rest, D gets up and disappears down the hall. When he comes back, J and I are kissing. We break apart, even though D tells us not to stop.

Do whatever you want, D says. As long as you don't go to sleep. Please don't go to sleep tonight. I couldn't stand being alone.

His voice is serious and I think that's sad and I tell him I'll do my best, that I'll try not to sleep until he does, but knowing my own weaknesses, I stop short of a promise. J has no such qualms: *he* promises with a superfluity of confidence, of words and emotion, drunk on the idea of himself as a good friend, just as he is drunk on alcohol.

Then he asks D where he has been.

On the fire escape, D says. Naked. He says it was wonderful and he tells us everyone should try it and J gets up to do just that. But I stop him as he is unbuttoning his shirt,

remind him of police prowling the neighborhood, of mothers and children out for a walk, of the neighbors, our poor neighbors, looking out their windows. Reluctantly (it is the children that do it), J sits back down. But he looks so disappointed, I end up feeling guilty, and can't answer when he asks what in the world we'll do now.

Another beer, D says, his voice bright with genius. We'll have another beer.

We all open another though I at least still have one half-full. When we finish those, J and D go into the kitchen. I stay where I am, on my back in the hallway, looking up at the ceiling, which is cracked and spotted and beautiful, I decide. I only pull myself up when I hear a crashing noise, and then something worse: a loud pounding that sounds painful. I go to the kitchen door and look in and see that there's glass on the floor, and a hole in the wall. D stands holding a broom and a dustpan, trying to get rid of the evidence, but poor J is sitting dazed, with a swollen, bruising eye.

I look from one to the other and suddenly J's my college boyfriend, who used to come home with black eyes every other month, inflicted on him by his best friend. He's my college boyfriend, who never loved me, never thought of me at all, until he gives me a concerned look, a caring look, and that look is enough: I let J become himself again.

I rush into the room. What is going on here? I say. What did you do, D?

I broke some glass, D says. And I hit the wall and I broke it, too. I'm sorry.

No, I say. What about him? Then I turn to J. What about you? What did D do to you?

D didn't do anything, J says. I hit myself. He shows me how, his fist knocking into his own eye, and though he meant it to be just a demonstration, he ends up hitting it so hard that we all cry out, and then start to laugh. Before we can stop, D's rolling a joint. I take it when he passes it, even though I know it will make me dizzy and sick even as it

makes me feel good. Then I get up to clean the mess on the floor, laughing when I realize that the shattered glass is one of my favorite dishes, yet another thing I love broken beyond repair, I know it will hurt in the morning, but now I'm just fine.

In the end, I leave the mess be and go to the bedroom to lay down. D and J follow me there and keep drinking, sitting in the open window. Their voices float out around me, but I can't really understand them. Let's just go to bed, I call out.

They both scream no, but then come back inside and I tell them we need to sleep.

Okay, J says. D, here's a blanket, you can take the couch.

D takes the blanket but stays where he is, looking too vulnerable to ignore.

Don't be silly, I say. J, D can sleep with us.

No, J says, No. And he starts talking crazy now. Do you want him, he says, and do you want her, and what's going on here? He starts talking crazy, become my father once more, so that I look around for my mother, who must be here, too, if he is yelling in this way. But my mother isn't here; there's only me.

You're being a jerk, I say. And stupid. D's *your* friend and he's lonely. I get up, stumble to the bathroom, and I hear J ask, Do you love her, are you in love with her, and I want to laugh, but I end up throwing up in the toilet instead.

I brush my teeth and go back to bed. Come to sleep, I say. Both of you.

No, J says.

I'll sleep in the other room, D says. I will. He starts to cry, and J watches him for a minute before he gives in and says D can stay with us. They get into bed, J on my left, and D on my right, and then we're all holding hands, or rather I'm holding J's hand and

then D takes my other hand and it all feels so innocent, and then J's asleep. D squeezes my hand. You have to stay awake, he says.

Right, I say. Talk to me then.

He does. He tells me the story of him and S, and not just that night and day, but the whole damn thing. And as he tells it, I can see it all clearly, but not him and S, it's me and J in the future, what we'll become, which is of course D and S. The fights will start, or rather they've already started, little fights about little things, like windows left open and milk not bought. Little fights that *seem* to be about little things, because no one will ever say it: that J is drunk when he does or doesn't do all those things that make me so mad. But then the fights will get bigger and when they get bigger there'll be no hiding what they're really about, and I'll finally say it, what I've been thinking all along, that this has to stop it has to, and J will promise that it will. He'll pour out all the liquor in the house while I watch and then the next night or maybe the same night he'll go out and buy some more and we'll start the whole thing over again. And then it'll be the both of us, desperately pouring out bottles together, bottles that will be replaced, and which we'll pour out again when J makes new promises. And then the fights will be about promises made and promises broken and then J will stop making promises altogether and it will be me by myself pouring out the bottles, huge bright arcs of beer and whiskey and wine when J is out of the house, and then when he is asleep, and then when's he in the next room, and finally when he is right there, trying to drink them. And then I'll tell him to leave and he'll go and I'll follow and bring him back home and then we'll fight again and he'll go again and on and on until he's in someone else's bed and I'm dialing a busy number, wondering if he's alright.

When D finishes, at last, I feel like someone has come and squeezed the breath right out of me. Like there isn't any breath at all, no air in the world to go on, not for anyone. Then D turns and kisses me. I don't pull away, and I don't even think that I should, because I am S now and he should be kissing S. He reaches for me, and I turn to J, but he is lost to us, unable to stop what is about to happen. Then D is on me, he's in me, and all I can think is that it's right that we should do this, how can it be wrong when J is D and D is J and I am S and S is me and we four have become two: my mother and father, reunited at last, reunited despite death.

After though, there's just me and D, and we're no one but our own selves. I turn to one side and D turns to the other and we sleep.

I wake early and go to the bathroom, to wash D away. I'm so thirsty I drink water from the shower as it comes down, but I keep soaping until he's all gone, scrubbed clean off me. But that doesn't change the fact that D's inside me, now, and will be, I think, forever.

Later, I cook breakfast and J watches, smoking a cigarette, calm and well-rested, like he always is in the morning, though he never really gets a good night's sleep. Of course, I don't look at him, I can't, I'm *that* kind of cheater, always have been. But my voice is normal when I try it. *That's* the kind of cheater I am, too. Is D up yet? I say.

J goes and checks and comes back to report that D is sleeping like a baby. I wonder that he can do that, but just tell J to wake him so we can eat. J does. Then we all sit at the table, and face each other like the night before didn't happen. We've just finished when we hear the cries from the street. S, it's S, her voice coming in through the open window.

J, she screams, Can you hear me? J, do you know where D is?

J doesn't answer and no one expects him to. In the morning, we're all adults and we do what we should and let others do what they must. So D rises, and goes to the window. I'm here, he calls. Be right down.

No, S says, You don't have to come now. But meet me at home, okay? Soonish?

All right, D says. He sits down, lights a cigarette, smokes it through. We're all silent and the silence is heavy like it should be. I'm thinking about who we are, about who we'll turn into, all the people we'll become, if ever so briefly, if only in my own head, by the end of the day. And I'm thinking about all the people I've left behind in this life. How, somehow, all those people I've left have managed to stay with me, no matter how hard I try to escape. And I can feel them now, as if I'm carrying them inside me, every single person I've ever loved the father of his own stillborn twin that just won't leave me, and it's almost a comfort to think how I'm never quite alone. What J and D think, only God knows.

Finally, D stands, brushes unseen dirt from his pants. It's going to be awful, he says. So terrible. I don't know how I'll get through it. He squares his shoulders.I don't know how I'll do it. But I will.

D packs up his things and we walk him to the door, all three of us sad, maybe because he is going, maybe because we must all face another day. Once D is gone, J goes to his study. And I know that one day soon I'll have to go in there and say things I don't want to, but today I go to our room. I open the window and climb onto the fire escape. I want to be quiet and think about something other than last night. I want to be quiet, and think something good. To see the future as something other than what D has painted, to know it as something I can change and something that can change me; turn me into someone else,

for real and for good. But, for the longest time, it's all I can do to just hold on, to be, and no matter what I try to think, all I can hear in my head are D's last words. And no matter what I try to believe, all I know is this: D was right, he's absolutely right.

Good People Like Us

Of course, she's completely crazy—I accepted that long ago—but I guess I am, too, because I'm the one moving out to Vegas to be with her so that she can get yet another degree in art that we both know won't get her anywhere. Oh well, she said, when she called to tell me the news, Ya gotta do what ya gotta do. But, really, I thought, Ya don't. You can give up and move on, grow up, get a real job, a real life. Really, ya can. I didn't say that, though, at least not to her, because it's dangerous to try to break the delusion, and I'm more than a little afraid of her. And by afraid I mean physically afraid: she *has* tried to kill me. True, it was only once, and many years ago, in "Round One," as she calls our first attempt, during a period when she was off her meds, and eating way too much speed, but, still, you never know. And though she denies serious intent now (the woman had a knife and tried to use it; did use it one time, but a shallow cut), she does insist, all-too-frequently, that she has murderers on both sides of her family.

Uncle Buzzy, for one, she likes to say. And my cousin Zulim, for two.

Just last week, in fact, when I came out to see her, she did it again. It was the last day of my visit, the very last hour actually, as I was packing up for LA, when she started in on her crime-committing family tree.

Thieves, she said, and pushers. Gamblers, too, can't forget those. But all that, all of them, they're nothing compared to the *real* criminals.

Oh yeah? I said, bending down to shove a pair of shoes into my bag, and refusing to let her phase me. Which real ones?

The *murderers*, she said. Of course. She paused. Got 'em on both sides.

Both sides, I repeated.

You know it, she said. So remember that, when you deal with me. Never forget that I may be a mild-mannered grad student *now*, but—

I cut her off before she could get to the only place she was going.

Mild-mannered, I said. No one would accuse you of that. Don't worry: if you ever go off and kill someone, no one will be surprised, least of all me, even if I'm your victim. I slung my bag over my shoulder. And that's the God's honest truth.

Well, good, she said, pleased. Great.

Yeah, great, I said, but in a different tone. One that told the truth about me, her, us, everything I knew and know. And all that truth, all that knowledge, maybe makes me more than crazy, it maybe makes me stupid, for quitting my job and packing this car so full of my junk that it actually rides a little low today and driving this low-riding car out to Vegas to kick off "Round Four," as she insists on calling our latest attempt. But I guess someone has to do it. Not move here and live with her, necessarily, but love her. And I do. I love her and I need her, and god I want her, my wanna-be Lizzie Borden, and what's so strange about that—even Hitler had Eva Braun and she isn't a monster on Hitler's scale by any means, just a little monster. One who's close at hand now that I've made my way past the Strip. One who doesn't mind being called what she is.

On the street before her apartment complex, I get her on the phone. Hey Monster, I say. I'm here.

I feel a little excited and, I can't help it, I let it creep into my voice. But her reply, as expected, is completely casual. Are you here, she says, here? Or just near-here?

I don't answer right away. First, I pull into her parking lot. Here-here. So come on down.

She does, and I get out of the car to greet her with a hug and a barb.

So, I say, Little Monster. Done anything horrible lately?

She shivers in my embrace, pressing herself against me under my coat, running her cold hands under my shirt until she gets a reaction. Then pulls away.

No, she says. And she goes to the trunk—triumphantly, I must admit, but why not when two days ago I swore I wouldn't move out here and now I have. She grabs my laptop and dashes away, leaving the rest to me. I wrestle with a suitcase and a duffel bag and more; by the time I get to her place (with its door wide-open on her mess, she sure doesn't care who sees it), she's put my computer in a corner and thrown herself down on the poor sagging couch. I stand in the doorway, loaded down and waiting; finally I ask her what to do with my things. She rolls her eyes.

Over there, she says, pointing at the corner where she put my computer. Obviously.

But I don't move. Wouldn't it be better to put things away?

Whatever, she says. Up to you. But we're moving soon, so it's just a couple days wherever you put it.

She turns to look out the window as she says this, so she can't see my reaction on my face. As she well knows, we're supposed to stay in this studio until her lease runs out (three whole months from now), and *then* move. So, surely she suspects it: I'm surprised

by her announcement, and I'm angry, too. But even if she suspects it, she refuses to see it, and I don't make her know it, not yet.

Really? I say. That soon. And your lease?

Break it, she says. This place is too small. We'll never get along here.

I look around the apartment, and it *is* tiny, but it always has been, and we already talked about that. We talked, and we made plans, and we have an agreement, one I'm not about to give up, just because she feels like it. Especially when part of the agreement is that *I'm* the one who'll be paying for all this, for everything from rent on down now that we're shacking up. (Fair is fair, she said, I *am* still a student. I didn't answer, but that doesn't make it fair).

We have an agreement, I say. We have a plan.

I know, she says. But I made a new plan.

She stands. Listen, she says. I totally meant it when I said we could stay here. I did. But then last night I was reading a Ray Carver story and that changed everything. She takes exactly five steps and now she is three inches away from me. Get it? she says.

I nod. Oh I get it. You read a story and that changed everything. May I ask how, exactly, it did that?

Well, she says. It's simple. It just showed me that this apartment's not going to work. That we need a new one, and right away.

And she's a pretty little monster, I have to admit it, smiling up at me now like she actually expects me to agree. But I don't smile back at her. Her explanation bothers me. A random change in plans would have been bad enough, but this is somehow worse. I don't like that poor dead Ray Carver is involved in this mess now: I have my respect for

your artist-types, which is probably why I put up with her. No, I don't like it, any of it, Ray Carver least of all, and I wanna tell her that I'm not flattered that any woman I'm with could read a sad story about sad people and think, Hey, that reminds me of *my* relationship. But, then again, I'd feel stupid saying that, when I already knew it, how cold she is, or can be. So instead of the long version I say, A Ray Carver story reminded you of us? Gee thanks. You know, you don't have a romantic bone in your body.

Yes, Ray Carver, she says, her voice rising on the second syllable of that revered last name. Why not?

Then she's defending herself, or rather defending Ray Carver, with a passion that I know she would never defend me with, defending that dead dude who is famous and doesn't need her defense (hey, my sympathy for artists only goes so far), saying that, so much I know, Ray Carver isn't just down-and-out drunks and sad-sacks defeated by life, oh no, many of his stories are *intensely* romantic. I note that she doesn't say that she herself is romantic, doesn't claim that the "devastating truth of love" that is, apparently, the heart of these particular stories she references without naming is what made her think of me, or us, or our apartment. She doesn't bother with that argument, knowing she can't fool me, or maybe because it doesn't even occur to her to lie, instead she just adds that he, Ray Carver, *knew* what it was to love and lose and how to write about it, god damn it, and that, besides, she wasn't saying that our relationship was anything like the relationship in the story—and the way she says this implies that the difference is our relationship doesn't have enough love to be like the one in the story, not during Rounds One, Two, and Three, anyway—it was something else.

The story relates to us, she says primly, only in this: our choice of apartments.

She adds that it was *the home* in the story that made her think about us, because of our proposed living arrangements. That, in the story, which she still doesn't name, this man and woman live in cramped quarters. And, at one point, the man sits there in that cramped apartment and thinks how there isn't anywhere to go, how there's never anywhere to go. Literally.

Their small apartment, she says, meaningfully, is obviously a metaphor for how he's trapped by their relationship.

So? I say.

So, she concludes, this isn't about me. We need to move for you. Honey, when *you're* feeling trapped by *me*, I don't want you to have to feel trapped by our apartment, too. I don't want you to have literally nowhere to go. I want *you* to be able to stand up and walk into another room and feel trapped by me in there. Understand? she says.

Yeah, I say. But we're still finishing your lease.

And that does it, I can see it in the narrowing of her eyes when I say it, and now she's off and running. No? she cries. Are you telling me no? And, We're not moving? she wails. And who do I think I am when just last night on the phone I said no dog when she said she wanted one? When just last night I said no to a Shih Tzu, when I *know* that she's wanted one ever since her mother just gave away her little Shih Tzu Tai-Wang when she was innocently off in the fifth grade, and couldn't do anything about it? Who do I think I am to deny her a decent apartment, when I've already denied her a damn dog? Who do I think I am, to try and force her to stay in this *dump*, which is barely big enough for one, and to stay here with me? (Of course, she's crying now, and anyone who didn't know

better would feel sorry for her. But I know the truth, which is that she only cries for effect, or because she's angry, never when she's sad or sorry or sincere.)

Forget it! she screams. If we're not moving to a bigger apartment, then forget it. No Round Four!

Don't say that unless you mean it, I say.

She shakes her head for an answer. I should have known, she says, considering who I'm dealing with. First, you take my virginity, then you hit me, then you leave me for dead, and then it's over, our whole damn relationship, just like that. God, I should never have gotten involved with you. Not the first time, or the second, or the third. And certainly not now! She punches me, hard, in the arm at the end of each of her sentences. Then punches me one last time (this one as hard as she can, she actually jumps into the punch) in the shoulder, to punctuate the speech as a whole. Finally, she storms into the bathroom and slams the door, either to get away from me or to stop me from defending myself. She knows well what I might say, since I've said it before in similar arguments: that our relationship, or relationships, just weren't like that at all. That, even Round One, which she's sort of describing, wasn't like that at all. True, I did take her virginity, but she wanted me to, and it wasn't like we weren't going out when I did it, or even like I wasn't totally in love with her, because I was. And yes, I did hit her, I slapped her *one time* during one of her hysterical fits the first month we were together, but she slapped me right back and after that I never hit her again, even though she kept hitting me, *keeps* hitting me, to this very day! Or how about this: I could say, and have said in the past, No, I did not leave her for dead. I was supposed to come over one night (thirteen years ago! and clear across the country! will she never let this go?) and instead I had a snowball

fight with my friends, immature and thoughtless for a twenty-one-year-old and I shouldn't have done it, but how was I supposed to know she was burning up with fever or that, by the time I finally made it to her door, she'd be in the emergency room? And, as for the end, *she* left me, against my will, left me weeping and calling her name, and wouldn't talk to me, not for a year, not until she was ready to start up again (with the goal in mind, she admitted later, of just leaving me again)—what about that? And what about all the things I've done, during Round One, Two *and* Three, to try and make this damn thing work, and all the lying and cheating and craziness *she* has done to fuck it all up?

What about all *that*, I could scream, and in the end I do. I scream out all my accusations—a list of her faults and her crimes, the men she has cheated on me with, and even the girls—at the bathroom door.

And then I'm done, and silent, and the door is still closed.

I wait a minute, and then another, but the chipped white paint gives no clue about anything. Finally, I knock, once, calmly. Almost immediately, she opens up; stands staring up at me with blazing eyes. May I help you? she says.

You're crazy, I say. Do you know that?

Maybe, she says, but you're here anyway and so is all your crap. So what does crazy have to do with anything?

I don't know, I say. But you are. And not even nice-crazy, or fun-crazy. You're bad-crazy, mean-crazy, and a lot of the time just plain boring-crazy. You're a little monster.

But she's a pretty little monster, and I love her need her want her, whatever, and, as I say this, I can't help myself, I reach out and touch her. I can see her face now and it is totally frozen, totally still, her eyes blank and flat: the face she wears when she is scared

or sad, and I can't help myself, I caress her cheek. She lets me; then takes my hand and holds it. So, she says, and her voice is falsely brave, just one note shy of breaking, but also just one note shy of being dead-on confident, I'm a monster. What's new? Are you staying or what? Is there gonna be a Round Four?

I don't answer, which is an answer.

Good, she says, recovered in a flash, and now we're back to where we were before the fight. Cause I've already found us a place. A big one-bedroom, six-thirty a month. Cheap, huh?

I nod. And now I put both my arms (they're still smarting from where she hit me but why should I care) around her. Eyes closed, I see us, in our familiar post-fight pose, and we look so calm and sweet and right together it's hard to believe otherwise, even though I know it. And what a fool I am, stupid and careless, to do this again, and what an adorable little monster she is, and how crazy this real thing, love, is, and what a small price to pay—the screams the six-eighty the lies the cheating (she does that so well) uprooting my life and the broken pieces of my broken heart and the hard cold sharp edges of hers and how all of this will probably fall through—such a small price for a fourth try at first love, yet another chance not to screw things up.

It's cheap, I say. Definitely.

Definitely, she repeats, looking at me for a second like I'm the only thing in the universe (she should patent that look, it's powerful). Then she looks past me, over my shoulder. Hey, she says. Wanna close the door?

I turn around, and, yes, it has been open all this time, forgotten by both of us. We never were very good at keeping dirty laundry at home. I turn around and put my hand on

the knob, and that's when I see him, the man in the hallway, a shadow whose features I can't make out, watching us. Our eyes meet and I stop, but he doesn't decently turn away. Instead, he steps forward, black-haired and stubble cheeked and chinned, a dirty white tee-shirt stretched tight over his belly, the words printed on it (Bud Light) distorted by his fat. He smiles, and he waves.

Hey there, he says. Having problems?

Before I can decide how to respond, she steps forward.

Asshole, she says, and shuts him out.

Next-door neighbor, she says. What an asshole.

I nod. Well, I guess I'm glad we're getting out of here now, I say.

She laughs. Because of him? Please! Don't worry about *him*, he fights with his girlfriend all the time. Sounds like he beats her too. Besides, you and me, we've been caught worse than this. And we have, but I still lock the closed door and bolt it, double-lock out our witness. And that's enough (just enough) for us to move on, to do what we do: have dinner, get drunk, have sex, fight, get high, go to bed, have sex again. But through all these things we do, I feel the gaze of that man in the hall, and I feel ashamed, and *known*. The feeling is so strong, it stays with me even hours later, when she's passed out, but I'm still awake, pinned down in her bed by her arm flung over me, trapped in this room where all our stuff is crowded around me, along with the memories of three failed attempts at love and the bitter taste of the beginning of *this* attempt. I listen to her breathing (it's too damn loud) and all I want is to free myself from her embrace, from these shadows of too many things; to go out into the hall and get away. But I don't dare, because I can't stand to meet that neighbor, that judge. Instead, I push her off me and go

to the bathroom and lock myself in, like she did during our fight, but this just makes me feel worse.

Finally, I tell myself how ridiculous it is to hide from a stranger, and a stranger like him, who, if my monster can be believed, fights with his own girlfriend day-in, day-out, and I decide to go into the hallway to get some freedom, or the semblance of it. Fuck it if that neighbor sees me and frowns: he's no saint either. Right? Right. But I'm still careful on my way out the door. I poke my head out and I look into the hallway and only go forward once I verify that it's empty and dark. One step, then two, three, and already I'm better. Four steps, five, and now I hear sounds that draw me to the door of the man I wanted to avoid. There, I find out my monster was right. I hear that man, so quiet in the shadows watching us, so mocking when he said hello, screaming out curses and threats at a woman (some cunt, some whore, some bitch, some *nothing*; she's gonna get it soon) who weeps so violently she can barely answer back (but she does: she just wants to know, why are you so mean to me, she just wants to know, why don't you leave me then, if you feel like that, why don't you kill me then, if you think that way?), both of them behind the locked door of their apartment. And the sound of his screams and her sobs, that terrible give and take and take, is sweet music to me; it makes me and my little monster seem normal and good, just like everyone else maybe, maybe even a little better. And as I stand there with my ear to their door, it seems to me that everything between me and my monster is right, and all of it will surely work out. That all the problems we've had are in the past, and not so very bad, really, that they're even romantic. That our relationship itself is romantic, too, not unlike, I guess, but I'm not sure, the couple in that damn story she loves but didn't name.

## The Dating Game

John Chen Harris was forty-two years old, single, and lonely, and he wasn't getting any younger. He knew this logically, of course, because people don't get younger, no one does, and he knew it from his mirror, which displayed his sad traitorous face (it had, one night, while he was sleeping, become his father's) every morning when he shaved. He also knew this because his mother telephoned regularly to remind him of it.

"John," she'd say. "You're not getting any younger."

"I know, Mom," he'd say.

"Well, when you gonna get married?"

"I don't know, Mom."

Mother and son had had this conversation since John turned thirty, with more frequency each year, until it became a weekly event. The conversation always followed the same pattern: the telephone would ring, and, as soon as he said Hello, John's mother would bring up the subject of marriage. Then John would express mild hopelessness regarding what they both considered to be his sad situation. After an appropriate display of regret on John's part, his mother—often citing her lack of grandchildren—would move on to another topic.

That is, the conversation always followed this same pattern for twelve years, until the day (which would change his life though he could not know it then) when John exploded, sending it on a new path. "What do you want me to do, Mom?" he said. "I don't even

have a girlfriend! What should I do, grab the first woman I see and make her marry me? Or should I just marry myself?"

John's mother laughed when he said this, and John felt hurt that she should find humor in his bachelorhood: after all, she knew he really did want to get married and have a family; the whole nine yards. How could she, he thought, laugh at his pain, no matter how ridiculously he expressed it? "I'm glad you think my life is funny," John said.

But, his mother explained, it was not John she was laughing at: his strange choice of words had reminded her of something else. Only the night before, she had seen a television program about a woman who had done just that: married herself.

"That's TV, Mom," John said. "Not real life. We're talking about real life here."

(*My* real life, he thought.)

"But it was real," she said. According to John's mother, this woman had always wanted to get married, but never had the opportunity, and so had decided to take matters into her own hands. The local news had shown footage of the "wedding;" afterwards, there were interviews with the unfortunate woman's best friend, and mother, who said:

"She always did want to get married so badly!"

"I never dreamed I'd have a daughter who married herself!"

Also interviewed was one of the bride's ex-boyfriends. He described how, years ago, the woman (now married to herself) would stop at dress shops and bakeries, at jewelers, to stare through the windows at white lace gowns; at triple-tiered wedding cakes with tiny candy bride and groom on top; at shiny gold bands and diamond engagement rings.

"It was kind of pathetic," the boyfriend said.

John's mother started laughing again, even as she repeated this, but her son found the

story touching, poignant, even. He could see the woman, leaning longingly toward a shop window, and she looked remarkably like himself. "No," he said.

"Yes!" his mother said. "It's true!"

That wasn't what John meant, but he didn't want to explain himself. He wanted to change the subject; to get away from the story of this sad, lonely woman. But, before he could do that, he had a question. How old was she? How old were you when you finally gave up and just married yourself? The woman, John's mother said, was two years younger than he was; she had thrown herself the wedding as a fortieth birthday present. John sighed then, unable to finish the conversation. He was dismayed at his mother's lack of feeling for this strange woman and for her own son. As much as he hated always hearing about his single-ness, at least these discussions were about him. His mother had turned what should have been a conversation about John into one about someone else. Even his own mother didn't care about him; even his own mother didn't find his life interesting.

This phone call put John in a bad mood for the rest of the day; he was still upset that night, when his mother called again. But John had been wrong, apparently: his mother did care about him; she did find his life interesting. In fact, she had been thinking about him all day. "John," she said. "I have the answer to our problem. You won't have to marry yourself, after all." His mother paused, waiting, John knew, for him to ask her just what that answer could be, but he was silent. He was afraid that she was up to her old match-making again; that he would be forced to go on yet another date with yet another one of her nationwide network of Chinese friends' daughters or granddaughters or nieces.

And that this date would result in the same thing all the others had: interest on his part (however mild), and, eventually—after one hour, one week; one time, three months—rejection from the woman. For, though not particularly shy or socially disadvantaged, and though not unattractive, John was inept with women and this led (inevitably, or so it seemed) to his being cast aside by his girlfriends. John could only imagine for someone more exciting and handsome than he was. Women don't like nice, simple men, John thought, and he was a nice, simple man. One who could take no more rejection.

"Well?" his mother said.

"Please," John said. "Not another blind date."

"No," she said. "No need for a date. I found you a wife."

As unbelievable as this sounded to John, his mother had indeed found him a wife. It was a Sunday, and so a day on which she worked at BestCut, a small Chinese hair salon. His mother had spent the afternoon cutting hair and lamenting, to her BestCut coworkers and clientele, her only son's lack of a mate. This was something she often did, much to John's humiliation. (The only thing that made his humiliation bearable was that BestCut was in Maryland, where his mother had settled after his father died, while John was safely across the country in Las Vegas.) But, instead of the usual sympathy that began and ended with, "That's too bad, a nice boy like John," something extraordinary had happened that day: his mother had received a marriage proposal. Her new coworker, Wan, a Chinese immigrant who had, like John's mother, married an American, offered a solution to their problem: her cousin. This cousin, still in China, was looking for a man who would marry her and bring her to the States. John's mother and Wan had decided that John should be that man. "It's all set," she said.

"First of all," John said. "I've never even met this woman. Second of all, she hasn't even heard about the whole thing. So how can you say it's all set?"

"Because it is," his mother said. "Wan told me all about her cousin and she's perfect for you and I told Wan all about you and you're perfect for her cousin."

There were so many arguments John could have made at this point—starting with the fact that no one was perfect for anyone ever, and leading up to one against arranged marriages (John wanted to marry for love, after all)—but he chose not to make any of them. "Good night, Mom," he said. He hung up the phone and went straight to bed, even though it was only eight o'clock, and he hadn't eaten his dinner. The conversation with his mother, his bad mood, the fact that there was a woman out there who had married herself, and another one in China who would, if her cousin could be believed, agree to marry John without even laying eyes on him, his long years of loneliness, and his many failures with women, all of these had worn him out.

Over the next week, John didn't think about this proposed arranged marriage. In fact, he had practically forgotten the whole thing by the time his mother next called. She, however, had not forgotten. In the last seven days, she had learned details about the cousin; she had even called the woman and talked to her. "You know, John," she said. "I always hoped you'd marry someone Taiwanese like me, but Mainland girls are good too. And this one is very nice and *very* pretty. I made Wan show me two pictures, to make sure. And she likes the sound of you. I told her: a successful accountant; a big custom-built house in the suburbs. She's very impressed."

"Mom," John said firmly. "This woman is a stranger."

But his mother was not intimidated by his firmness, or his argument. She went on, in a quick frustrated voice. "She is *not* a stranger. She's Wan's cousin!"

John sighed, and closed his eyes. "I don't care whose cousin she is," he said. "I will not have an arranged marriage." And, though he thought that anyone else would accept this statement, and agree with his choice, his mother did not. What was so wrong with an arranged marriage, she demanded. All her sisters and brothers had had arranged marriages! (The woman did not point out, and her son did not bring up, out of sheer weariness, that she herself had chosen her own husband.) What about John's aunties and uncles? What about his grandmother and grandfather: they were married for sixty years! What about everyone his mother grew up with, her entire village?

His mother went on, until John interrupted her. "Well what about love?" he said. "What about that?"

"Love?" she said, with, her son noted, what seemed to be genuine surprise. "They love each other."

All of them, John wanted to know, did his mother mean to tell him that every single person, in that village, and others, who had ever had an arranged marriage, had just happened to fall in love with his spouse? This, he asserted, was highly unlikely. But his mother would not concede his point; she countered. Not every single one of them, of course not every single one of them, but, still, as many husbands and wives as love each other in America.

"What do you think love is?" she said. "You and your sister always worry about love first, but love can come later, too. If you marry someone and live together and have a family together, then you will love that person."

John shook his head, though his mother was not there to see it. "That's not the same thing," he said.

But how, his mother asked, could John be so sure, and, even if he was right, who was he to say which was better? From the tone of her voice, John knew that she was not winding down (as he had hoped), but rather just getting started. If he didn't do something now, this disagreement might go on forever. "I'll think about it, okay," John said. "Will that make you happy? Is that what you want to hear?" It most certainly was, and, within seconds, his mother had clicked off the line. John congratulated himself on finding a diplomatic way to end what would have otherwise been a never-ending phone call. Of course, he did not intend to think about it, not at all.

Whatever he intended, John did find himself thinking about the arranged marriage, that very same night, as he lay, eyes open, in bed. His mother had made some good points. What about his aunts and uncles and grandparents? What about the village? For John was just the sort of man to be swayed by a village. He saw not only strength and safety in numbers, but reason, too. How bad could something be if so many people had done it? And, if his mother could be believed—for he had never met her family, or seen that village, and, even if he had, it wouldn't have done him much good, since he couldn't speak Chinese—, not only had all of those people done it, but they were all glad they had. And, really, how *could* he know? Maybe it was possible to begin loving a person after you married; maybe it did just happen, once you had built a life together. But what sort of love was that? Not, he thought, the sort he wanted. It was, he suspected, a solid plodding boring sort of love, not the weak-in-the-knees-and-stomach kind. And didn't he, John

wanted to know, have, like everyone else, a God-given right to weak knees and a weak stomach?

The next morning at work, John received an envelope from his mother, Federal Express. Inside was one thing, only: a photograph of a woman. John stared at this photograph in amazement. The woman stood alone, leaning against the railing of a bridge, and smiling out at him, from somewhere in China. And, there was no doubt about it, she was beautiful. Beautiful enough to make John not only weak in the knees and stomach, but weak in his whole body, including his brain. Beautiful enough so that she was dangerous. For John had always been a man who, when faced with a pretty woman, could be moved to do for her things that he would not normally do, things which he knew to be crazy, or stupid. When faced with a beautiful woman, John would become confused; he would forget that he once had doubts about whatever it was she might desire. The woman in China fell into that second category of women: she had a face that could make John a believer if only he looked at it long enough. And John couldn't seem to put the photograph down.

There was something about the woman, something about her smile, which spoke to him. And maybe it was only because John was a lonely man, and in what might be termed the final round of his personal dating game, but that something seemed to him to say, *If only we met, we could fall in love.* Now John was not a man who fell in love very often; he had, in his entire life, only been in love with two women. But he was a man who fell in love very easily; with both of those women, it had been love at first sight (the most romantic sort of love, in John's opinion). So it was that, as John stared at the photograph,

and listened to the woman's unspoken words, he began to think that, just maybe, she might be the third, and last, love of his life. And then he decided that the something about her which spoke to him did not say what he originally thought it did, but that it said something else: *If only we met, we* ***would*** *fall in love.* John was inclined to believe her. He dialed his mother's number; she picked up on the first ring, as if expecting his call. "What's her name?" he said.

"Chun Lian."

"What does that mean?"

"It's a flower. A lotus. A spring lotus."

They were silent for a moment.

"So you like her," his mother said. "So we can arrange the marriage."

And John, God help him, said, "Yes."

John cancelled his appointments for the rest of the day and left the office. He drove from the city to the suburbs, thinking about the woman in China, and smiling a smile so silly that even he realized he looked like a fool, but he was too happy to care. He kept the Fedex envelope on his lap the whole time, picking it up and sliding out the photograph whenever he hit a stop sign, or a red light. How beautiful she was! What a beautiful woman! And how lucky he was! By the time John got home, he had decided that Chun Lian (Spring Lotus!) had been brought into his life by no other than the hand of fate. He was convinced that he was already in love with her; and that, when they met, she would fall in love with him, as well. He was further convinced that an arranged marriage was the best idea he had ever heard of.

John walked around his empty lonely house in a daze. So happy was he that he did not hear a sad reproach in the echo of his footsteps, as he did on other nights. Nor did he stare with remorse at the pathetically small can of soup that was his dinner, and read its name—*Soup for One*—as a sign of his failure. That night, John thought only of his future wife; of how, soon, this house would be filled with joy by her presence. "Chun Lian," he said. "Spring Lotus."

John's happy daze did not even last a full twenty-four hours. Early the next morning, the telephone rang, interrupting his pleasant dreams about the future. At first, he ignored the ringing, and tried to get back to sleep; then he realized who it was, who it must be, and why she was calling, and he sat up, reached eagerly for the telephone.

"Mom!" he said. "Did you talk to Spring Lotus?"

"No and no. Sorry to disappoint you." It was his younger sister, Sharon, and she sounded angry. She had heard, of course, that John was planning, in her words, to import some poor woman from China, and make her marry him. "How could you?" she said.

The sound of his sister's voice (so forceful and self-assured), and the rapid gunfire of her words frightened John, and he wondered for a moment if he really was guilty of the charges leveled against him. Then he rallied. "Now wait a second," John said. "No one's making anyone do anything here. Spring Lotus wants to come to the States; she wants to get married; she wants to marry me."

"Wrong!" Sharon said. "She doesn't know *you*; she doesn't want to do anything with *you*. What she wants is to escape an oppressive government. I don't care how desperate you are, John, I can't believe you'd resort to a mail-order bride!"

"That's not what this is," he said. "This is an arranged marriage; they're not the same thing." His sister scoffed at him, refusing to see the difference, and so John tried the arguments his mother had used on him. He repeated that their aunts and uncles had had arranged marriages, that they were still together, and added that they were as happy as any American couples, that, in fact, they were even happier. He also pointed out that arranged marriages were a Chinese custom, part of a long and noble Chinese history, and who were they to argue with thousands, yes thousands, of years of tradition. "Come on," John said, wrapping things up. "Tradition. Tradition!"

But Sharon did not come on; she argued back: their aunts and uncles were married half a century ago; and arranged marriages were no longer the norm in the Chinese world. She was not impressed by John's, "Well, maybe they should be," and went on to add that, besides, they were living in America, and he was an American. Now John had always thought of himself as just that (and proudly, too), but on this day he bristled at the word. "I am not American," he said. "I'm Chinese. Half at least, just like you are."

"Just like I am," Sharon said. She left it at that, but she didn't need to say the rest of it: her tone carried her accusations, so that the silence that followed her statement sounded like one big self-righteous blank to her brother. He filled in that blank for her: you are not just like me, you do not speak Chinese, as I do, you have never been to China, or Taiwan, or even (for longer than a couple hours) Chinatown, let alone lived there, as I have. *I* may be half Chinese, but *you* are an American. John realized then that, in order to win Sharon over, he'd have to use more than shaky logic. He would have to resort to the truth about his feelings, something he usually did not like to share with his sister, who often found humor in that truth. "Then don't think about it as arranged," he

said. "If that's the problem. I'm in love with her."

"Love? You haven't *met* her!"

"It's love at first sight!" John said. "I saw her picture. It made me weak. It made me sick all over."

But Sharon was unmoved by his honesty, and passion. "Sick?" she said. "Then call a doctor. You know, this is classic: a picture bride in 2006! In love with her, indeed. And what about the age difference?"

"I know, John said. "That I'm a little older than she is."

"You could be her father!"

"It isn't that big a difference," he said. "After all, Dad was nineteen years older than Mom. And that worked just fine."

"God," Sharon said. "You're doing it! You're actually trying to justify this."

Sharon hung up on John, at last, leaving him to his (or rather her) doubts about his marriage. Twenty years, he had to admit then, was a big difference—maybe too big a difference. Maybe he really was as bad as his sister claimed; maybe Sharon was right about the whole thing. But if she was, then why would his mother support the marriage, and this girl in China, and her cousin? (John had forgotten, of course, that before he saw the photograph he himself had thought the whole thing ridiculous and wanted no part of it.) Maybe, John thought, it was his sister who was wrong, then, and he who was right. Sharon, who in college had been a communist! Sharon, who next became a vegetarian! Sharon, who was now a feminist! (And this last one was perhaps the worst of all: John suspected it meant that, deep down, his sister did not think anyone should marry anyone

else—in an arranged marriage, or otherwise—, unless they were of the same sex.) Yes, John decided, it must be Sharon who was wrong; and hadn't she been wrong all along?

John lay down and tried to sleep, but he could not find his way back to his sweet dreams of just an hour before, so he got out of bed and took out the photograph of Spring Lotus. Then he went to his dresser and stood before the mirror, holding the photograph up against his chest so that he could see himself and his fiancée together as they soon would be. But, of course, the photograph was small and John was big, so his exercise was a useless one. Unwilling to give up, John closed his eyes. He called forth the reflection from the mirror; then he tried to enlarge the image of his future wife, while simultaneously shrinking his own. But try as he might, the woman in his mind remained as small as the woman in the photograph, and the imaginary John remained the same size as the real man. John tried again, and again, but with no success. He had just admitted defeat, when it happened, of its own accord. Spring Lotus, and John—well a slightly thinner, slightly younger, slightly more handsome John—appeared before his mind's eye, so bright, so detailed, that they seemed real. They stood next to each other, holding hands and smiling; happy and comfortable, as if they had been together from the beginning of their lives, and had been meant for each other, John thought, from the beginning of time. John watched the two for one wonderful minute, sighed happily, and let the image go. Then he looked down at the photograph in his hands. This marriage was a good thing; possibly the best thing to happen in his entire life. Despite what Sharon said, there was really only one problem with it. Unfortunately it was no small problem.

John called his mother, but got her answering machine. "Why," he demanded of the tape. "Didn't you teach me Chinese? Why did you teach Sharon and not me?"

*

It was not until late in the afternoon that John finally heard from his mother. When she did call, she did not, as her son expected, immediately answer his question. Instead, she started to chat about her day, complaining first about her boss at the salon and then about two rude customers. John listened to these stories with feigned interest, but, when the woman launched into a discusion of a sale at her favorite department store, he had to interrupt her. "Look, Mom," he said. "I'm glad you bought all that great stuff on sale, but you still haven't said anything about the message I left this morning. You know, the question I asked?"

"Oh," his mother said, "your message. I almost forgot."

"Well," John said. "Now that I've reminded you...."

"Well," she said. "I *did* teach you Chinese. Don't you remember?" John did not remember, so his mother told him. Apparently, from the day he was born, from before that day, even, she added, dramatically, his mother had spoken to him only in Chinese, determined that he learn it, though they lived in America. Despite this, when John started talking it was English that popped out of his mouth. "I kept trying, anyway," his mother said. "I tried for a long time. Until you were six."

"Six," John repeated. That did not seem like so very long a time to him, but he did not say so. Instead, he asked her why she had finally given up.

His mother sighed. "Because," she said. "You started laughing at me then. Whenever I spoke Chinese, you pointed at me, and laughed."

Hearing this, John felt a terrible heaviness in his chest, one which he quickly identified as guilt. Not only had he laughed at his own mother (laughed at their own

language), he had pointed, as if to erase any doubts about exactly what it was that he was laughing at. And, it did not escape him, either, how appropriate it was that he was only learning this now, when he was preparing to marry this beautiful Chinese woman. Only now, when being Chinese would have finally worked to his advantage, did he care to find out why he couldn't speak the language. "I'm sorry, Mom," he said.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "It was cute. Well, it's cute now, anyway."

They were silent, and John tried to think of a way to restart the conversation that would portray himself in a more flattering light. In the end, it was his mother who spoke first. Her words pushed the past completely from John's mind. "I talked to Chun Lian," she said. "Everything's all planned. You'll go to China in September and get married. Wan will go with you. I'll go with you. Then you go back to work and me and Wan will wait with your wife for the paperwork to be done and bring her back to America."

"September," John said. It was then the beginning of June. Three months more, he thought, of loneliness, and then you're free.

***

As the China trip approached, John felt increasingly nervous. How would he deal with the paperwork, all the red tape that must be involved in bringing over a foreign bride? How would he deal with a wife who didn't really speak English? He calmed down when his mother gave him the number of an immigrations lawyer living in China, a man whose only business was international marriages. After calling this lawyer and getting him started on cutting through the red tape, John began to study Chinese. He bought books and tapes and practiced in his car as he drove to and from work, and in his house at night. When he spoke with his mother, he'd try out a few phrases on her. Things, he

convinced himself, would be fine. His sister, meanwhile, kept up her angry phone calls. John let her go on, but he didn't really listen to what she said. It was always the same thing, anyway: "Terrible conditions...do practically anything to get out...how can you take advantage of this...unable to make a free decision...."

Only once did John try to engage her in battle. "Mom," he said, "married an American. Mom married Dad. And she was Chinese." Their own mother, John pointed out then, was just seventeen when she married their father. She wasn't even with her family in their village when they met, but alone in Taipei, working to pay off the family debt and save the family farm.

"*Those*," John said. "Were terrible conditions, too." Was Sharon, he asked, trying to say that Mom was unable to make a free decision; that Dad shouldn't have married *her*? John thought this would shut his sister up, but she surprised him. "You don't need to tell me anything about Mom," she said. "And no, Dad shouldn't have married her." John realized two things then: that Sharon had a much different understanding of their parents' marriage than he did (hadn't Mom and Dad married for love; wasn't it romantic to move to a country you had never even seen, all for love?); and that she was willing to say that her own birth should not have happened. Both of these things frightened him, and John gave up. "I'm sorry you think that," he said. "But Chun Lian and I are going to be very happy together."

His sister laughed. "How?" she said, "when you can't even pronounce her name?"

September came at last, and the appointed time for the trip was almost upon them. Over John' s protests, his mother and Wan made arrangements to travel from Maryland

to LasVegas, so that the three might take the same flight to China. The women arrived two days early, surprising John with a call from the airport. Although he was annoyed to learn they were already in town, John was actually glad they had come. He had finished his packing the week before, and these last days before the trip were anxious and boring. Maybe because of this, John spent almost every waking minute of the next two days with his mother and her friend. The first day, he devoted to staring at Wan (who was equally devoted to staring at various slot machines and a list of casinos that she wanted to visit), hoping to see a resemblance between her and his beautiful fiancée. But, alas, there was none: Wan was an attractive woman, pretty, even, but she was just no Lotus.

Lacking his earlier diversion, John spent the second day following Wan as she and his mother trekked across the downtown and gambled, asking questions about his future wife. "What does she like to do?" he said. "What does she like to eat? What does she want to see in America?" But these questions were pointless, as Wan did not generally understand John when he spoke English, and it was even worse when he tried to speak Chinese. And, on those few occasions when Wan did understand him and answer, her English was so poor that John could not understand her. Though John wanted (desperately, in fact) to ask his mother to translate for them, he could not bring himself to do so, because he didn't want to embarrass Wan about her English. How, John thought, can this woman be married to an American? He couldn't imagine how Wan and her husband might communicate about the most basic things, let alone how they might have a meaningful conversation. Then he realized that his own wife would speak less English, even, than Wan; that his mother had said that she spoke practically no English at all. Though he had known this all along, he had not, up until that very moment, understood

what it meant, and understanding it frightened him. But then John did what he always did when he began to doubt his plan: he took out the photograph that had started it all. And, in Spring Lotus' beautiful face, in her sweet and innocent expression, he found the belief he needed to carry on. This was right, it was right, oh God, it was right.

The trip to China was not what John had imagined it would be. He did not step from the plane to find his new life, in the form of Spring Lotus, waiting for him. Nor did he find the China he had fantasized about—a country at once beautiful, and rural, and vast and empty, the China of Chinese restaurant calendars, and movies, full of serene foggy mountaintops and majestic misty waterfalls, a place where, always, soft traditional music played. What John found instead were excuses about his fiancée's absence (which didn't quite make sense), and the not-foggy-at-all, in fact much too clear, reality of a dirty Beijing. A city that, on the few streets John ventured on, seemed to be stuffed with every single person in the world, except the one person he was interested in, Chun Lian.

Indeed, that first day in the country, as they fought their way out of the airport and then to a restaurant for a meal, John couldn't wait to get home to his hotel and check in. And, once there, and safely away from the crowds, the dirt, the garbage and all those (extremely Chinese) people, he refused to leave. While his mother and Wan went back out almost immediately, John stayed locked in his drab room. He stared at the cracks in the wall, listening to his Chinese tapes, and wondering aloud (in English) where in the world Spring Lotus was, and what she might be doing that was so important it could keep them apart after he had travelled all this way just to see her. (This was probably not the best way for him to learn the language, considering that he was literally surrounded by

native speakers.) That night, when the two women returned to take John out to dinner, he refused to go, just as he refused to go out with them the next day and night. Of course, his mother, and even Wan, cajoled and begged him to accompany them, but John was adamant: they could go out all they wanted, but he, for one, would simply wait right here until it was time to meet his wife.

That meeting finally happened the morning of John's fourth day in Beijing, at the home of some of Wan and Chun Lian's relatives—how exactly these people were related to Wan and his fiancee (and soon to himself), John could not understand. Wan led them to this apartment, first through the city by cab, and then on foot through narrow alleys. When the three arrived, the door was slightly ajar. Wan walked in without knocking, followed by John's mother, and an embarrassed, excited John. Then, there she was: Spring Lotus. She was more beautiful, even, than her photograph. She was so beautiful, in fact, that John felt nauseous when he saw her. Because he felt this, John believed, with greater certainty than before, that he had made the right decision in coming to China.

The entire family welcomed them warmly, a welcome which, being in rapid colloquial Chinese (a Chinese that sounded very little like his tapes), was wasted on John. Then everyone sat down. As he sipped his tea, John glanced at his future bride shyly. Chun Lian (Spring Lotus!), on the other hand, smiled at John boldly, making him feel even more shy. She even stared at him with what, in an American woman of his own age, John would have called unashamedly frank come-on eyes, but which he, here in the mother-land, so to speak, decided must be instead the normal eyes of a sweet and innocent Chinese girl. Sweet and innocent or not, though, John did his best to avoid

meeting those eyes, just as he avoided making eye contact with anyone in the room, and avoided joining the general conversation, though his mother was (as she said) ready and willing to translate for him. So it was that, during the course of the entire evening, John managed to say one thing only: *Ni hao, ni hao*: to the room at large; to his fiancée; to himself, sometimes. Hello, hello, so flustered was he, that John even said it as he was leaving.

The next day was the wedding: a sterile affair, in a cold official building. John stared straight ahead for most of the ceremony; only twice could he bring himself to peek at his bride. Both times, he gave her a sickly (his nausea was even stronger then) smile; Spring Lotus, meanwhile, smiled even more boldly than she had in the apartment. She looked as if this were indeed the happiest day of her life, and John could not help but think that the photograph's prophesy was already coming true. He could not help but attribute her happiness to her budding love for him. When they were married, John kissed his wife (his wife!) on the cheek, too nervous to kiss her lips, or even put his arms around her.

Then Wan and his mother whisked them off to see the lawyer.

The lawyer's office surprised John in its luxury. Maybe because of this, John felt a confidence—even before he sat down, even before he heard the lawyer speak a single word—in the order of things, in the world, which he had not felt since he left Vegas. After greetings and small talk, the lawyer, a tall blond man who spoke both English and Chinese fluently, asked John and Chun Lian a seemingly endless series of questions. Then, there was an equally endless series of paperwork. When, at last, all the questions

had been answered, and all the forms had been completed, John found himself smiling his relief. "When," he said. "Can I bring my wife back to the States?"

John expected the lawyer to say a couple weeks: this was what he had assumed the wait would be all along, inexperienced in such matters as he was. (Though he might have asked his more knowledgeable mother how long she thought the paperwork would take to process, he had not.) The lawyer shrugged, and seemed to be deep in thought, and John leaned forward in his seat in excitement. Since he and Spring Lotus were, as John thought it, in love, in asking his question, he was hoping for a minor miracle. He was hoping that the lawyer would tell him that Chun Lian would be able to fly to America when he did; that is, in five days.

"Well," the lawyer said at last. "Five months at the outside; three, if we're lucky."

"Three months!" John said. He did not consider himself very lucky. He listened as the lawyer translated this for Chun Lian (and Wan, really), and then looked at his mother. But the three women did not seem surprised at the wait; in fact, his mother nodded.

"That's pretty fast," she said.

"I waiting long too," Wan said.

"Fast?" John said. "You waiting long too? You mean you knew about this? What about your jobs? What about Wan's husband?"

(What about *me*? he thought.)

"Sure," his mother said. "What about them? Me and Wan told the boss we'd be gone a long time. Told Wan's husband, too. Both said okay."

But it was not okay, at least not to John. He wanted to complain and kick up a fuss until the lawyer promised to make things move more quickly, but he couldn't, because he

didn't want to appear bad-tempered in front of his new wife. "Well, " John said at last. "I suppose it can't be avoided." He waited for someone to contradict him, but no one did, and he and his party prepared to leave the office.

At the door, the lawyer stopped him, and handed him a stack of business cards.

"Listen," he said. "Pass these around to your friends back home, maybe I can help them out, too."

"Oh," John said. "Are you thinking about coming back to America?"

But the lawyer only smiled.

The four were in a cab, John in the front seat, and his wife, mother and cousin-in-law in the back, when John realized what the lawyer meant by the business cards. He had assumed that Chun Lian was some kind of mail-order bride, and reasoned that anyone who would procure a wife in such a fashion would have friends who would want to do the same. Wait, John wanted to call out; he wanted to stop the car and go back to the lawyer. He wanted to explain, This isn't what you think; this is an arranged marriage, but of course he didn't.

At the hotel, the new family had dinner. The meal was not an elegant affair by any means; not at all the wedding day banquet John had imagined (but had not planned). After dinner, they went up to John's room to celebrate the wedding; toasting one another with small glasses of plum wine. As they drank, the four stood awkwardly in the center of the room. Or at least John did; the women were actually quite comfortable. They downed their burning-strong wine easily, and, between glasses, made suggestive comments in Chinese, which, unfortunately for John, his mother translated into English.

"You work hard tonight, John, maybe make me a grandson!" his mother said.

"Try once, not enough, you have to keep trying, for your mother's sake," Wan said, according to John's mother.

This talk was accompanied by laughter from the two older women, and even from his new wife. In fact, Chun Lian laughed more loudly and eagerly than either her mother-in-law or her cousin. She even, John noted, added to the conversation, making some statement so hilarious that all three women doubled over and were forced to sit on John's bed. When they finally calmed down, John's mother slapped Spring Lotus playfully on the arm, while making some new comment of her own that sent the three into hysterics once more.

"What," John asked nervously. "What is so funny?"

"Your wife," his mother said. "Oh, she is *too* funny. She said—no, I can't repeat it, it's so bad. She have to tell you herself."

John did not press his mother for more information. Instead, he picked up the bottle and poured himself another drink. For some reason he could not (or would not) name, he was glad that his mother had not told him what his wife had said, and even gladder that his wife would be unable to do as his mother wished and tell him herself, for a very long time. He forced his drink down and poured another. Then he remembered his manners and offered the bottle to his mother.

"Good idea," she said. "One more for the road."

She took the bottle and divided the last of its contents with the other women. Then she and Wan put on their coats and got ready to go back to their room. John watched them, thinking that the three women were nothing like him; that they were surely

impossible for him to understand. He replayed the talk in his mind: a conversation about sex, which took the guise of a discussion of work, a job to be done; the production of an heir. And then of course there were the parts of the conversation that he hadn't understood; parts that surely covered the same ground, in a more explicit way. The challenge of the discussion as a whole, the challenge, especially, of those unknown, explicit words, was simply too much for John.

"Mother," he said, taking her aside, although unnecessarily, since he was speaking in English. "Tell Chun Lian we aren't sleeping together tonight. Tell her I want to wait until we're in America."

John's mother seemed shocked by his announcement, as did the other two women when it was translated. In fact, it took some (mortifying) work on John's part to get them to believe he meant what he said. Bit, in the end, the three finally left the room, and John closed and locked his door after them. Then he sat on his rumpled bed, and considered himself lucky to be alone.

The next day, while touring the city—John could not very well stay in the hotel now: he felt that he should show his wife a good time, or try to, at any rate—, John was subjected to more suggestive comments. To John, this talk, which had the night before seemed like good-natured jokes (told in the worst taste, of course), now sounded like taunts about his manhood. By mid-afternoon—after a second humiliating meeting with the lawyer—John realized that there was no way he could survive his remaining four days (and nights!) in Beijing; and decided to cut his China trip short. So, without telling anyone about his plans, John snuck off and called his travel agency. By paying a small

fortune for his ticket, he was able to secure a flight that took off the next morning; after that, he had only to make his apologies and avoid his wife for one more night. He managed to do this without too much difficulty, but without too much grace, either, and almost ran to the airport the next day.

Back home, John did not doubt once his decision to marry a woman he barely knew. After all, he understood better than anyone that it was not often that a man like him got to share his life with a beautiful, sweet, and good and kind (for surely Chun Lian was sweet and good and kind) woman. A woman he was in love with, and at first sight, no less. Though the China trip had not gone as well as he had hoped it would, John knew: he only needed his mother and Wan out of the picture. He was sure: he only needed to be alone with his wife, in America, to make things work.

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Ninety-five days after John left China, the night before his wife was to fly into Vegas, his sister—who had not spoken to him since the day before his wedding, when she called him to tell him he was a fool—showed up on his doorstep. "Sharon," John said. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think?" she said. "Here, help me with my bags."

John did help her; there were several: Sharon, apparently, was planning to stay for a while. John carried his sister's things into the foyer, and then up the stairs without a word, for it was obvious to him, if not when he saw her, then certainly when he heard her hostile voice, that Sharon had come to ruin his marriage. Once her bags were in a guestroom, John said as much, but his sister laughed at him. "That's stupid," she said.

"But of course you would think that. Don't worry, though, I'm not here to destroy your life. I'm not here for you at all; I'm here for her."

"Chun Lian?" John said.

"Chun Lian," his sister corrected him. "Obviously." Sharon sat down on the bed, and lit a cigarette. "I mean, really," she said. "Mom and her cousin live across the country and you don't speak Chinese. Who did you *think* was going to help that poor girl get used to America?" John did not answer that he had thought he himself would help his new wife, Chinese or no (did love really need a language?). Instead, he gave in to his sister in advance, and left the room to find her an ashtray. After all, he thought: no reason to fight someone, when you know you're going to lose.

When he came back, John found Sharon flat on her back, her cigarette held out in front of her, a long ash dangling off the end. John slid the ashtray under her cigarette, and sat down next to her. "So," he said, as casually as he could manage. "Sharon. How long you staying for?"

"I don't know."

"Well, when do you have to get back to work?"

"I have three weeks of vacation and another couple days of sick leave," Sharon said.

"Well, we wouldn't want you to use them all up now, would we?" John smiled brightly then, but his sister didn't smile back. They lapsed into silence and John tried to think of something to talk about that wouldn't lead to a fight. But he and Sharon had little in common, except for their genes, and generally were not interested in the same things. The best topic, he decided at last, would be Sharon's favorite: herself. "So what's this I hear about you leaving the shelter?" he said.

"I'm not leaving the shelter."

"But Mom said—" John began, then he stopped himself, remembering. Sharon, of course, was right: she *wasn't* leaving the shelter. Her friend Skip had offered her a job in advertising, making a lot of money, but Sharon had turned it down. That was what their mother had said. "Well," John said. "Thought it was weird. Didn't think you'd leave nonprofit work."

"I did," Sharon said. "For a while at least. I needed the money."

She stood, and John followed her downstairs to the kitchen and watched her make coffee; drink it. After she finished, she kept the mug cradled in her hands, as if they were cold and she was trying to warm them. She looked sad to John, then, and he felt sorry for her. "Listen Sharon," he said. "You know there's that money Dad left you. I invested it for you and it's actually a nice bit now."

"I don't want his money," Sharon said. "I don't need it now, anyway. I found a roommate."

John stared at his sister in shock, but she didn't seem to notice. Sharon lived in a tiny studio, barely enough room for one person, let alone two. "Sharon," he said. "You don't have to do this. I can lend you something."

Sharon shook her head. "I don't want anything from you, either."

That night, John couldn't sleep, and neither, apparently, could his sister. They sat together at the kitchen table, reading quietly, until the sun rose weak in the sky. Or at least Sharon read quietly. John stared at the same page for hours; he wanted to talk. About China, well, at least as it related to him and his wife (the unfairness of all that red

tape); about Chun Lian (Spring Lotus); about his hopes and dreams for their future (their life together; their children); about the disappointments of his love-life to date (even though all of that was history, now), but he didn't dare. Sharon wouldn't want to hear any such things. John looked at his sister and thought with regret, as he had many times in his life, that he could have been good-looking; that, really, he *should* have been good-looking. His parents had been a mismatched couple, and mismatched couples, John had long ago noted, almost always had reasonably good-looking children. (So mismatched were John's parents that people had often asked John's father how he had managed to marry such a beautiful, young woman. Each time, John had listened eagerly for his father's response—hoping to use that information to his own advantage later in life—, but his father had always laughed politely, and refused to answer.) Unfortunately for John, though, unlike those other mismatched couples who, in procreating, averaged their looks so that all of their offspring were neither unattractive, nor too attractive, but safely good-looking, his parents had literally reproduced themselves. First, they had John, as unexceptional in his appearance as his father was; then they had Sharon, who—as a baby, as a young girl, as a woman—was lovely, like their mother.

No, John thought, Sharon wouldn't understand him, she couldn't, and it wasn't fair of her to judge him when she was beautiful and so did not need the hand of fate to intervene in her love-life, as John had needed it to intervene in his.

At John's insistence, he and Sharon arrived at the airport at nine: more than an hour before Chun Lian's plane was scheduled to land. They sat together in the waiting area, and, again, John wanted to talk, but, again, Sharon took out her book. "Sharon," John

ventured. His sister did not look up. "What." Her tone, not quite angry, and not quite mean, it was foreboding, John decided, silenced him. Not knowing what else to do, he left her, and began to pace around the terminal.

When the plane did land at last, almost an hour late, so that brother and sister had been waiting a total of two hours, John, not wanting to appear overly anxious, returned to his seat. At any moment now, John thought, his mother and Wan and his wife would be coming out to greet him. As it turned out, those three were the last to disembark, so that dozens of people, and forty more minutes, passed before John saw them. "There they are!" he said.

His sister put her book away, and stood. John turned to watch her; suddenly, her face changed. "My God," Sharon said. "Is that her? She looks like Mom! Why didn't you tell me that?" But John didn't answer; he had already turned back to the women they were waiting for. His mother and Wan walked on either side of Chun Lian; the three seemed tired, but when they approached John and Sharon, Wan and Chun Lian's eyes opened wide, and they began chattering away to John's mother. Then Sharon spoke, and the chattering stopped for a moment, before beginning once more, even louder and faster than before. "What?" John said. "What is it?"

"They're just surprised," his mother said. "Because *meimei* is so pretty."

"Oh," John said. He was disappointed. He had thought, for just one moment, that the excitement had been for him.

The party went to one of the airport restaurants, to have lunch, and to pass the time, for the two older women were catching a connecting flight out of town in just under two

hours. During the course of the meal, which Sharon ordered, translating even for their mother, who, it seemed, had temporarily lost her English, John sat staring at his wife, and being ignored. He couldn't understand the conversation, but he listened to it intently, anyway, hoping to learn something from all that talking, though he could not imagine what. But hope was all John did, until they five stood together saying their goodbyes, and it became clear to him that Sharon really had not come to make things more difficult for him; that she had not come of her own free will at all. "Thank you for helping, *meimei*, such a good girl," their mother said. "You know I have to get back to Maryland."

"Yes, Mom," Sharon said. "You know what I think, but we'll talk about this later."

Once home, John took his wife on a tour of the house. Sharon walked dutifully with them, but she did not translate John's comments, as he hoped she would. John did not dare to actually ask her to translate (he was afraid that she would laugh at him or say no or both), but he tried his best to hint to her that this was the polite thing to do. First, by directing everything he said in as obvious a manner as possible at Chun Lian, who, of course, could not understand him; second, by turning to his sister between sentences, with an expectant look on his face. This strategy did not work, but John continued what turned out to be his monologue, anyway, too embarrassed to stop, once he had begun. He said, slowly and clearly and brightly, when they entered each room:

"This is the kitchen!"

"This is the living room!"

"This is the second downstairs bathroom!"

"This is the formal dining room!"

Then, less brightly, it was actually a whisper, "This is the master bedroom."

Sharon is impossible, John thought. Anyone else would translate. But no translation was necessary, it seemed: Chun Lian almost skipped through the house, laughing and pointing the whole time. She looked in closets and under beds, fingering wood and caressing cloth—as if she were at home, John thought, and then caught himself; he supposed that she was—, finding even John's clothes and shoes interesting. The house was definitely a success.

After the tour, the three sat down in the family room. John waited for his sister's book to reappear, but it did not; instead, Sharon and his wife chatted happily. The two spoke at such a rapid pace, their conversation never slowing, except of course when they were laughing, which was surprisingly often, since they had just met. Neither one of them, John noted with a little bitterness, made an effort to include him in the conversation. Chun Lian, at least, has an excuse, John thought, she *can't* speak to me. Surely, she would rather talk to me than to Sharon; I *am* her husband, and Sharon is only her sister-in-law. Maybe, he thought, Spring Lotus has asked Sharon to translate, and Sharon has refused! Heartened by his thoughts, John tried to insert himself into the conversation.

"Sharon," he said. (More Chinese.) "Sharon!"

"What?"

"Why do you call her *jyejye* and why does she call you *meimei*? She *is* younger than you are. Shouldn't she call *you* Big Sister?"

From the look Sharon gave him, John understood that he had said the wrong thing, but he did not know why what he said was wrong. Perhaps, he thought, as his sister glared at him, and the smile froze on his face, even a woman like Sharon might be

sensitive about her age. After all, Sharon had broken up with her last boyfriend a month ago, and seemed always to be breaking up with her boyfriends. Her relationships were so short-lived, in fact, that her brother usually didn't know that she was in one, until she called to say it was over. And thirty was only three and a half short years away. Maybe, John thought, even Sharon is afraid of being an old maid! "Not that you're old," he added. "Just older."

"I know I'm not old," Sharon said. "And the way she and I address each other goes by your birth order and mine, not by my age relationship to her." His sister paused. "And if I were you, I wouldn't point out how young she is."

John did not dare say anything else for two hours. Whatever Sharon's problem was before, she must have gotten over it by now, he reasoned then. Besides, he was so hungry that he could not stop himself. "Sharon," he said. (More Chinese; then giggling.) "Sharon!"

"What?"

"Aren't you two hungry?"

"I guess."

"Well, what should we do about it?"

Sharon turned to give John a look that made it clear, he thought, that neither she nor Chun Lian would be cooking that night (or ever, if Sharon had her way), and said, "What do you think we should do?"

John actually had a plan. "Why don't I go to Szechuan Inn?" he said. This was his sister's favorite local restaurant, one frequented almost solely by Taiwanese and Chinese immigrants—never had John seen an unaccompanied white person at Szechuan Inn—; a

restaurant which, truth be told, John did not very much like. "I could pick up some take out," he went on. "While I'm gone, you two can stay here and talk and rest."

His sister and wife conferred for a while, and Sharon picked up the phone. She dialed the restaurant and ordered in Chinese. Then she handed John a piece of paper covered with characters.

"What's this?" he said.

"That's what we want to eat. In case they have any questions about the order."

John got up to go to the restaurant; as he was putting on his shoes, Sharon came into the hall. For a moment John hoped that Sharon would offer to let him stay with Chun Lian while she went to the restaurant; she did not do this, however. Instead, she watched him in silence. "Really," she said at last. "Do you know anything about this woman? Anything at all about her life in China?"

"Yes," he said.

"Well then?" Sharon said. "How can you live with yourself when you've taken advantage of someone who's been through so much. How could you happily marry a helpless victim?"

"Victim?" John said. "Sharon, I don't know what you're talking about. Chun Lian isn't anyone's victim, she's—"

"Your little Chinese wife?"

Sharon did not then, as John wished she would, stalk away from him, but stood where she was, and stared him straight in the eyes. After only a few seconds of this, John could take no more, and he went into the garage.

As he drove to the restaurant, John could not help but think about what his sister had

said. He found himself wondering what they had done to Chun Lian, his Spring Lotus, in China. He searched his mind for what he knew about that country, trying to dredge up every horrible detail he could remember. But then he stopped. Hadn't he just been there and seen for himself? Of course, China was not nearly as nice as America, not as free or open or rich, but it wasn't bad. Certainly, no one was starving to death, and there were no people being killed in the street, at least not in any of the streets he had been on. Besides, Chun Lian did not look like a woman who had been treated badly. Or maybe what he really thought was that no one would treat a woman who looked like his wife badly. Probably, John decided, his mother had told Sharon about some small slight, some unimportant event, and his sister had exaggerated it. Sharon was like that.

John remembered then his sister as she had been in college. The first time he had visited her at school there was a huge hand-drawn poster on the door of her dorm room. It was Hello Kitty, a good likeness, but, John thought when he saw it, there was something strange about the cat. Upon closer examination, he realized she was wearing a little Mao suit. Yes, Hello Kitty, got up like Chairman Mao! Underneath the cat, there had been a blurb, one question: What does Communist Hello Kitty say? John had, on that occasion, and on others, asked his sister the answer to this question, which for some reason always stayed with him, but she refused to tell him, until after she graduated from college. The day before she left for China to teach English, Sharon had turned to him. "Hey John! What does Communist Hello Kitty say?"

"You know I don't know," he said.

"Mao! Mao!" Sharon answered. Then she burst into peals of laughter.

Although her year in China had—much to John and their mother's relief—cured

Sharon of her communism, it was also the beginning of her unfortunate (for John) career as a letter writer. From Beijing, China, Sharon had written: *Our people are being oppressed by an unjust government!* From the Taiwanese countryside, she had written: *Our people are being oppressed by an unjust government!* From San Francisco's China Town, she had written: *Our people are being oppressed by an unjust government!* Even when she worked in LA (four hours away, anyone else would have just called), Sharon had continued to find Chinese people to worry about, and she had continued to write: *Our people are being oppressed by an unjust government!* No, John thought, Chun Lian was not a victim of anything, after all. She was no more or less oppressed than everyone else Sharon had been talking about all these years, and surely Sharon could not have been right about all of them. Surely, it was impossible that everywhere on earth, everyone Chinese, was being oppressed.

When John brought back their dinner (two huge bags whose contents he could only guess at), he set it on the table, and called for Sharon and Spring Lotus. His wife surprised him by jumping from her seat and running to the kitchen. Chun Lian emptied the bags and opened the containers, spooning rice into bowls. She offered the first bowl to John, the second to Sharon, and took the last one for herself. Sharon made a face at this, but John was pleased; touched, even. His wife, his (Chinese) wife, was serving them dinner. The dinner, itself, however, was far from pleasant. His wife and sister had ordered what John could only think of as the most Chinese of dishes. Every container seemed to be filled with intestines and claws and hearts, even eyes and ears and lips and one actual beak, so that John found himself unable to eat anything but the dumplings. But John did

not dwell on the unpleasantness of the meal, or even on the unpleasantness of having Sharon around to hoard his wife and, he thought ruefully, slow down Chun Lian's falling in love with him. He was too excited to do either: after all, the later it got, the closer it was to bedtime. Now excited can be good or bad, and for John it was both of these things. He was determined to sleep with his wife (his fears in Beijing had stayed in Beijing); the only problem now was Sharon. How could John sleep with his Spring Lotus while his sister looked disapprovingly on? How, he did not know, but, by midnight, John had decided that how did not matter; he simply would. Whatever Sharon said or did, she could not argue with the fact that John and Chun Lian were man and wife, and that man and wife slept in the same bed. "Gee," he said. "I'm tired. How about you two?"

"Yeah, I guess it's getting late," Sharon said, actually answering him on his first try, John thought, and he was encouraged.

"Well why don't you two go on and get ready for bed. You don't mind helping Spring Lotus, do you, Sharon?"

"No," Sharon said. "Of course not."

The two women left the room, but John stayed where he was. He watched the clock impatiently, but waited forty-five minutes before following them upstairs. Surely, that was enough time. How did John feel as he walked up those stairs? Like Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*. Like Clark Gable in *Gone With the Wind.* Like John Wayne—the Duke!—in everything. Like a man of the world. Like he had never felt before.

John opened the door to his bedroom. "Chun Lian," he whispered. But, much to his surprise, the lights were not dim, and Spring Lotus did not lay anxiously and nervously

and shyly awaiting him, her husband. Instead, all the lights were on, and Sharon and his wife were next to each other in bed, the covers pulled up to their chins. They looked up when John opened the door, but neither one of them moved. His sister, John understood in amazement, was planning on spending the night in his room, and his wife was going to let her!

"Sharon," he said. But he did not say anything else. He intended, of course, to get rid of her, and was trying to decide how to manage it, without causing a scene. Before he could think of a way to do this, his sister spoke. "John," she said. "Chun Lian told me that you wanted to wait to sleep together until you got to know each other." Sharon paused. "*She* thinks that's sweet of you. Anyway, since you won't be here tonight, I'm going to stay with her, in case she gets scared. I guess you can sleep in one of the guestrooms. But don't use the one in back, okay? That one has my things in it."

Sweet, John thought bitterly. And, then, Guestroom, indeed! But he only said, "Good, Sharon, I was going to ask you to, actually. Well, good night."

Then his wife surprised him: apparently at the prompting of his sister, she said: "Good night, John. Sleep tight."

(Well, really, it was more like: Goo Ni Ja. Slee tigh—but close enough. They were, he thought later, *her* first real words of English.)

John closed the door on his wife and sister, and went to bed, where he lay cursing his bad luck. How had this mistake happened? he asked himself. What exactly had his mother told Chun Lian and Wan in Beijing? How difficult could 'I want to wait until we're in America' possibly be to translate? But he soon got over his upset. Goo Ni Ja, she

had said. Slee tigh, she had said that too. And sweet, she had told his sister he was sweet; this was a start, and a good one.

The next day was a Monday, and though John had planned to stay home with his wife, Sharon shooed him out of the house, taking his credit cards, and saying that she and Chun Lian had things to take care of. Unable to refuse his sister, and not knowing what else to do, John drove to his office, but he was too excited to work. Midmorning, he buzzed his secretary and told her to hold his calls. Then he locked his door, and closed his blinds. He spent the next hours staring at the bright colors and strange geometric patterns of his screensaver, and thinking eagerly about Spring Lotus, who he imagined at home, thinking just as eagerly about him. At exactly five o'clock, John ran from the office and leapt into his car. He sped to his house, sure that his wife was sitting on the front doorstep, or standing at the window, watching for him. But, when John pulled into his driveway, he did not find her in these places. Maybe she's in the garage, he thought then. But of course she wasn't there, either. When he walked into the house, John saw that Spring Lotus was not waiting for him at all. Instead, she sat with his sister in the family room—which was a mess—practicing English.

"Hello," John called out. "I'm back."

Even as he was speaking, John's wife jumped up, knocking a book to the floor, and running to him. "Jahn!" she said. "Jahn!" She gestured around the room, making wide excited circles with her arms. "You look!"

John smiled at his wife (this was more like the welcome he had expected) and he did look: the mess turned out to be empty bags and boxes; piles of new clothes. Apparently,

the things his sister and wife had to "take care of" was shopping. That whole day, while John had been sitting in the office, thinking about Chun Lian, the two women had been at the mall! Probably, neither one of them had given him a second thought after he walked out the door. "Well," John said. He picked up a heavy winter coat, and a short wool pea coat, both of which still bore their (shockingly high) price tags. "Well," he said again.

Chun Lian started giggling; she took the pea coat from his hand and buttoned it on. "Pretty?" she said, turning once and then again for his appraisal, and, of course, she was. More than pretty, she was beautiful, when—John still silent—she cocked her head slightly, as if to repeat her question, without words. When she did this, her husband, feeling suddenly confused, suddenly defeated, could only nod.

When John came home from work the next day, the family room was even more of a mess than it had been when he left it that morning. Not only had his wife (for some reason that he could not understand) kept her things from the previous day's shopping spree downstairs, she had added that day's purchases to the piles. John made his way across the cluttered floor, to the couch where Spring Lotus was sitting.

"Buying to-day," she said brightly. She presented him with a pair of shoes, then with another, and another, and another, a half dozen in all, everything from sneakers to boots. John nodded at each pair, and kept his expression blank throughout, but as he looked from the last shoes—shiny patent loafers—to his wife's shiny, happy face—it was literally glowing—he felt something like the start of panic rise within him. What is going on here? he thought. Why was his sister taking his wife on daily pilgrimages to the mall? Why was Spring Lotus filling his family room with frivolous purchases? How could a

woman, not one hundred hours out of a communist country, have already become such an avid consumer? Did no one in his house, other than himself, understand the value of money?

"There are more over here," Sharon said.

John turned to his sister, who was holding a pair of red mules up for him to see. Sharon wore an innocent expression, but something about the tilt of her head seemed like a challenge to John, and he understood almost as soon as he looked at her what was happening in his house. His sister *was* trying to undermine his marriage! First, she had invited herself to Vegas, when he did not want her there. Then, she had installed herself in John's own bedroom, with John's own bride, and put John all alone in a guestroom (and not the best one, either; her things were in that one). And, now, she was trying to spoil his nice, simple wife with material possessions! Yesterday, it was clothes; today, it was shoes; if John did not do something now, who knew what it would be tomorrow?

"Sharon," he said sternly. "What is all this?" He gestured around the room, first with one hand, and, then, feeling that that was not enough, he gestured again with both hands.

"Some clothes and some shoes," Sharon said. "Isn't that obvious?"

She rolled her eyes, as if she could not believe his stupidity, and John stepped forward, caught up in the sudden anger that he only felt when his sister was around to provoke it.

"You shouldn't have bought all this," John said. "You didn't even ask me first!"

"What was there to ask?" Sharon said. "She needs these things."

"Needs?" John said. "I don't see how one person could need all these things!"

"Of course you wouldn't," Sharon said quietly. She stood. "You're cheap."

"I am not."

"Yes you are. You're cheap and you're rich. And *no one* likes cheap rich people."

Sharon turned and hurried from the room. John could hear her slippered feet on the carpet as she ran upstairs, and they sounded angry and self-righteous to him, as if they wanted to continue the fight. More quickly than John would have thought possible, if he had not seen it himself, his sister was back, breathing her shallow smoker breaths, and holding a small brown cloth suitcase in one hand.

"Here," she said. "Take it. This is everything your *wife* brought from China."

Sharon pushed the suitcase into John's hands, and, as soon as he held it—it was so very light a child could have carried it with ease—he felt a sensation like sinking. Such a light bag could not possibly hold enough to start a new life; it could not even hold enough for a long vacation. "Satisfied?" she said. "And now look, you've upset her." Sharon crossed the room to Spring Lotus, who had backed into a corner behind John during the fight, and who had kept so quiet since that he had quite forgotten her. John faced his wife, and she stared at him with huge frightened eyes. "Buying too many," she whispered. Spring Lotus started to cry, and Sharon put her arm around her, sat her down on the couch, the two murmuring in Chinese. John watched his wife's shaking shoulders and thought suddenly of his mother: how she loved nice things, as many as she could have, and how she hated to this day anything—sweet potatoes; cheap clothes—that reminded her of being poor. His father had not made nearly as much money as John did, but he had always made sure that his wife had everything she wanted. "Spring Lotus," John said. "Spring Lotus." She did not look up. "I'm sorry," he said at last, but to whom he did not know. No one was listening to him—his wife and his sister were transported by their

foreign language to some foreign place—as far from him at that moment, he thought, as if they were in China. One could not understand him, and one would not, but he spoke anyway. "I didn't know," he said. "I just...I don't know what I thought. It was stupid. I was stupid. Buy whatever you need. God, buy whatever you want; everything you want. Sharon," he said. "Please tell her that."

The next morning, when John woke, Spring Lotus' things had been cleared out of the family room, as if she did not want him to see them anymore. And, though John could hear his wife and sister whispering away, the door to their room was closed, and no one answered when he knocked. They're probably in there saying terrible things about me, John thought. But even he couldn't be angry with them for that: he did look bad. It looked as if he wanted poor Spring Lotus to wear the same few things she had brought from China for the rest of her life. But that isn't true, John thought. And it wasn't fair! They should have explained things to him: of course, he wouldn't have denied Chun Lian decent American clothes and shoes. He would have been happy to spend whatever necessary, if only they had told him first. It wasn't the money; they should understand that. After all, he had enough money to go around. John looked at his watch: it was almost nine already. "Spring Lotus!" he called. "Sharon! All right, then. I'm going to work."

John headed for the city, driving fast to make up for his late start. He tried to forget the way his wife had cried the night before, and the way the door (to his own room) had been barred against his entrance that morning, but he could not. Minutes from his office,

he made a u-turn and drove toward an upscale mall. He wanted to make up with his wife and the only way he could think of was with a gift.

John wandered through the mall, going into stores at random, but he had no idea what to buy. Then he remembered the way Spring Lotus had admired Sharon's simple watch. His wife had no watch at all, he thought with a pang of guilt; she didn't even have a proper engagement ring, only a gold band. John turned into the jewelers; flagged down the woman behind the counter. "I need a watch and an engagement ring. Oh hell," he said. "I need a bracelet, too, and a necklace. I need everything."

When John, giddy from his purchases, left the mall, he went home instead of going to work. He found his sister and wife in the kitchen, where they were just finishing an early lunch. John pushed their plates to the far end of the table, and presented Spring Lotus with her gifts. Sharon laughed when she saw the beautifully wrapped boxes, and stood to pat him on the back. "I should have known," she said. "Like father like son. Dad would be proud that he taught you so well." She walked away, and John moved closer to Spring Lotus; helped her unwrap her presents. When the last box was opened, John was left with a silent, staring wife. He thought he had made a mistake, and an expensive one.

Then Chun Lian stood from her seat. "Me?" she said. "All me?"

"Yes," John said. "All for you."

He helped his wife put on her jewelry, and she began to laugh. Then she stepped forward and hugged him. John was so shocked that he did not realize what was going on, until she had let go, and backed away. It was their first hug, he thought then. Their very first hug! If he had chosen to, he might have calculated that that hug had cost him more

than twenty thousand dollars. Had John made those calculations, he would have thought the money brilliantly, beautifully, wonderfully, well-spent.

The next morning, John woke early, wanting to surprise Spring Lotus with breakfast in bed. But, when he went downstairs, his wife and sister were already in the family room; with them, he noted happily, were all of Spring Lotus' things. The two sat among those purchases, practicing English. They were so intent on their study that they did not notice John; instead of calling out to them, John watched his wife from the end of the hallway. He noticed then that she had placed her clothes and shoes in such a way that she could see them all from her seat on the sofa. And that, when she and Sharon took a break, Spring Lotus surveyed her property and smiled; patted her jewelry, as if to make sure that it was really there. This is the first time in her life, John thought, that she has had anything nice. And he also thought, with no small bit of pride: It is me who has given her all this.

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Sharon stayed at John's house for more than three weeks, getting Chun Lian settled into America. This settling was quite expensive, but John made no objection to any of it: writing out checks and signing credit card slips for, among other things, English classes, a private tutor, even a bilingual driving instructor, and a new car. When it was time for his sister to leave (at last!), John was thrilled, though he obviously could not say so. When Sharon is gone, he told himself, I get to sleep with my wife! And, once Sharon was gone, he thought, the process that had begun in Beijing on the day of their wedding (when Chun Lian had looked so very happy), would continue. Within days of Sharon's

departure, John was sure, his wife would be in love with him!

At the airport, though, John realized that his life might not be quite as he imagined it. While waiting for her flight, Sharon surprised him by taking his hand. "Listen, John," she said. "I was against this from the start, but just promise me you'll give her a good life." She didn't look at him. "I know you mean well, but this whole thing is too much like Mom and Dad for me to deal with well."

"Like Mom and Dad," he said. "But that's a good thing."

Sharon shook her head, and John was about to say: You never did understand Mom and Dad's relationship, when he realized that that was exactly what his sister was thinking as she looked at him. In that moment, he wondered which of them understood it more. He thought of the anger his sister had felt for their father. It had begun when she was a teenager: John had come home for Christmas to find it, something new in their lives. The way Sharon had fought with Dad over everything. The way she had called him, with such contempt, "the white man" and "the American," behind his back. The way she had, at just seventeen, stood stony and silent through his illness, angry at him even then; stony and silent and angry, even at his funeral. "Why," John said. "Why did you hate Dad, Sharon, why did you hate him so much?"

Before Sharon could answer him, John's wife started to cry. Sharon stepped to Spring Lotus, who grabbed her, and held her tightly. John watched, helpless, as his sister comforted his wife, making what were undoubtedly promises, and asking questions to which the other woman nodded yes, or shook her head, no. It was not until Sharon had to leave for her gate that the two separated. Then, Chun Lian turned to John. "No go out," she said.

"What?" John said.

"No go out."

John looked to his sister. "What's she talking about?"

"I told her I'd phone in the afternoon," Sharon said. "I guess she's afraid she'll miss my call."

"Oh," John said. He had planned to take his wife out for a romantic lunch, but one look at Spring Lotus' anxious face told him to scrap the idea. "Okay," he said to her. "No go out."

After waving a final goodbye, Sharon disappeared. John stared at the blank space where his sister had stood, and realized that he was nervous, and afraid. But why? He was alone with Spring Lotus at last; he had finally gotten what he wanted. It must be that, somehow, he had not thought it would be like this: this terminal with its cheap thin carpet, and its cheap terminal smell; those cheap chairs covered with that strange cheap material that made your skin itch. He turned to look out the window, but the dark glass made the outside—the runway and the sky and the planes—seem flat and unreal. Thinking that it was his own eyes that failed him, John stepped closer to the window; Spring Lotus followed. Now, John saw himself and his wife reflected more clearly than he liked. He sighed, but kept looking at that tired man, no longer young, who stood next to a sniffling girl whose hand he wanted to hold, but did not dare take.

As soon as they got home from the airport, Spring Lotus settled herself at the kitchen table to wait for Sharon's call. John sat down as well, and waited with her. He felt better

by then—not so tired, and not so afraid—but no matter how he tried, he could not think of anything to say. His wife, unfortunately, seemed to have the same problem.

When the phone finally rang, Spring Lotus jumped up. "Sharon!" she said. "It Sharon!" The two women talked for more than an hour; during this hour, Spring Lotus laughed and smiled and John, watching her, kept wondering what Sharon could possibly be saying that was so very entertaining, and wishing that, somehow, he could have said it instead. Then Spring Lotus put down the phone. John smiled at her eagerly.

"Well," he said. "How's Sharon doing?"

"She good," Spring Lotus said. And she began to cry. John watched the tears roll down her cheeks, panicking at this sudden change in mood, and trying to decide what he should do. Before he could think of the words to comfort her, she had wiped her face and gone upstairs to take a nap.

While his wife was asleep, John drove to Szechuan Inn and ordered takeout. He had fortunately kept the menu from that first night, along with the others that Sharon and Spring Lotus had written during his sister's stay, and so he was able, at random, to pick one for that night's dinner, and bring it to the restaurant.

By the time John got back from Szechuan Inn, it was nearly eight. He had to wait for the cook to prepare the dishes once he handed over the menu, and then the roads were terrible on the way back: slick from sudden rain; dangerous in this cold. His wife was up by then, and sitting in the family room, waiting for him. They had a quiet meal; after they finished eating, Spring Lotus sat watching movies Sharon had rented for her from BlockBuster. These were Chinese art films with English subtitles, and John could have watched them as well, but he chose not to. Instead, he sat watching his wife watch her

movies, and waiting until it was time for bed. At last, after two movies, and well after midnight, she stood. John started to stand as well, but spoke instead. "Listen," he said. "Tomorrow, after your English class, I'll take you shopping, okay? To the store to buy things?"

Spring Lotus nodded; then she went upstairs. Thirty minutes later, John followed her. He knocked on the door to their room, and then opened it. His wife was already in bed. "Night, John," she said. She waved to him as she spoke, a goodbye wave, but, even as she was waving, John was stepping into the room. Then they were both embarrassed: John, because his wife obviously did not expect him to sleep with her; Spring Lotus, because he obviously planned to do just that. A shadow darkened her face, and a look came into her eyes that seemed to John to say: *So this is what you mean by wait to get to know me better, you mean wait until there are no witnesses.* John stopped where he was, guilty and silent. (But why guilty? he asked himself. This *is* my room, and I never actually said anything about getting to know her better.) Then, he turned away. When he turned back, the look was gone.

John took a long shower, arguing with himself the whole time: should he have sex with his wife; should he not have sex with her? If he tried to have sex with her, would she say no? If he didn't, would she wonder what was wrong with him? He decided in the end to do it, or at least to give it a try: they *were* married, after all.

John changed into his pajamas and stepped back into the bedroom. He found then his beautiful young wife waiting for him, almost exactly as he had imagined she would be: her face was shy and sweet, and, he thought, just a little curious. He climbed into bed next to her, and turned and kissed her gently. Then he began to take off her pajama top.

He did this as slowly as he possibly could, both to give his wife a chance to stop him, if she chose, and because he himself was getting nervous about what would happen next. One button (slowly); then two buttons (even more slowly). John started on the third button, but, before he could make much progress, his wife pushed his hands from her. Within a second, she had shimmied out of not just her pajama top but all her clothes, and thrown them onto the floor.

"There," she said. "Now come on."

Spring Lotus smiled and waved John towards her with both hands. "Come on," she said. "Let's go." But John was too disconcerted to move. He stayed where and as he was, for a long moment, and would have stayed there indefinitely, if his wife hadn't pushed him onto his back, and (giggling) stripped off his shirt and pants. When he was naked, she climed on top of him.

It was over in just under five minutes.

Afterwards, John pulled up the sheets to cover their nakedness. Then he lay back down. His wife was stretched out at his side, her head snuggled against his chest. John put his arms around her, but didn't look at her. He wasn't sure what to think: he had assumed that his wife was a virgin, and had expected this night to be one of tenderness and discovery. But instead of gently initiating his wife into the act of love, she had (not gently at all) initiated him. John tried not to, but he could not help it: he felt somehow cheated. And, though he told himself that such thoughts could only lead to bad places, still John wondered who he was, that nameless man who had taken John's rights and priviledges, and deflowered his wife.

In fact, almost an hour passed before he could think of anything else.

Nearly an hour before John remembered that he had learned something else important about his wife that night. When he did remember, it was with a kind of shock, and disbelief. He lifted the covers and brought her leg toward him, half-expecting to find that he was mistaken. But he wasn't. Her left foot had only two toes. John stared at that foot for a long time, wondering if his wife had ever had five toes; then he saw the white lines of her scars.

"Your foot," he said, pointing at her foot. "Your toes?"

Chun Lian nodded. "Yeah. China cold," she said. She pretended to shiver, hugging herself and chattering her teeth; after that, she too pointed at her foot. As she did this, she—much to her husband's horror—smiled. John looked at that foot again, and then at his wife's smiling face, and then at the foot once more, too shocked to speak. Spring Lotus *was* treated badly! he thought. She *was* a victim! She had been frozen; her toes had been frozen, right off her body, and, now—the most unbelievable part—she was smiling about it! John took his wife's poor mutilated foot in his hand and held it tenderly. He understood then that she smiled, because otherwise she would weep, because, of course, somehow, those toes must hurt her still. Then he thought of the disappointment he had felt only moments ago (he had actually felt cheated!) and he was ashamed. If one person could judge another, and John wasn't sure that one could, then certainly it was not he who could judge this woman. All he could do was make her life what it had not been: beautiful, and good. He resolved to do that, then.

"Is this why," he asked, gently, and in his best Chinese. "Losing your toes, is this the reason you left China? Is this why you came to America?" (Or this was what he was trying to say, but, as John reflected later, it must have sounded to Spring Lotus more like:

"This China, you America to coming. these small things not there. Because?!" But gentle.)

Still, his wife understood him. But, instead of the tears John expected, or the brave fighting against tears and solemn yes, which he had considered as her alternate possible response, Spring Lotus shook her head. John, who had planned to put his arms around his wife, and promise her that she would always be warm and safe with him, did not know what to do now. For, far from crying, Spring Lotus stared at him angrily. Then she pulled her foot from his grasp. "No," she said. "What you think? Just foot? Just toe?" She sighed loudly, shook her head once more, before turning away from him. Then she gave up on English, or maybe it was English that gave up on her, and she sent a long angry burst of Chinese into the room. Though John could not know exactly what his wife was saying, he recognized some of it from his mother, and knew that certain of her words were said in times of great upset, when someone or something was too stupid to be true.

John was at a loss, staring at Spring Lotus' back, and wondering what he had done. And then he understood. What you think? she said. Just foot? Just toe? What did he think, after all? Would he leave *America* over three toes? No, of course not. Would he leave it over a whole foot? Of course not. How could he have thought that Spring Lotus would leave her country for such a reason then? And John understood for the first time that his wife had not come to America for the reasons he had imagined. She had not come because she wanted a devoted American husband and a nice house in the suburbs; or even to enjoy the freedom and the unbelievable wealth that was everywhere in this country. It had not been as simple as all that. It could not have been so simple as all that. He remembered suddenly his wife's tears at Sharon's departure; how she had grabbed his

sister, and held her so tightly, not wanting to give Sharon up, not wanting to lose Sharon, her last link to China. No, Spring Lotus had not wanted to leave China, not really; she had only done so because she felt she had to. His wife loved her country, she must, John realized, just as he loved America. This was a shocking thought for him, that Chun Lian loved China, and that, perhaps even now, in this bed, she longed for it.That, even now, surely even now, his wife yearned for China, feeling it as one feels phantom limbs, as she must sometimes feel her missing toes, as if it were a part of herself. My God, he thought, why did she really leave?

John closed his eyes and an image came to him: three perfect beautiful pink toes, floating in the air, and he knew how it was that this woman had come to be with him. It was not just her toes she had lost, but other things, too, things that John—who had never known the world, but only this rich America of easy lives and whole bodies, of temperature control and colleges; corner offices and choices—could not even imagine. Things he would probably never understand; things that she, even, might not understand. Parts of herself gone, and each part so small that, though she might miss it, she could live without it; she could even laugh at its loss. Each small part gone and gone, until, one day, she realized that if she lost just one more part, then she would cease to exist as herself, and she knew that if she lived in her country (which she loved) this was exactly what would happen. From that one single thought it was a direct line to everything else: marrying a stranger, a plane to America, making love in this America with the stranger she had married; everything.

Oh God, John thought, oh God, Sharon was right. But then he remembered his mother and father, and felt that there was hope, after all, there was love, after all; things were not

so terrible as his sister would have him believe. His father, who had defied his racist country and brought home a Chinese bride; Father, who had loved Mom so much that he had spent thousands of dollars—a fortune back then and almost all of his savings—rescuing her family from ruin; paying off the debt that threatened their farm. His mother, who had, for this man she loved, left her family behind and moved to America; who had, for her husband, lived most of her life in another country and another language, and who had borne foreign children. These were his parents: this couple who had sacrificed so much to be together, and all of this not even one month into their relationship. This couple who had married just three weeks after they met.

And, as he thought this, John began to weep, because he realized then what Sharon, poor angry Sharon, must have known all along. Their mother had not married their father for love; their father had not saved the family farm for love. That was obvious to anyone with two eyes, who cared to look. How naive, how romantic, had he been, that he could for so long have believed in real love between the girl his mother had been, and the man that had been his father? The marriage had been arranged, after all, hadn't it? Of course it had. Oh, of course: the youngest daughter, sacrificed to the rich American. His poor mother, sacrificed for their land. And Father, so in love with this girl, beautiful when he was plain; a teenager, when he was middle-aged, Father, so selfish in love, oh Father, so wrong. But, still, John thought, my father, despite what you did to my mother. Just as those people that had been his mother's family, were still his own family, despite what they did to their own daughter.

May God forgive them all, John thought. May God forgive. For, with some things, human forgiveness is not enough.

John's slow silent tears became violent sobs and the woman by his side, his wife, began to stroke his arms, his head, finally holding him to her chest. When she did this, he turned to look at her and wonder who she was. His sister's words echoed in his mind: your little Chinese wife, and John thought, No, no, what does that make me, then, the American husband? This was a thought he could not bear. And he wanted nothing more than to ask what kind of world he was living in; what kind of man he was that he could take part in it; how he and this woman could go on together, now, when they both knew why they had married, what it was really all about, but he asked none of these things, because of course there was no one there who would understand his words, and even if this woman could have, these were not questions she could answer. He felt then like himself as a baby, screaming out his first wails at the terror of the universe, held gently in the arms of a black-haired woman who comforted him in a language he could not understand, and he cried even more, and more bitter tears.

Then, suddenly, he found himself laughing, because the joke was on him: he had married himself, after all. He, John Harris, had wed his own fantasy about life, a fantasy in which a beautiful girl would, of course, want to leave her family and homeland to marry a man she had never seen, and live with him in America. John's laughter grew, and his wife took her arms from around him. She must have been frightened, so far from home, and alone with a man she could not understand, a man who seemed to be crazy, John knew this, even then. But, still, he laughed, and laughed, until, finally, Spring Lotus laughed with him, and they were both laughing at the same thing: the unbearable ridiculousness of it all. And, for the first time, John knew, there was some real understanding between them.

As they laughed, the world changed—at least the world outside their window—, though they were too busy to notice. Snow, a minor miracle in this desert land, came down outside: falling in small flakes at first; and then in flakes so large they could not be ignored. Spring Lotus saw it before her husband: she went quiet, before pointing at the window, and exclaiming excitedly at her first American snow. Only then did John turn to look outside.

"My God. Will you look at that?" he said.

He rose, and, his wife rose with them. They went to the window, to watch the ground be swallowed by the white. Then, on sudden inspiration, John began to put on his clothes. He told his wife to do the same. They went outside, together.

"You won't see this again. Not here anyway," he said.

His wife looked at him without understanding, and he pointed at the ground, "Snow. Snow, right here in Vegas." Then he pointed at the flakes that swirled through the air, "It's snowing! Snow."

"Snow," she said.

"Yes," John said. "Snow. It's snowing today. Right here! Can you believe it?"

Spring Lotus laughed and stretched her arms out in a passionate embrace of nothing, or maybe of everything. "Snowing," she said. "It snowing today. I can believe!" She let her arms drop to either side of her body, and turned to get a better view of the night. Then she started down the driveway. John followed her. They walked slowly and carefully, but did not stop until they stood in the street, staring up at their own house in amazement.

They two were completely alone then—in the morning, every single person asleep in the sleeping houses of their development would come out to exclaim at the snow, but, for

now, for this moment, this night was their secret. And in that secret moment, John stood looking at his house and he saw it as his wife must: as something too-lovely, almost beyond belief; something grand and fine that should not, but did, belong to just the two of them. He saw the night as she did, and it was an American night, and America—*Meiguo* in Chinese, beautiful country—was snowy white and sparkling; deserving of its name. John took a deep breath, full of wonder. Even as he did this, his wife sighed, and took a single step backwards. She began to slip, and John reached out to her. He took her hand, to steady her. And he thought then, as he held her hand—and maybe it was just that he so desperately wanted it to be so, and maybe it was just that he so desperately needed it to be so, or maybe it was just the miracle of this snow that covered everything, made even the dull asphalt of his familiar driveway seem new and pure and strange, but he thought then—that maybe, just maybe, endings do not depend on beginnings. That maybe, just maybe, even the ugliest start can lead to something that is amazing in it's beauty, as his parents' union had led to his sister, as the freezing rain of this afternoon had led to this dazzling, surprising snow; oh maybe, just maybe, things might turn out all right, after all.

# VITA

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