2001

Transparency| [short stories]

Frances Hwang

The University of Montana

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TRANSPARENCY

by

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B.A. Brown University, 1994
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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

2001

Approved by:

[Signatures and dates]
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Transparency

Henry Liu lost his voice halfway through the trip, coughing so violently that his left side felt like he had pulled a muscle. Whenever he felt pain, he put his hand across his chest to reassure himself that his heart was still beating. He looked at the view as his wife drove, at the broken edges of mountains covered in snow and the turquoise lake where not a single fish lived because of its cold waters. The mountains held a stillness that silenced him. He felt regret watching the lake slip past his window. When it disappeared from view, Henry felt as if he had been given a last glimpse of the world and that he would be dead before the trip was over.

His sixteen-year-old son, James, slouched in his seat, playing his Gameboy. Alice leaned her head against the window reading a Russian novel for college – a thousand pages at the very least – by an author whose name Henry couldn’t pronounce. His wife kept exclaiming at the scenery – *look outside, isn’t it beautiful?* – and when neither of their children looked, she became angry, saying what a waste it had been to bring them, until his daughter put the novel down on her knee and gazed outside. His wife drove the car in fits and starts, pressing the accelerator down and just as suddenly releasing it so that the car kept lurching forward. “Mom,” James yelled, “you’re making me sick! Stop it!”

“What?” she said.
“Your driving! It sucks! I’m a better driver, right, Alice?”

Alice picked up her novel and flipped a page.

“Mom, stop the car and let me drive!”

“You shut up,” his wife said. “I don’t want all of us to end up dead at the bottom of the cliff.”

James gave a heavy sigh as he collapsed back into his seat. He glanced out the window. “Everything looks the same,” he complained. He picked up his Gameboy, pushing his glasses back with the edge of a finger.

Henry rolled down his window, but his wife turned to look at him. She didn’t like the wind hitting her face because the lady who sold her makeup said that moving air wasn’t good for her complexion. So he closed the window, and they drove like that for another hour or so, the rented car smelling of vinyl, the way new cars smell, and the lukewarm air blowing in softly through the vents. Through the glass, Henry stared at the mountains taking up the sky, massive wind-cracked surfaces that from a distance became faint blue outlines. He wanted to remember them, but it seemed impossible for his mind to remember anything so vast. On previous vacations, he had bought a postcard or two to remind him of the places they had seen, but this attempt at memory now seemed like wasted effort.

A tickle crept into his throat, and Henry held his breath. He didn’t want to begin coughing, but his throat convulsed like he was suffocating. He hunched over in his seat and coughed until his eyes watered. His family watched him in silence. “How are you?” his wife finally asked.

Henry nodded, swallowing, his fingers touching his throat.
“Your father is sick.” His wife sounded surprised, like she hardly believed it. 

Ever since Henry had lost his voice, his family talked about him as if he weren’t there. 

*What about Dad?* his children would say. *Poor Dad!* Their regard made Henry feel his sickness even more. He would look at the lines of his skin, its cracked translucence, and wonder if he was becoming invisible. 

His children liked to hear him croak. “He sounds like the Godfather,” James said. 

“Hey Dad, can you say, ‘He sleeps with the fishes.’ Say it, Dad.” Henry just smiled. 

When he wore his gray jacket and pants, James and Alice addressed him as Don. “How’s it going, Don?” they said, laughing together in the back seat of the car. “You do a favor for me, I’ll do a favor for you.” They made their voices deep and scratchy. 

When Henry did speak now, his family stopped their chatter and listened to his every breath. He spoke so rarely that his words seemed to hold unusual power. Now, as they followed a winding road through the mountains, Henry lifted his hand up. His wife glanced at him. “Stop,” he said. His voice was like dry wind. He felt his insides shaking. His wife pulled over to the side. 

“Are you okay, Dad?” Alice asked. 


Alice found a bottle underneath a jacket on the floor and poured him a cup. 

Henry drank quickly with everyone watching. When he was done, he pointed to the mountains outside the window, and then opened the car door to get out. 

“What’s he doing?” Alice asked. 

“Dad’s going crazy!” James said. 

“He wants to see the view,” his wife told them.
His wife and Alice got out and followed him to the outlook while James stayed inside the car. Henry stepped onto a large red rock to look at the view. “Let me get a picture,” Alice said to her mother. “Smile!” Her voice followed the sing-song that people used when taking photographs. Henry noticed that his wife was smiling without really smiling. Her face seemed to be resisting the wind. She kept blinking as she held her lips together, a colorful silk scarf surrounding her throat. Henry was struck by how old she looked as she waited for Alice to take the photograph. “Dad, turn around,” Alice said. Henry shook his head without looking at her, waving his hand as if brushing away a fly. His daughter took his picture anyway, a side profile of him gesticulating on top of the rock.

“Why doesn’t he want his picture taken?” Alice said to her mother.

“Don’t worry about him,” his wife said. She and Alice paused for a moment, breathing in the view. “So beautiful!” his wife sighed. Then, they turned and headed back for the car.

Henry set one foot on top of another rock. A burnt oak tree rose from the rocky earth, its limbs twisted in the air. There were acorns still hanging from the dried-up branches, and they were colorless as silver, looking as if they were petrified. Henry thought it remarkable that the acorns had not already fallen. He picked up a small piece of rock, brick-red, like a misshaped diamond, and pressed it into his palm. One side was crusted with dirt, leaving his fingers dusty and dry. It smelled like stale smoke when he sniffed at it.

When he looked back to where the car was parked, he noticed that his family was staring at him. He tossed the rock to the ground and then spit along the side of the road,
trying to clean his tongue of its acrid taste. When he was inside the car again, before they had even driven a mile, he turned to his wife, speaking to her in Chinese. “Please take me to the hospital,” he said.

Three hours passed by as they waited in the emergency room for a doctor. As Henry had complained of chest pain, the nurse took his blood pressure and pulse to make sure he wasn’t having a heart attack. She also drew a sample of his blood and sent it to the laboratory for results. His wife had dropped their children off at the motel after having given them permission to sign up for an ATV ride. Henry didn’t like the idea at all, but his wife had given in after James had promised he wouldn’t drive but would share the same vehicle with his sister. Henry knew of course that Alice would let her brother drive, but he didn’t say anything to stop them.

There was a television in the waiting room, and he and his wife were watching the men’s finals at Wimbledon. The screen was mounted so high, however, it was impossible to follow the ball as it flew across the net. After squinting for an hour, Henry finally gave up, closing his eyes, while his wife continued to watch the game. He was tired of the heartless drama, and the crowd which demanded nothing less than perfection from the players.

With his eyes closed, Henry concentrated on the pain inside his throat. He wanted to drink something – hot tea with a couple of cough drops thrown in, a few tablespoons of whiskey mixed with honey and lemon – anything to relieve the soreness. The air had turned raw inside his throat like he was breathing in particles of dust. He had heard of
people with asthma being able to breathe again after being submerged in water, and he thought once more about the lake he had seen that afternoon, its glacial stillness with not a single thing stirring below. He imagined lying on the silt floor, his nameless body edged in blue, drifting without words or sound along the empty bottom.

His wife shook his arm, and Henry woke up. He cleared his throat and sat up straight in his chair. Several people were looking at him. "You were snoring," his wife told him. His body felt cold and damp. Henry rose slowly to his feet. "Where are you going?" his wife asked. He pointed his thumb toward the window. "Huh?" she said.

"Outside."

In front of the hospital, there were a few empty benches. Henry chose the one facing the most sunlight, blinking as he sat down. The sun felt weak against his skin, like the light was passing through him.

"You have a smoke?"

Henry looked up at a woman standing beside him. She was in her early thirties with frizzy brown hair, and she still wore the flimsy gown issued to patients. When she stepped in front of him, Henry could see that she wore another gown underneath but reversed to cover her back. Her right arm was attached to an IV drip, and she had dragged the metal stand along with her.

"What?" Henry asked.

"Do you have a smoke?" she repeated. She made the motions of taking a cigarette in and out of her mouth.

Henry shook his head, waving his hand.
A nurse wearing blue scrubs walked through the sliding doors and approached him. “Henry Liu?” she asked.

Henry nodded, getting up out of his seat.

“Actually, Mr. Liu, you can stay where you are. I just wanted to check on how you’re doing.”

“Okay,” he said.

“We’re almost ready to see you. We’re still waiting for the results from the lab. It won’t be more than an hour or so.”

“Nurse,” the woman said. “Got a smoke?”

“I’m afraid not,” the nurse said, turning away.

“God, what does it take to get a cigarette around here?” the woman demanded.

She walked up and down the sidewalk. She stopped by his bench and rubbed her shoe along the cement pavement. “This feels nice. Henry, right?”

Henry looked over at her in surprise.

“Henry,” the woman said again, “won’t you talk to me?”

Henry tapped the base of his throat and shook his head.

“I know my body better than any doctor,” the woman said, “but they won’t let me smoke. I can’t even drink my glasses of water. You know what they call my condition? 

*Psychogenic polydipsia.* Psycho fucking what? I said. Who would think water could be bad for you?”

Henry raised his eyebrows, looking at her.

“My ions are off,” she said. “Missing electrolytes. The doctor said I was drowning.”
The woman’s eyes had a green fluorescence. When she spoke, her skin moved tightly along her face like she’d received a face lift. Yet she couldn’t have been older than thirty-five or so.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” the woman said. “You probably think I need a new liver or something.”

Henry cleared his throat. “How much water—” he curled his fingers and made the gesture of drinking from an imaginary cup.

“A lot, Henry. I am addicted to water. The pills I take make my mouth so dry.”

A couple walked towards them from the parking lot. “Hey, excuse me, got a smoke?” the woman yelled.

“Sorry,” the man said, and the couple passed by.

The woman pulled her IV stand closer to the bench and sat down beside Henry.

“Guess how much water I drink,” she said.

Henry shrugged.

“Come on, guess,” she said.

In his lap, Henry stuck out his thumb and forefinger. “Two gallons,” he whispered.

“No,” the woman said. “I drink 452 fluid ounces each day. Three and a half gallons of water.” The woman leaned her head back, tapping her fingers along the bench in spite of the tube that came out of her hand. She crossed her legs, bobbing one foot up and down, the laces of her tennis shoe dangling. Henry could see short brown hairs sprouting from her legs. His wife didn’t ever need to shave, her legs so dry they had a sheen to them, like cracked porcelain.
“Nothing more delicious,” the woman said. “Everything has a taste except water. You know how hard it is to find something without a taste, Henry?” She began fiddling with the tube stuck on the back of her hand. “The other night I dreamed I was sitting in a restaurant with my ex-husband, Ronny, and it was like we were married all over again. The only thing he said to me was, ‘I’ve flushed out my ears.’ Then he proceeded to cut his bread into very small pieces. To be honest, I was more interested in looking at the menu. There were fancy things. Orange-Glazed Duck Breast. Maple-Roasted Carrots. All I wanted was meatloaf, but I couldn’t find it on the menu. The more I looked, the more convinced I was it was my last meal.” The woman caressed her IV with the tips of her fingers. It made Henry nervous, like she might yank the tube out at any moment. “I never wanted to have a taste for things.”

“Lou Liu,” a voice said from behind. Henry jerked his head up, saw that his wife was standing behind the bench. Old man, she had called him. Old Liu. His wife stared at the woman sitting beside him.

“Your wife, Henry?” the woman said.

Henry got up awkwardly out of his seat. He would have introduced them, but he didn’t know the woman’s name.

“It’s time for me to pick up the kids,” his wife said to him in Chinese.

“Oh, I know,” the woman said. “That’s Japanese, isn’t it?”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll be here waiting.”

“What are you talking about, Henry?” the woman asked.

“Who is that?” his wife said, digging through her purse. Henry shrugged. His wife put on her sunglasses. “Don’t forget about insurance,” she said as she turned away.
She walked to the parking lot, clutching her purse. Henry watched her recede into a horizon of glinting cars.

“Well, I have a better chance of understanding you when you don’t say anything at all,” the woman said when Henry sat down again. “How long have you been married, Henry?”

Henry stared at his feet planted on the smooth, newly paved sidewalk. For his last birthday, his wife had to remind him that he was turning 53 – not 52, as he had imagined. Sometimes, he caught himself drifting away only to be seized with panic that he no longer knew where he was. The years had passed, and somehow he had ended up on this bench speaking to a woman he didn’t know as he tried to remember his life. “Twenty-one,” he finally said.

“Impressive,” the woman remarked. “Ronny and I didn’t last half that time. Love can turn ugly so fast. The simplest things about him made me go crazy. Like at night, when Ronny brushed his teeth, he used this curved metal thing to scrape his tongue. He liked showing me all the gunk he collected because he was trying to persuade me to use it. Whenever we went out to eat, he would inspect his glass. If there was the slightest water spot, he’d wipe it down with a napkin.” The woman sighed. “It’s the stupid, small things that make you hate someone. We parted ways, and then last summer a neighbor found Ronny. I never thought he would be capable of doing that. He didn’t leave a note, just a piece of paper calculating how much he would have to fall. He was 189 pounds, and he worked it out that he would have to fall 8 feet and 2 inches.” The woman scratched her elbow.
“I know what you’re thinking,” she said. “You’re wondering about the water.” She folded her hands over her stomach. “The doctors ask me all the time. Do you know what’s going to happen to you if you don’t stop, they say. Seizures. Coma. I don’t know whether to believe them or not. I have such a terrible thirst.” The woman paused to gaze at Henry. “You don’t think my body would be telling me something that’s wrong, do you?”

The skin along the woman’s face sagged once she stopped talking. Henry wondered what it would mean to be like her, smoking her cigarettes, taking her pills, drinking her water. He had never been addicted to anything in his life. He imagined her arranging her glasses of water neatly in a row. She would pick up a glass and begin to drink, and when it was empty she would pick up another, letting it pour down her throat, filling the folds of her stomach.

“It’s the moments of pettiness that you regret,” the woman said. “Even though they reveal who you really are.”

When the nurse came to get him, he rose out of his seat.

“So long, Henry,” the woman smiled. She gave him a thin brown hand, the nails bitten down to shapeless stubs.

He turned and followed the nurse back inside.

After taking his vital signs – measuring his temperature and pulse, his blood pressure, respiratory rate and oxygen saturation – after taking out his blood and submitting it to a laboratory for tests, after giving him a chest x-ray and then a CAT scan,
hooking him up to the cardiac monitor to follow the rhythms of his heart, it was determined that Henry had bronchitis. It wasn’t too serious, the doctor said, prescribing him the usual course of antibiotics as well as a cough syrup with codeine to suppress the fits and relieve the pain. Henry’s family was sitting in the waiting room as he came down the hallway. He had a bracelet around his wrist, and he was holding a white paper bag containing his medications.

“What’s up, Don?” his son said to him.

“How are you doing, Dad?” Alice asked.

Henry nodded his head and smiled. He’d taken his antibiotics and cough syrup already and felt like he was going to be better. “You drive?” he asked his son.

“Sure,” James said.

“We saw a bear from the side of the road,” Alice told him.

Henry widened his eyes. “A bear!”

“He had a white patch on his chest,” Alice said. “He stood up on his hind legs when he saw us.”

“Alice tried to take his picture,” James said, “but he ran into the forest when he saw her.”

“You kids,” he smiled, patting his son on the shoulder.

Outside, the mountains had become a mass of shadows darker than the sky. Driving along the highway, Henry felt them closing in as the tiny car pressed forward. They stopped at a seafood restaurant a few miles from their motel. Henry felt hungry for the first time in a week and ordered two bowls of vegetable soup. Alice had brought her novel into the restaurant – she was at a good part, she explained, had only a couple of
pages left in the chapter. She read diligently until the food came and then placed her book face down on the tablecloth.

Henry cleared his throat. “What kind of story?” he asked, pointing to the cover of his daughter’s book.

“Oh!” Alice exclaimed. “It’s hard to say.” She paused for a moment, thinking. “It’s about this young man who’s innocent, almost like a saint. He’s in love with a General’s daughter, but there’s also this tortured, fallen woman. She’s beautiful and mad, all these men are in love her, but she doesn’t like any of them. One of them gives her a hundred thousand roubles, but she throws it into the fire.”

“Sounds like a stupid book,” James said.

“It’s not,” Alice said.

His wife cut off a piece of her salmon and put it onto Henry’s plate for him to try. Henry couldn’t help but notice the gentle slope of her hands, her maternal fingers, and clear, rounded nails. Twenty-three years ago, he had touched her hand for the first time. They had gone ice skating together, and she had clung to the outer wall of the rink wearing a bright yellow dress – a dress even though they were ice skating! – but he knew she had worn it for him, and as she tottered on her skates, he had taken her small cold fingers into his own.

His wife’s jade bracelet gleamed in the light as she turned her wrist. The waiter came and refilled their glasses of water. Henry touched his glass, felt the beads of condensation along his fingertips. He thought of the woman at the hospital, imagined her lying awake at this hour, trying to forget the dryness in her mouth. Perhaps she
swallowed her own saliva for relief, moistening her lips with her tongue. He lifted the glass to his mouth, his lips parted to receive its coolness.

Something clinked against his teeth. A pink mass floated up toward his lips.

"Dad, my glass!" James laughed.

Henry saw a pink retainer sitting at the bottom of the glass he was holding. His family erupted into laughter.

"I put it in there for a rinse," James said.

"You know your father is getting confused," his wife said.

"I didn't see," Alice laughed. "Did he really drink from it?"

People began looking over at their table. Henry realized he was still holding the glass of water in his hand. He could hear his heart beating louder and louder as he set it on the table and then waited for his family to quiet down.
All my life, my mother has told me how to avoid dying of cancer. Don’t smoke. Don’t drink coffee. Avoid butter or the burnt edges of toast. Stay in the shade. Do you want this hat? Did you put on your sunscreen? Roll up your car windows. Ventilate your dry cleaning. Do not abuse the cellular. Get away from that microwave. Not too close to the computer screen. Or the television.

When I moved to Philadelphia, she asked me not to live near electric wires. When I turned twenty-three and still had no permanent boyfriend, she urged me to get pregnant at least once before I was thirty. It decreases your risk of breast cancer, she said.

Now, two years later, I’ve succeeded in doing what my mother told me though out of wedlock. This is probably not what she intended. It is a dismal morning and I have been hanging around the bathroom feeling antiseptic. For lack of anything better to do, I remain seated on the toilet, staring at the tiny cup of fluid that I placed along the tub’s edge. Its pinkness is glaring, leaving nothing to the imagination. My cat whines as he pushes open the door, nudging my foot with his nose. He can’t understand why I’ve been in here so long. I pick him up and rub his cheeks. He starts to purr like a motor. I remember my mother’s words when she first saw me holding him this way. “You really want to get a baby, don’t you?” she said.
“He is my baby,” I replied. I crooned his name affectionately, putting my face up to his, squeezing him tight. He gave a petulant yowl and began arching his back, kicking at me with his legs. When I let go, he landed squarely on the floor, shook his head once and then walked away.

“Babies are more interesting than cats,” my mother noted.

I didn’t believe her. Babies do not leap on top of refrigerators or catch flies in mid-air. Their heads dangle like drooping flowers, their eyes vacant as stars. My cat is fierce and self-cleaning. In the mornings, he kneads my stomach, purring at me with the intensity of a lover.

Garrett, my boyfriend, hates my cat. He particularly hates it when my cat hops onto the bed, watching us having sex. “Could we keep him out of this?” he says. “Could we just close the door?”

“We could,” I say, “but it wouldn’t be any good. Manny knows how to open doors.”

“What about the lock?”

“It doesn’t work,” I say. “This is an old apartment.”

Garrett has nightmares about my cat. In his dreams, the cat shits on the bed and I make him clean up the mess. Or the cat suddenly appears on his armchair, his eyes brightly intent, his mouth curving in a grin. My boyfriend claims that I love my cat more than I love him.

“I love you both equally,” I say, making sure to look at both of them.

My cat is contemplating me now, his yellow eyes flecked with green. Sometimes when he paws at the door, he seems to be this blind little ego, this impossible Will, whose
desires rarely coincide with my own. When he looks at me, I wonder, really wonder, if it is with love or indifference. If I drank a potion like Alice, shrinking to mouse size, would he be able to recognize me? I'm afraid he would bat me around the carpet until my body went into rigor mortis. Somehow, I don't take this personally. I understand that it is in his nature to kill small things. “I'm pregnant,” I tell him. He yawns. Rests his chin upon his paw.

I don't tell my boyfriend. He is more sensitive than both me and my cat combined. He would look at me in that dazed way as if I had just punched him in the stomach. He would take hold of my wrist, his fingers getting deep and existential. For him, there will always be these roaming ants of doubt. For me, my future is as clear as crystal, my conscience as easy as one plus one, my stomach as flat as the flattest ironing board. Everything is as plain as night and day and there isn't a question in my mind as to what I will do.

Over dinner, I begin to wonder if there should be a question in my mind as to what I will do.

All the while, I hear my heart, its dull palpitations and thuds. I think about what's growing inside me. I have an image from high school biology in my mind of a pink, jelly-like thing with black dots for eyes. The thing looks more like a pig than a human. It is a mass of undifferentiated tissue, its microscopic heart unformed, incapable of being detected.

Garrett wonders why I am so quiet. “You look unhappy,” he says.
“Just brooding,” I say.

“About what?” he asks.

I stare at him, my hands pressed against my cheeks. I spread out my fingers, wiggling them as if I don’t know.

“You know,” he says.

I want to hide from him, and for a moment I cover my eyes with my palms. It’s like the game I played with my mother as a child. She would cover her face with her hands, and I would laugh and pull at her wrists. Then I wanted to see and to be seen. Now in the dark of my hands, I imagine I’m hiding in a closet. I can only see the pink edges of my skin. I think, I can’t see you, you can’t see me.

Garrett pulls my hand away from my eyes. “Amelia, what’s wrong?” he says.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I say. “Really, really nothing.”

“Okay,” he says. There is a pause. “You obviously don’t want to talk about it.”

I am silent. I wonder if he thinks I am a cold person. He is drawn to warm, earthy types. I know this from watching television with him. Women like Wonder Woman and Deanna Troi with maternal feelings and large, tender breasts that proclaim home. Why, I wonder, did the two of us ever fall into each other’s paths? Maybe we are like colliding stars. Hot and cold water that when mixed become lukewarm.

Each fish sits at the bottom of its plastic cup breathing heavily. There are at least fifty of them on the shelf, iridescent though faded, like wilted peacock feathers. I recognize them because I had a betta when I was a kid. I saw them for the first time in
Baltimore walking with my mother through the touristy shops beside the harbor. Each fish swam in its own glass world, rising and falling, trapped in a monastic dream of blue and clear stones. Both my mother and I had been struck by the flaming reds and blues, the cold purity of that world, the fish like living pieces of stained glass curving in the water.

My mother wondered why there was only one fish in each bowl. “Aren’t the fish lonely?” she asked.

The owner held a mirror to one of the fish, and immediately its gills flowered. “You see that?” he said. “You put two of these together, and they’ll end up killing each other. They’re Siamese fighting fish.”

My mother told me to choose. I couldn’t decide at first because each fish represented a different world. The owner had chosen the shape of the bowl and the color of the rocks with care in order to enhance the beauty of each fish. It was like choosing among living pieces of art. I couldn’t make up my mind.

“Choose, Amelia,” my mother said. “Hurry and choose.” I finally selected a blue and purple fish in a small cylindrical bowl. I kept looking at the other fish, comparing their beauty to mine, worrying that I had made the wrong decision.

“Is that enough space for him?” my mother asked.

“Oh, sure,” the owner said. “That’s the size of a spacious apartment for this guy.”

Later, when I brought the fish home, I discovered that its world was not so beautiful and clean. I discovered that this fish had cares, bodily cares, that it spit out its food and scavenged for the leftovers at the bottom, that it left shit on the rocks like tiny red worms. Later, when it was dying, I realized that the rocks were too sharp for the fish
to rest on, that they grazed its stomach leaving traces of blood. I realized how artful the owner had been. How deceptive.

That fish lived in its small glass bowl for a year. It glided around those crystal rocks until I got sick of it. That was the way of all things it seemed. Nosing around the same glass wall in circles, a year could be a long time. I didn’t like how its existence depended on me, and in a way, I was relieved when it finally died.

Now in the pet store, buying food for my cat, I am drawn to the bettas sitting at the bottom of their plastic cups. I am shocked by the display for the store makes no pretense as to how expendable their lives are. A couple of them have turned white under the fluorescent glare. They are like a rare species of albino. Little ghost fish. Perhaps it’s another ploy for already I’m beginning to feel sorry for them.

“Can I help you?” a man in the standard red uniform asks. His badge says his name is Willie.

“Oh, I was just looking at these fish,” I say.

“Beautiful fish,” Willie says.

“Yeah, I had one when I was a kid.” I look at Willie, the graying edges of his hair and his tiny round glasses. “How long can these fish live in these cups?” I ask.

“Oh, a long time,” Willie says. “In the wild, they live in little pockets of water just like these plastic cups.”

“Uh-huh,” I say. I want to believe him. “It just seems like they’re really unhappy.”

“These fish are real hardy,” Willie says. He grabs a plastic bag from his workstation and fills it with maybe two tablespoons of water from a nearby tank. “I kid
you not,” he says, twisting the bag shut, leaving only a mouthful of air, “these fish come
to us shipped just like this.” I nod when he looks at me. “I know it seems cruel, but these
fish can live in just a little bit of water. Someone in the store dropped a fish wrapped up
like this behind a tank once. We found him three months later and you know what, that
fish was still alive. I kept that fish myself because I could hardly believe it. He lived
another two years under my care. I kid you not, these fish are hardy creatures.” I think
about this as I look at the bettas languishing in their plastic cups. When Willie asks me if
I want to buy one, I say okay, just like that, without thinking, as if I was a kid.

“Alright then,” Willie says. “You just have to pick the one that you want.”

“I want that one,” I say, pointing to the one that seems closest to dying. His
colors are fading fast in the rust-colored water.

“He’s a pretty one,” Willie says encouragingly.

“Oh, come on,” I laugh. “He looks like he’s going to die any minute.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Willie says, picking up the cup with the dying fish. “You go
ahead and choose the one that you want.” He opens a tank filled with small silver fish
and dumps the betta into the water. I watch the betta, its first stunned reaction of being
immersed in another world, and then its recollection of itself as it wriggles through the
water.

I select a turquoise and red fish, its color flaming in spite of the plastic cup.

“That’s an even prettier one,” Willie says, winking. He pours the fish into another plastic
bag, and I take it home like this, sealed in its own little bubble. My cat is interested as
soon as I let it loose into the one gallon tank I purchased. He taps at the glass with his
paw and even tries to open the small canister of fish food. Garrett comes home, sees me
and the cat staring at the fish together. I tell him about the bettas, how sad they looked in their plastic cups.

Garrett smiles. “Didn’t you think that by buying one, you’re creating a demand?” he says. “Because of you, more fish are going to have to live in those little plastic cups.”

I am silent for a moment. “I already thought about that,” I say.

During my lunch hour, I hang out at the mall. I am like some loud, ravening insect as I weave my way through each store, seized by an impulse to acquire and consume. I don’t need anything, yet the things steadily accrue. A ceramic house for the fish to swim through. A small device for measuring my blood pressure. Two identical pairs of shoes, in case I wear one of them out. A self-cleaning litter box for the cat.

I’ve been feeling these intangible creative impulses. I begin to frequent a ceramic store where I can paint my own pottery. I choose one of the mugs, silty and dry, as hard as bone. I paint it in the most fantastic colors. I imagine doing a Kandinsky on this mug. I want it to be iridescent and alive, to express all the multi-colored hues of my soul. I look up, a little girl stares at me with curiosity. She is painting a plate with purple sky and green stars. In the middle of the plate is a large blue frog with black spots. I look at her creation, she looks at mine. “It’s a poisonous frog,” she says simply. “It’s very pretty,” I say. She picks up her brush as if she hasn’t heard me, continues with her painting.

At the mall, after picking up a seaweed mask from the Body Shop, I pass by a woman sitting in front of a booth for the American Cancer Society. My body drifts of its
own accord toward the table. I smile uneasily at the woman, begin fingering the pamphlets. “Is it okay to take these?” I ask.

“That’s what they’re here for,” the woman smiles.


“My father,” I say. “He died of colon cancer a few years ago.”

I watch her eyes widen, the slow intake of breath. “I’m so sorry,” she says.

I smile gently as if to say it’s okay, the hurt will never go away, but I’m managing. It’s a lie, of course. My father flourishes in California with a second wife and three children. Six years ago, when I visited them, I got to swim in their pool. It was kidney-shaped with blue tiles, and every morning for a week, I waded around until my fingers felt like prunes. I slept a lot too. I slept away entire afternoons. On my last day in California, my father and his five-year-old son dropped me off at the airport. They were wearing matching shirts – striped yellow and black – which made me think of bumble bees. “Give your sister a kiss, Tim,” my father said, but Timothy hung upon his arm, pressing his lips together like he was trying to hide them. His eyes were shiny, bulging with fierceness, and when he frowned at me, his upturned mouth made him look like a monkey. It was the kind of honesty only children seem to possess.
“It’s a terrible disease,” the woman continues. “One out of every three people will have to deal with it sometime in their life.”

“How awful,” I say. My lungs feel cold and dry, like a dust has settled inside. I want to run away from this woman, but for some reason I can’t leave. I hover around her booth, begin flipping through one of the pamphlets. *Cancers are a group of diseases that cause cells in the body to change and grow out of control.* My eyes blur and I put the pamphlet down. I look up at the woman, murmur a hurried thank you, and begin to walk away.

“Miss,” she says, calling back at me.

“Yes?” I say feebly, turning around. “Yes?”

“Would you like to take a pin or a magnet with you?”

I return to the table and she presses a few things into my hand. “Good luck to you,” she says. My fingers close upon the objects as I thank her and leave. I want to say that I have a life forming inside of me. I imagine it as a tiny bubble or sanctum. A perfect sphere. I haven’t told anyone, not a single soul.

My cat doesn’t like his new litter box. He has seen the machine scrape his shit to the side and is now suspicious of it. He has taken to peeing on my bathroom rug, pawing near the spot for several minutes in an obsessive-compulsive manner. At night, he wanders from room to room yowling, as I sit on the sofa watching television. “Manny!” I call, patting my lap, but he only stops his pacing for a moment to glare at me.
Garrett is on the opposite side of the room working on a paper called “Impaired Splenic Erythropoiesis in Phlebotomoized Mice: An Experimental Model for Studying the Role of Stromal Macrophages.” He and three other co-workers from his lab are trying to get it published in one of the scientific journals. Every so often, he looks up from the dining room table to eye my cat. “What’s wrong with him?” he finally asks. “Is your cat horny or something?”

“He can’t be,” I say. “Manny’s a eunuch.” I get up from the sofa, but my cat rushes for cover beneath the coffee table. When I reach under his stomach to pick him up, he flops over onto his side defensively. I sit back down on the sofa, pick up the remote and begin flipping channels. I stop on a program that shows real footage of accidental deaths caught on tape. The theme for this particular show is falling. There is the last footage of a cameraman who leaped out of an airplane to film skydivers but forgot to put on his parachute. The footage records his descent, from the three skydivers joining hands as they float in the air to the orange swatch of his suit blocking out most of the view except for a shard of sky and the grainy rush of earth.

There is also black and white footage from the 1950’s of a tightrope walker, an old man named Magaldi, treading across a cable slung between two ten-story buildings. According to the voice-over, Magaldi was recovering from a broken rib when he performed this stunt, and indeed, his face is unshaven as if he’d just gotten out of bed, a few wispy hairs dangling from his chin like a goat’s. Magaldi is bare-chested, so lean you can see the outlines of his ribcage, and as he moves along the wire, it is painful and slow like his bones are arthritic. “Unfortunately for Magaldi, it was a windy day,” the commentator notes. Magaldi pauses, knees bent, arms spread out as the rope trembles
beneath his feet. His body wavers in the air, leaning to one side, and then Magaldi disappears leaving only the tightrope in view.

“Oh!” I exclaim.

“What?” Garrett walks over to my side of the room, stands by the sofa as he looks at the screen. “What is it?” he asks. We watch a home video of a young man jumping off a bridge. His body is stiff and straight, arms pressed to the side. A certain stillness of the body as he falls.

“This is sick,” Garrett says. “Why are you watching this?”

I look at him, not knowing what to say.

“They’re allowed to show this on TV?” Garrett walks back to his table. My cat brushes up against my leg, lets out an aggrieved yowl when our eyes meet.

“I don’t know what to do,” I say. Manny stops by the bookcase to give a half-hearted swipe at the fish tank.

“You need to get him some Prozac,” Garrett replies. He’s right, though I don’t want to admit it. How was I to know that I was getting a depressed cat when I went to the pound? A moody, complicated cat. A cat suffering from Weltschmerz. For the rest of the night, Garrett doesn’t speak to me as he works in front of his computer.

At night lying in bed, I think of Magaldi trembling along the wire. How impossible it is to move forward when you can’t even maintain your own balance. All around me is an anonymous darkness, the sound of Garrett’s quiet breathing as he sleeps beside me. I take his warm, sleeping hand and press it against my stomach. A spasm runs through his body like an electrical impulse, jerking the bed. The first time this happened, his body startled mine awake, but I’m used to it now. I hold his hand in the
darkness and imagine what it would be like having a child with him. Days in the park eating an ice cream. An excursion to the zoo to look at the elephants. All those stupid, sunny images. I am afraid that having a child is more like a scene from Walmart, an angry mother with sagging breasts spanking a shrieking child. I think of Garrett, how he would talk to our child in the reasonable tones of a psychoanalyst. I would be the mean one with frazzled hair and a pot belly. It would end in divorce, and he would keep the child because he loved the kid more than he loved me. He told me this in so many words once. We were walking along South Street, and he said that a parent’s love for their child is the strongest kind of love there is.

“That isn’t the most romantic thing to say,” I told him.

“Well, it’s true. Lovers can always separate. You can always find another husband or wife. But you can’t discard your child, and you can’t find another parent.”

I was silent, though I didn’t agree. This was just one more proof of his lack of feeling for me, I thought, as we walked the remaining four blocks in silence. A parent. A child. A husband or boyfriend. Wasn’t it the same thing in the end? People were always leaving each other behind. My mother told me that I adored my father when I was young, but I can’t remember anything from that time. There was only his absence which my mother and I tried to fill up with games and movies and sweet things to eat, excursions to the mall or weekend trips to the beach. Once she took me to a park and bought me a white balloon, fastening the string to my wrist. “Now keep this on,” she said. I watched the balloon hovering above my head, how it seemed like a floating grape or a little moon, and when I loosened the string off my wrist, it slipped from my fingers,
just as my mother had said it would. I watched as the balloon drifted away, rising higher and higher above the trees, a translucent globe floating toward the sky.

I decide to go home for the weekend. I call my mother to tell her, and immediately she thinks something is wrong. “Have you two been fighting?” she asks.

“No,” I say. “I just feel like coming home.” I hang up quickly because I am afraid of giving myself away. For some reason, I always become more vulnerable when I speak to my mother on the phone. It’s like the sound of her voice has a secret timbre that resonates in me alone which no one else can hear. I think of it as an underwater mammalian call reaching me through the vasty spaces. It is difficult not to respond. I want to fold my limbs until I am a perfect circle, close my eyes and bob along the waters.

I pack up my bag to leave, and when Garrett comes home, I find him sitting in the kitchen, eating a granola bar as he reads. He flips a page, takes a sip of apple juice. When I tell him I’m going home for the weekend, he lifts an eyebrow. “What does that mean?” he says.

“Nothing. My mother’s feeling lonely.”

“Ah,” he says. “Is she making you feel guilty?”

I shrug my shoulders.

“Would you like to hear what Dr. Freud has to say about guilt?” He points to the cover of his book. *Civilization and Its Discontents.*

“Oh, no,” I say.
“He says that you feel guilt when you think you’ve done something bad. You don’t even have to do the bad thing. You just have to think about doing it.”

“So?” I’m waiting for the punch line.

“So what makes a thing bad? What makes a thing reprehensible?”

I stare at him helplessly. “You tell me,” I say.

“Anything that causes you to be threatened with the loss of love,” he answers. He puts his feet on the chair in front of him and crosses his ankles.

“Huh,” I say. He looks like a boy to me in his t-shirt and shorts. “Do you mind taking care of Manny and the fish while I’m gone?”

“You’re leaving now?” He gives me a gloomy face as I kiss him on the lips. Maybe he knows something is up.

“I’ll be back Sunday night,” I say.

“So how is your boyfriend?” my mother asks. She is wearing her old pink robe, lying on the sofa watching television. Though I have been dating Garrett for two years, my mother still prefers not to refer to him by name.

“Garrett’s fine,” I say, settling myself on an adjoining sofa.

“Living with him still, huh?” My mother folds her hands over her stomach. She knows the answer, but wants a chance to express her disapproval.

“Yes,” I say.

For a while, we both watch the television in silence, our bodies spread out on separate couches like zombies. I think of how ubiquitous the television is, how it fills up
the empty spaces like God. During a commercial, she turns to me with a bossy look in her eye. “Don’t get pregnant,” she tells me.

For a moment, I can’t think of anything to say. “Alright,” I reply.

“Is it going anywhere?” she asks.

I shake my head slowly.

“Do you love him?” My mother looks at me. There is something shapeless about her face, like her bones have softened with age. It is sad and moving to me that my mother should be the one person who loves me most on this earth.

“I don’t know,” I answer.

“Oh, Amelia,” my mother says. The clock above the mantel chimes, its sound blurred and unnaturally sweet, as it echoes along the walls of our house.

At night, I hear my mother calling my name. It is three or four in the morning. I stumble to her room, my head full of sleep. I can’t help it but I am annoyed at being woken up. *Selfish*, my mother would say to me when I was a child. I go to her bedroom and find her sitting up against her pillows. The only light in the room comes from the small lamp on her night table.

“I don’t feel well,” she says. “My heart is racing.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I feel so nervous.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “You’re going to be fine.”

“My mouth is so dry.”
“Where is your medicine?” I ask.

“In my purse.”

I go downstairs and return with two pills and a glass of water. She takes them from me as if she can barely summon the strength for motion, swallowing them slowly one by one. The first time my mother had a panic attack, I called 911. The paramedics arrived and found her vital signs normal. She seems perfectly fine, they said. My mother insisted that her heart had been racing, that she had been seized with the fear that she was going to die.

She looks at me now, her lips pale. She wants my sympathy. “My hands and feet are so cold,” she says. “I don’t understand it.”

I sit on the edge of her bed. “Would you like some hot tea?” I ask. “Another blanket?”

“No,” she says.

My body hungers for sleep. I can’t resist stretching myself out along the foot of her bed, closing my eyes.

“If I die, I want you to take good care of yourself,” my mother says.

“You’re not going to die.”

My mother is silent.

“Why do you always think you’re going to die?” I say.

“One has to die sometime.” She pulls at the blanket impatiently. “Why don’t you go back to bed? I’m feeling better now, so you can go back to sleep.”

“I can’t move.” I press my face deeper into her blanket.

“I will never understand why I get these attacks,” my mother says.
“They’re irrational. Everyone is afraid of dying.”

“It’s worse when I’m alone,” my mother says. “My greatest fear is to die when I am alone.”

Driving back to Philadelphia in the rain, I notice a billboard along the highway. Stark white letters against a black background:

I don’t question your existence.

—God

I begin to laugh, but then I see the next billboard. In big bright red letters, I read:

Abortion increases the risk of breast cancer.

A silvery blue Mercedes honks at me, and I notice that my car has drifted into the next lane. I jerk the wheel, and my car swerves to the right. The road is slippery and wrinkled. The wind and rain slap and hiss against my windshield. I pull over on the side of the road, and the car behind me blares its horn as it passes by.

I sit inside the humming car, both hands gripped on the steering wheel. I listen to the splashing rain, though I can only see a blur of lights from the window. The past few days, I have begun to feel gaseous and constipated. My stomach seems to have formed into a hard lump. I wonder if it is indigestion, a trick of the mind. Perhaps the fetus is
already dead, hardening inside me. The heater blows its dry breath along my cheeks. I don't know what to do, so I wait in the car, the world glassy and smeared from the inside.

I arrive at my apartment late at night. Garrett has been waiting up for me, sitting on the couch. My cat sits beside him on the armrest, his two front paws curled inward. He stands up when he sees me, meows plaintively. For some reason, he looks unfamiliar, like he has just gotten a new haircut.

"I have something to tell you," I say to Garrett.

"Same here," he says. "Some bad news, I'm afraid."

I look at Garrett in panic. "What? What is it?" I think about my mother even though I left her only two hours ago.

"Your cat has been bad," Garrett says.

"Oh, has he?" I smile, scratching Manny's head, massaging near the ears. "What did he do?"

"The fish," he says. "It's no longer with us."

"What?" I say.

"It's gone. It's disappeared. I came back from work and the lid had been knocked off the tank."

I drop my cat on the floor, rush to the fish tank. It's empty except for the water.

"Manny, what did you do?" I say to the cat.

"Manny is a murderer," Garrett says.
“Oh,” I say, sinking to the couch. My body slides slowly, until I am lying down, my face pressed against his lap.

“Poor Amelia,” he says, stroking my hair.

I laugh and then begin to cry. The world has become watery, I can barely discern my cat as he begins to meow at me. “Manny the Murderer,” I tell him, pushing him away. I remember the fish when I first saw it, sitting in its plastic cup. I thought that I had been doing it a favor when I bought it.

“It’s only a fish,” Garrett says.

“I know that,” I say.
Perfect Day

My younger sister, Winnie, is sifting through photographs of her wedding. She knows them by heart and rages at the misplaced hand or insincere smile. In a series of six photographs where the family is posed in front of a blossoming cherry tree, my mother flutters her eyes like an epileptic. Everyone else looks just fine.

“Too bad that one person can ruin the entire thing,” Winnie says.

After consulting with her photographer, Winnie has decided to cut off our mother’s head and replace it with a more attractive version from another photograph. I can’t say that I’m surprised. Though Winnie was married in June – almost nine months ago – she still wants everything about her wedding day to be perfect. If she’s not writing thank-you cards, then she’s looking through photographs trying to decide which ones will go into her wedding album. Now in our parents’ house, she places three photographs in front of me on the glass table. “Which do you like best?” she asks.

The pictures depict the same subject – four bridesmaids (including myself) flocked around the bride with the same flowering tree in the background. My sister looks her gracious self in each one, her lips curving in a beatific smile. She wears a silk-satin dress that drops in stately, opalescent folds, and her bouquet of white roses floats along her wrist. Gathered around her, we bridesmaids look pleasingly banal and overfed, far too solid in our flimsy dresses of watery lavender. We fidget and blink and forget to
smile, standing with lopsided shoulders, revealing a loose bra strap as we lean over toward the bride. It's like we can't contain our defects of soul before the probing eye of the camera. I look at myself in particular. In one photograph, my mouth is parted in an obscene grin. There is a maniacal glint in my eye. It's clear to me now that I'm wearing too much eye shadow, my eyes turned into bruised slits. At the time, I thought I looked nice. I preened in front of the mirror, adding an extra layer of powder to a face relentlessly secreting its oils. Striving for beauty and ending up a clown. Photographs reveal just how ugly you really are to people.

"They all look the same to me," I say, handing the photos back.

"You're no help at all," Winnie replies.

My family, I think, was in a state of shock when the wedding was finally over. Winnie and George flew off to Hawaii, while the rest of us were left behind with exquisite bunches of flowers and a feeling of emptiness. We had all been participants in a year of excruciating details. The appointed day had finally arrived, unfolding in a flurry of rose petals and synchronized splendor. When I saw my sister walking down the aisle on my father's arm — a dream, a vision in white — I began to cry at the perfect, moving fantasy of it all. Whispering to my dry-eyed mother for a tissue, I watched as my sister floated down the grassy aisle to the tune of Pachelbel's *Canon in D*.

And then it was over. We could hardly believe it. The day had been perfect, no one could have desired anything more beautiful. And yet it was over, we had to reinsert ourselves back into reality. The morning after, my parents and I languished in our separate beds — our feet sore, our hair stiff and tangled. We pressed our faces deeper into cool, ghostly pillows. When we finally surfaced into the bland light of morning, we
talked about the wedding in a kind of lewd groping. My father began to spend each night in the family room watching Winnie's wedding video. "Look at Mrs. Hsu dancing!" he would shout to me or my mother upstairs. "Look! Now they're cutting the cake! Don't you want to see them cutting the cake?" After a month of this behavior, he finally put the video to rest. But now with another wedding in the air, the videotape has been resurrected and will be shown this weekend for the benefit of the poker crowd. "Mr. Chang wants me to make a copy so he can show Florence," my father says to me after Winnie has left. "I don't think Florence will be able to beat Winnie's wedding though. It will be hard, don't you think?"

"I think Winnie has better taste than Florence," I say.

"That's right," my father says. "No one will be able to have a better wedding than Winnie."

In this respect, I have to agree. Though Florence is my childhood friend, one inevitably has to side with one's own blood.

As I am turning thirty in April, my mother is worried about my spinster status. No fresh-skinned, frolicking damsel am I. "Wandanlema!" she says, which in Chinese means "Uh-oh! A broken egg!" The expression has the same connotations for me as the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme. Once the wrinkles form and the breasts sag, no amount of skin-repair lotion or plastic surgery will put you back together again.

So even though I started dating Eric only three months ago, it doesn't surprise me that my mother should call me up and begin talking about marriage. "Is he serious?" she
asks. “Do you think he will marry you? I just want to know if this is a long-term relationship.”

“I don’t know!” I say. “I thought you wanted me to marry a Chinese guy.”

“I can’t afford to be too picky.”

“Well, what if he’s Jewish?”

“Eric is Jewish?” My mother pauses for a moment. “Jewish is fine,” she says.

“What about high school?” I say. “In high school, you told me never to marry a Jewish guy.”

“Don’t be silly, he’s a doctor, right? Daddy and I were thinking we could meet him for lunch on Sunday. I made a reservation at Aubergine. Noon. I hope Eric likes eggplant.” I hear a click as my mother hangs up the phone.

When I tell Eric, he gets a vague, faraway look in his eyes. “Don’t worry,” I say. “They’re not that bad.”

“Who says I’m worried?” he replies.

“You just look kind of unhappy.”


“Okay,” I say. “I’m glad you’re taking it so well.”

I see Eric mostly on the weekends. It is a weekend-type relationship. He’s an intern at Jefferson Hospital and works crazy hours, usually on-call every third night. During the week, he will call me late at night to tell me about a woman’s finger falling off or how he saw tiny delicate mushrooms sprouting from a man’s open abdominal
wound ("They looked like shitakes"). Sometimes, in the middle of one of his stories, he’ll drop off mid-sentence. "Eric?" I say, but there will be no response.

"Eric!"

"Yeah," he’ll mutter. "Is the person breathing? Can you feel a pulse?"

His life is so different from my own. I sometimes wonder what it would be like to live a perpetual drama like that. To see people in the most extreme situations – on the brink of death no less! – surrounded by distraught, weeping families. The most I ever see at work are two people squabbling in front of the photocopier. Sometimes, I hear about an assistant sleeping with one of the vice presidents of the bank. But mostly, it’s a bunch of lower-rung employees like myself sitting in the lunchroom, complaining about how we have to pay to use the water cooler.

So I am involved in another wedding. At first, I was just a bridesmaid but then Florence called me up on Saturday and promoted me to maid of honor. She is getting married in three months and her faith in Anne (the original maid of honor) is slipping. Anne is just not providing her with enough support – Anne, who couldn’t even remember the day she was getting married.

“She didn’t even bother to read my card,” Florence complains.

“They were really nice cards,” I say.

“And then you know what she said? She asked me when I was going to have the bridal shower! I couldn’t believe it. ‘You want me to plan that too?’ I said. Anyway, I want you to be my maid of honor now. I feel stupid that I didn’t ask you in the first
place. Anne still thinks she’s the maid of honor, but I just want to let you know that you will be the *real* maid of honor.


“I hope you’re not offended that I didn’t pick you first. These choices get very political, but they aren’t meant to be. I chose Anne because I remembered you didn’t enjoy being in Winnie’s wedding.”

“Did I give that impression?”


“Oh, well, I didn’t mean it like that,” I say.

Florence then asks me if I can come over to her parents’ house next week to discuss ideas for party favors. “Bring a list of your ideas,” she says, before hanging up.

After talking to Florence, I call up Anne in New York. She’s a financial analyst and when she answers the phone, she utters her name – Anne Liu – in a curt monotone, like she doesn’t want to talk to you.

“Guess what?” I say.

“I know,” Anne says. “I’m totally in the doghouse.”

“So why did you ask about the bridal shower?”

“I was trying to sound excited. Since when was Florence so touchy?”

“Shes going to be a bride.”

“No kidding,” Anne says. “Why do brides always lose their fucking sense of proportion?”

“It’s their day to shine. It’s supposed to be the happiest day of their life.”
"What a joke," Anne says.

We pause, savoring the acid taste on our tongues. Anne and I like to cut people down until we feel cleansed. "So how do you think you’re getting married someday?" I ask. I expect her to answer city hall. Something sane and no-nonsense.

"Well, I’ve always wanted to get married abroad," Anne says. "Like in France or Italy. It’s important for me to be married in a historical setting. A charming little castle, say."

I laugh at that one. "That doesn’t sound too extravagant."

"Hey, we’re all entitled to our own fantasies, okay?"

"Fine. Just don’t ask me to be your bridesmaid."

"Sure thing."

I don’t tell Anne that I don’t think I will ever get married. At heart, I feel like a spinster, and when I think about it, it’s not such a bad thing. To be a bride means to be vain, ostentatious, extravagant, and small-minded. My being cannot fit into a frothy, fairy-tale dress. Instead, I want to crawl unnoticed along papery walls, I want to retire into a corner balancing on perishable threads. There is something more truthful about being a spinster.

On Sunday, Eric and I meet my parents for lunch. Winnie and George are there too in order to provide relief. When we arrive, I see all four of them standing in front of Aubergine, my father gesturing excitedly with his arms, his eyebrows lifted for emphasis, as George, the sober, Polo-shirted son-in-law, nods in sympathy. Winnie hangs back,
watching them with a bored expression. Her arms are crossed over her chest, and she slouches like a tall, drooping mermaid. The only person who sees us approaching is my mother. She is overdressed, wearing a shimmery white suit with a sea-green scarf draped over her shoulders. At her throat is a string of pearls with a clear, dark amethyst hanging in the center. Her eyes take on a hushed stillness, an intense fixity of gaze as she turns and looks at Eric.

“So nice to meet you, Eric,” she says, touching his hand. On an impulse, she leans over to kiss his cheek. Eric is startled and turns his face suddenly so that her lips land on his ear. Both of them laugh uneasily, and then it’s my father’s turn. He grins at Eric, showing perfectly straight teeth – “No braces!” he likes to brag, though my mother insists that most of his teeth are false. He shakes Eric’s hand vigorously and even pats him on the shoulder.

The interior of the restaurant is dimly lit with obscure purple walls. We follow our hostess to the back, and it is like we are feeling our way through a cave. I shiver and rub my hands along the backs of my arms. “You’re cold?” Winnie accuses as we settle into our seats.

George shakes loose his napkin. “I hear you work at Jefferson,” he says to Eric.

“That’s right.”

“I’m a resident at Hopkins.”

“June told me,” Eric says. “Dermatology, right?”

“You bet.”

“George,” my mother says, pushing up her sleeve. “Do you think this bump here is unusual?”
“Mom,” I say.

“It’s okay,” George says. He is a tolerant son-in-law, though he has told Winnie in private that he thinks our mother is crazy.

I steal a glance at Eric who is studying his menu. “Do you know what you want?” I ask quietly.

“I’m thinking of the moussaka,” he says. But he doesn’t turn to look at me.

“The bump seems to be from some minor trauma,” George pronounces.

“It’s a bruise!” Winnie says.

“Eric, you’re doing internal medicine, right?” my mother asks, pulling down her sleeve. I stiffen in my seat, afraid she will ask about her racing heart or gastrointestinal pain. “Our family is full of doctors, though these two,” she points her finger at Winnie and me, “were not interested in medicine. But all my brothers back in Taiwan are doctors.”

“Really?” Eric says.

“Yes, they are all obstetricians. This one,” she points to my father’s head, “almost became a doctor, but he missed it by a few points on the entrance exam. So now he’s an engineer.”

My father laughs, widening his eyes. “If I’d scored just two points higher,” he says.

“Imagine Dad as a doctor!” Winnie turns a petulant face to George who can’t resist and gives her a quick peck on the forehead.

“In Taiwan, one exam can decide your entire life,” my mother says.
"I'm glad – glad that I'm not a doctor!" my father declares. “Such a hard life you have to live!” His speech is becoming slightly unintelligible because he is excited now. “Though doctors are always welcome in our family!” He laughs, flashing his teeth at Eric, winking at George.

“Aiya! Don’t be so obvious,” my mother says in Chinese to my father. “There is something coming out of the side of your mouth.”

Winnie and George can barely repress their laughter now. My father hurriedly dabs his mouth with the corner of his napkin. Eric is looking at me, wondering what my mother has just said. I am frozen in place, my head suddenly heavy, drooping toward the edge of the table.

When the waitress comes to take our order, my mother asks if they salt their eggplants. “I’m watching my blood pressure,” she says.

“I don’t think so,” the waitress replies.

“It’s a myth, you know,” my mother says. “Salt doesn’t get rid of the bitterness. If the eggplants are old, they stay bitter.”

On the back of my menu is a short history of the eggplant. In the sixteenth century, Europeans were afraid to eat eggplant because they believed it caused madness. It was used as an ingredient in love potions in order to inspire the most exalted form of madness, and the Spaniards called it ‘apple of love’ . . .

I imagine Eric stuffing his mouth with moussaka. How nice if love could be ingested.
My father took a photograph of me and Florence playing together when we were four years old. I am standing up next to the coffee table, looking at a plastic yellow and orange helicopter in my hands. Florence is sitting on the ground in a blue dress, white stockings, and black-buckled shoes. Her hair is smooth and flat reaching just below her ears. She gazes at the camera with quiet prescience. In the background, you can see the edge of my mother’s head as she tries to console Winnie whose face is a red explosion of anger, four fingers jammed into her mouth. I remember this photo as I sit in the Changs’ house. Florence is talking about party favors for her wedding. “I want it to be something special,” she says, “something that people can put on their bookshelves.” She looks at me, and I nod in agreement. “When people see it, I want them to think of my wedding.”

“So I guess chocolates won’t do,” I say.

Florence laughs lightly. A know-it-all, moneyed laugh. “Chocolate is not an option,” she says.

I cross out number one – small Godiva box – on my list entitled “Party Favor Ideas for Florence’s Wedding.” Other ideas on my list include little bags of jelly beans, arrangements of miniature dried flowers, soap bubbles, a pair of engraved chopsticks (one that says “Florence” and the other “Donald”), and different-flavored condoms. The last is a joke, but Florence’s face is tight as she smiles. I cross out the condoms and the jelly beans as they are both perishable items.

“I like your idea of the chopsticks,” Florence says in a moderate tone of voice, not wanting to hurt my feelings but also not wanting to encourage me with too much enthusiasm.
“I got the idea from Winnie,” I say. As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I realize that I’ve killed the idea for Florence. She is not interested in using ideas that another person has discarded.

Florence has changed since I knew her as a young girl. When we were growing up, she reminded me of a grasshopper with her thin, brown legs. Up until high school, she wore thick glasses that didn’t break if she dropped them. We saw each other every Friday or Saturday night because our parents played poker together. She was quiet and pliable then, and it is strange for me to remember how I used to boss her around when she came over to my house.

“What do you think of the idea of a little teapot?” Florence asks me.

“What do you mean?” I say.

“Well, I could customize a teapot. Choose a pretty design to go on the front. You know, something pretty from a Chinese painting —” Florence spreads her hand out professionally in the air with its curved white fingernails. “Maybe I could find a Chinese poem about weddings —”

“Where would you get the teapot?” I ask.

“There must be a manufacturer who does them in bulk.”

“It’s creative,” I say, “but wouldn’t it get too expensive?”

Florence cocks her head. “Maybe,” she says crisply. Florence’s nails are pointed and elegant, and I look at her ring – the diamond twice as large as Winnie’s – two carats, Florence says, and on the scale of diamonds, an E in color and brightness. When we were kids, Florence and I used to bang out duets on the piano together, and I remember she never cut her nails because her piano teacher was not as strict as mine. I would watch
her tiny fingers racing along the polished keys, listening to the tap and click of her nails. She played too light and fast, in a careless way that was also confident. That was the way she drove her car too, forgetful, without a conscience, her foot pressed smoothly down on the accelerator.

Florence won’t tell me how much money Donald makes, though she concedes that he does very well. My mother is baffled by Florence’s good fortune. “Why is she so lucky?” she says. “She’s not that attractive. What does someone like Donald see in her?”

“Well, what’s so great about Donald?” I reply.

“He’s tall and handsome.”

“Handsome?” I say.

“Well, he’s tall which is the same as handsome,” my mother says. “And he’s rich.” She lets out a little sigh. “If only you and Anne were so lucky.”

I think about Florence and about money, how one day Mrs. Chang will buy a mink coat, and how the next week my mother will follow suit. When my parents sold their house in Reston and bought a bigger house in Falls Church, Florence’s parents copied them, going so far as to move into the same neighborhood. It’s always been like that for everything. Who owns the nicest car. Which child can go to the best college. Which daughter can have the most beautiful wedding. Each family tries to outdo the other, the stakes getting higher and higher, just like the last round of a poker game when passions are high and everyone is losing their mind, flinging the last of their money into the pot.
"I don’t understand how you and the Changs can be friends," I say to my mother. "All you do is show off to each other. How can you be friends with people who want to win your money every weekend?"

"It’s a friendly game," my mother says. "The money isn’t lost, we’re just circulating it between us from one week to the next."

Still it’s a kind of friendship that I’ve always failed to comprehend. With Florence getting married, however, I’m beginning to see how insidious our parents’ language is.

"Can you come over next weekend?" Florence asks. "The caterer is going to give us a preview of the menu. There is the most wonderful dish — Chilean sea bass in a ginger sauce — that just melts in your mouth. Donald and I tried it in Colorado during our ski trip, and my caterer is going to make it for us on Sunday. . ."

It’s Friday night, and I’m waiting for Eric outside of Dmitri’s. The hostess tells me it will be a half hour until we are seated. I watch the cars go by, listening to a group of young professionals chatter about Sandra Bullock, digital cameras, and the nightclub that collapsed along the pier. The men look casual and suave standing around with their hands in their pockets. The women smooth their hair behind their ears, their purses dangling from their wrists as they laugh. I note their sexy black sandals, their toes painted light blue or honey red. It is an entrancing scene full of hormonal drama though it doesn’t seem subtle, which is probably why I’ve always been so bad at it. I remember
Anne advising me once over the phone when I complained to her about my nonexistent love life.

"You need to flirt, June," she said.

"Flirt," I said. "Do you mean I need to giggle?"

"Exactly," Anne said. "Men are more at ease with women who giggle."

This was all very depressing to hear. I had always imagined my ice maiden act to be mysterious and quietly alluring.

"No," Anne said, "you’re just being a wallflower."

"I can’t do giggling," I said.

"Better start trying," Anne replied.

I spot Eric walking toward me on the other side of the street. He has a soft, abstract air which I first thought was poetical, but which I’ve come to realize is due to his near-sightedness, when he doesn’t feel like wearing his glasses.

"Hey," he says in greeting, bending over me. Our lips touch – I am looking at some point beyond his head – and it is a brief glancing of skins, without a hint of moisture. He sits beside me and we watch the people pass by on the sidewalk, the cars inching out of spaces. The sky is gray, with one or two stars peeping through, paled from city lights. It is a warm night and we sit on the bench, holding hands like we are a real couple. Anyone seeing us would think that. I lean my head against his shoulder, Eric puts his arm around me, and I wonder if the women in front of us think we’re in love.

In the restaurant, Eric tells me about a patient hospitalized with pneumonia. "She told us that when she coughs too hard, she’s afraid of breaking a rib," he says.

"Have you ever broken a bone?" I ask.
“Never.”

“I’ve broken a finger. Winnie slammed the car door on it.”

Eric lifts his brows. “Deliberately?”

“She claims she didn’t see it.” I take a sip of my wine and then lean back in my chair. I watch as Eric cuts his steak. There’s something fluid and passionate about the way he eats. A kind of obliviousness which I envy.

“Do you think I’m a healthy person?” I ask him.

“As far as I know,” he smiles.

“I lack that critical enzyme which allows me to digest alcohol,” I say. “I drink only a teeny-weeny bit, and I end up looking like I have sunburn. I want to be able to drink without people knowing. But my face turns red as a lobster.”

“Drink alone,” Eric says.

“That’s depressing.” I study the surface of my wine. Already I can feel my cheeks beginning to burn. “It’s awful how my face gives me away every time.”

“It’s not a serious medical condition.”

I pour myself another glass. “No. Thank God for that.”

Outside, Eric grabs hold of my waist when I stumble against the pavement. “The sidewalks are crooked,” I tell him.

“You really do lack that enzyme,” he says. I lean against his shoulder and close my eyes as I walk. I feel a dizzy rush, letting him steer me through the narrow streets. When I open my eyes again, the streets are alive with smoke, the stars glittering obscenely. I notice we are a few blocks away from his apartment. I wrap both of my arms around his neck, making him stop.
“June – ” Eric says.

“I don’t want to move,” I say, resting my face against his chest. I listen to the quiet thrum of his heart.

“We’re almost there,” Eric says. He pauses for a moment. “We can’t just stand here.” When he touches my wrists, my arms loosen and slide off his body.

In his apartment, there is a strong odor of gas. “Your apartment is about to explode,” I tell him.

“I don’t smell anything,” Eric says.

“How can you not smell it?”

Eric goes to the bathroom to brush his teeth, and my mind goes blank as I stand there in the middle of his apartment. After a moment, I notice that I’m shivering. I crawl into his bed and wrap myself in his blankets like a cocoon.

Eric comes out of the bathroom, flicking off the light. He reaches for me in the darkness, smelling of mint and soap. He fingers the sleeve of my shirt. “You still have this on?” he murmurs.

“What time do you have to wake up?” I ask.

“Five,” he says.

I think how the windows will still be dark when he gets up tomorrow. I will huddle underneath the blankets, feeling the sickness of morning in my stomach, as I listen to him taking a shower. He will think I’m still asleep. Perhaps he will touch my hair before he leaves. When he’s gone, I’ll reach out to feel the cold emptiness of the bed, waiting for the windows to let through a whisper of light. In an hour, I’ll get up, slip into my clothes, locking the door behind me. Walking back to my apartment, I will like that
I’ve just had sex, and when men pass by, I’ll wonder if they can tell looking at my wrinkled clothes.

I am trying on a dress that is so narrow, my arms are half-stuck in the air and all I can see is a filmy gauze. I turn my back and wiggle my arms, and the cloth moves an inch along my spine. When I pull down hard, I’m afraid the seams will rip. “How is it going in there?” Florence asks from outside.

“Okay,” I say.

“Florence!” Anne calls from the dressing room beside mine. “Could you come in here for a sec?”

I get my arms through, and the dress crawls into place along my body. It is a pearly gray sheen, a thin grasping material that reveals the lumpy contours of my stomach. I suck in my stomach and open the door. Florence and Anne are standing in front of the three-way mirror. Anne is peeved because she is too short for the dress, and Florence is folding it under to see how it will look when altered.

“This dress is the pits,” Anne says. “I look like the Pillsbury Dough Boy.”

“They aren’t that flattering,” I agree.

Florence appraises each of us in turn, her head tilted to the side. “They’re not too bad,” she says. “I kind of like them.”

Anne and I glance at each other. “I’m all dressed out,” Anne says. “Let’s get coffee or something.”
Inside the mall, we get our coffee and sit down at one of the tables beside the artificially cultivated palm trees. "So what colors did you like best?" Florence asks us. "I can’t order the flowers until I know the color of your dresses. It sets the tone for the rest of the wedding."

"How about black?" Anne says. "Lime green?"

Florence’s face falls, and I can’t help but feel sorry for her. Anne and I must seem entirely inept to her. We don’t gush, we don’t cheerlead. We aren’t interested in the wedding as she would like us to be.

"I think champagne would be lovely," I say.

"Champagne’s not bad," Anne concedes.

Florence straightens the gold chain around her throat, and I notice her jade pendant is missing. She never took it off in high school because she said the jade turned greener the longer it stayed against her skin. Florence was quiet and understated while Anne was effervescent rather than acidic. Both have evolved since then, sharper on the edges, more clearly defined.

Florence’s cell phone rings. "It’s Donald," she smiles. She gets up and walks over to a less crowded area, talking with one finger stuck in her ear.

"They call each other every minute of the day," Anne observes.

"My mom says we should be jealous."


"Eric?" I say. "Oh, Eric’s busy." A group of teenage girls pass by in front of us. They have slim, ballerina-type bodies and they wear two-inch platform shoes and pants that flare out at the bottom. "Were we that stylish in high school?" I ask.
“It was the ‘80’s,” Anne says. “We wore stirrup pants and fluorescent sweaters.”

We drink our coffee in silence. Anne leans back in her chair, and we both watch Florence as she nods and laughs over the phone.

Eric is cutting his pancakes in a haphazard way. He eats quickly with careless grace. It’s not often that I get to have breakfast with him. We’re in a crowded diner on Spruce Street and we’re going to be spending the entire day together.

“So what do you want to do?” he asks me.

“I don’t know,” I say. I move the eggs around on my plate. I never feel hungry in his presence. “What do you feel like doing?”

He looks at me with an annoyed expression. “Don’t you have any ideas?”

“We could go to a museum—”

“I don’t feel like hanging around a museum on my day off.”

“Well, you decide then,” I say.

“We could ride our bikes to Valley Forge.”

“We could do that.”

Eric is silent for a moment. “You always give in to what I want to do,” he says.

“What do you mean by that?” I say.

“You always defer to my opinion because you want things to go smoothly between us.”

I stare at him, the fork still raised in my hand, but I don’t say anything.
Eric finishes his pancakes and we wait for the waitress to come by with the bill.

"Let me get this," he says, reaching for his wallet.

"No, I’ll pay," I say.

"June—"

"I insist." I throw the money down on the table like it’s dirty.

Outside, in the middle of the street, I turn and face him. "I don’t want to spend my day with you.”

"Do you want to talk about this?”

"No, I’m going home."

"I think we need to talk," he says.

I shrug and follow him to Rittenhouse Square where we sit down on one of the benches. The last time we were here, Eric held my hand loosely, like it was something he had forgotten. Even then, I knew he didn’t care.

"We’re just too incompatible," Eric says to me.

"That’s true," I say. I stare at the pigeons which coo and waddle, displaying their slick, iridescent coats. A woman throws the crusts of her bread to the ground, and the pigeons flutter their wings, fighting and pecking, swallowing the morsels whole. Greedy and fat and mindless. I think about how all of us gathered around Florence, giving little ooohs and aaahs, flapping our wings, when she showed us her diamond ring.

"It’s just not working," Eric says.

"Are you breaking up with me?" I ask.

Eric looks at me for a moment. "Yes, I guess I am," he says.

"That’s great!" I say. "I can’t wait to tell my parents."
“Is that what you’re worried about?” Eric demands. “That’s what you care about really, isn’t it? It doesn’t have to do with me at all. You just want someone to show around, for appearance’s sake.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I was really looking forward to having a date at Florence’s wedding.”

Eric crosses his arms over his chest, and I can tell he wants to move as far away from me as possible on the bench. We sit in silence like that for a while. I stare at the ground which is sprinkled with tiny yellow blossoms. When the wind blows, the flowers drop to the ground, heavy as rain. The paths look like they are dusted with pollen, and more than anything, I wish I could get up and leave.

“It’s sad how things have to end,” Eric says.

“Yeah,” I say.

“Were you thinking something different?” Eric asks. “Did you think it was going to last?”

“No,” I say. “No, of course I didn’t.”

“Because it always seemed to me that you didn’t want to talk about this. Like if I never said anything at all, things would remain the same.”

“You don’t like who I am,” I say. My face is lowered so that all I can see are the buttons of my shirt. The rest of my body has become a blur. I can hear birds twittering, the murmurs of people going by. The noise makes me feel separate like the ocean is sounding in my ears. I cannot tell him that I am afraid to be alone. Eric touches my shoulder, and when I look up, I want to say something, but he is already standing up from the bench.
"You take care, June," he says. Then he turns and walks away.

At Florence’s wedding, Mrs. Hsu compliments me on my figure. "You look thinner," she says. "Have you been on a diet?"

"No," I say.

"Don’t you have a boyfriend?" she asks me. "Where is he?"

"We broke up a week ago," I tell her.

"Oh, I’m so sorry!" she flutters.

"That’s okay," I say.

"We’ll have to find you someone else then. There must be someone here —"

I smile and turn away. I walk over to the lawn where the photographer is taking pictures of Florence and her family. In a short while, my mother joins me.

"What’s this I hear?" she says. "You said Eric couldn’t come today because he has to work. But Mrs. Hsu just told me that you broke up!"

"That’s right," I say.

"What!" she exclaims.

"You heard me."

My mother stares at me.

"It wasn’t working," I say. "We began to realize how much we hated each other."

"But I saw him only a month ago, and you two looked happy together."

"We were just pretending."
My mother is silent, but I know this can’t last for too long. “What happened?” she finally bursts. I look at my mother in her exquisite suit from Neimann Marcus, her hair newly curled like a poodle’s. It bothers me intensely that when the wind blows, her hair doesn’t seem to move.

“I’d rather not talk about this right now,” I say.

She takes hold of my arm, kisses me on the cheek. “Okay, later then. You look so pretty today.”

When the photographer is finished taking pictures of Florence’s family, he asks the bridesmaids to pose with Florence in front of the rose garden. There are six of us in yellow chiffon dresses. I was too cheap to get my dress altered and as a result, the straps keep sliding off my shoulders. As soon as I pull one up, the other strap falls down.

“You need to get that fixed,” Florence says, looking at me out of the corner of her eye. She can’t turn her head because the photographer’s assistant is arranging her veil. “Sandy!” she calls. The wedding coordinator rushes up to her. “Sandy, do you have a needle and thread?”

“It’s okay,” I say, flushing, but Sandy is already examining my loose straps.

“Sit down,” she says. She folds the slack end of one strap and begins sewing.

“We don’t want you to fall out of your dress,” Florence says.

When Sandy is finished, the photographer arranges all of us around Florence. “Look here, ladies!” he says between flashes of the camera. “Big smile, ladies!” Some of the guests gather around to watch. A man whistles at us, and a few of the bridesmaids laugh. Off to the side, I see Winnie leaning against George’s arm, looking up at the sky as she swings her purse back and forth.
We return to the dressing room for one last puff of powder, one last dab of lipstick. The bride is in her Cinderella gown with crystals in her hair, a tiara crowned on her forehead. “You look so beautiful!” we coo to each other. Coo, coo, cooing. From our open window, we can hear the excited murmur of guests, the slow winding of the violins.

We compose ourselves and file out of the mansion in single file. The sun weaves fitfully in and out of the clouds. The grass is vibrant yet lurid as in a dream. We wait for the wedding coordinator’s cue to begin sauntering down the aisle. Sandy taps the first of us, and one by one we descend the path, as people turn and stare and snap photos. Surely we move the heart with an inch of makeup caked onto our faces, our hair bundled high as honeycombs.

Now the wedding march strikes up and all heads turn to gape at the lovely bride as she smiles and is led down the aisle on her father’s arm. She seems to float down the grassy path even as a rain drop falls on my arm. I turn my head towards Anne, and she raises her eyebrows at the sky. The drops barely touch the skin, as light as kisses along my cheeks, the back of my neck. The bride continues to smile as her father leads her down the aisle. The silence gathers as they stop in front of the justice of the peace, the rain drops getting rounder and thicker, until I can see them plopping along the bride’s forehead, sliding down her nose. When her father kisses her cheek, I almost imagine Florence’s lip beginning to quiver.

“Welcome one and all. A little rain to bless this day!” the justice says. A nervous titter goes through the crowd, though by now the rain has become a consistent patter. A black umbrella has gone up in the crowd, and some ladies are covering their hair with the
programs. "On this occasion, Donald and Florence come before family and friends to affirm the choice that they have made for the fulfillment of life together. We have gathered here today to help give them added life to their union, but in doing so, we realize that this outward act is but a symbol of that which is inward and real..."

More umbrellas have blossomed ominously. The justice's voice, which began in a leisurely twang, begins to pick up speed as the rain falls faster. In spite of my hair feeling like a spider's web, stiff and sticky from hairspray, a hard little curl comes undone, falls in front of my eye. I let it hang there, but I feel as if the precarious creation that is my hair cannot stand the assault of nature.

"To be loved is to know happiness and contentment. To give love is to know the joy of sharing oneself. For it is through the miracle of love that we discover the fullness of life..." The rain is pouring down now. It is dawning on all of us that the rain cannot be ignored, the illusion cannot be sustained. The justice stops his speech and bends over to whisper to Florence and Donald. Florence's head is bowed as she nods slowly. "We have decided to postpone the ceremony," the justice announces, raising his voice above the wind and rain. "All of you are invited to find shelter under the tent."

In a second, everyone is up and out of their seat, a mass exodus rushing across the garden to the white tent in the middle of the grounds. "Are you okay?" I ask Florence, but she is swept along by Donald and her parents and doesn't hear me. Anne and I trudge behind them, drenched and sopping. I can see Anne's blue-flowered underwear peeking through the light fabric of her dress. We have become obscene, our makeup melting along our faces in crayon colors. The rain is disintegrating us.

"I can't believe this is happening!" Anne shouts.
I nod. It is a surreal moment, full of misery and disorder, yet it is reality as well. It can’t get any more real than this. We lift our dresses, stepping through the drowned and muddy grass. The rain slashes down, the wind pushing me along, making me stumble. I feel like I am in the eye of a hurricane. People are running now, galloping across the field in mad disarray. My dress is plastered along my body – *you look thinner, June, are you on a diet?* – the dress is soaked through, making it hard to move, but the wind propels me forward. Florence looks like a soaked swan as Donald holds her hand leading her through the mud. Florence’s mother holds the veil in back, her face grimly set, and the veil flaps and writhes in the wind like a terrible serpent.

The wind pushes me and I slip. For an instant, I see the ground rushing towards me, and then I feel my hands touching earth. “Are you okay?” Anne shouts above the wind. I gaze at her, blinking, the world tilted on its side. The rain is sliding down both our faces. My dress is torn, twisted along the side, but I don’t care anymore how I look. When Anne offers me her hand, I stay where I am, sinking deeper into the grass.
Marcy’s hair was loosening from her scalp. She scooped up fistfuls clotted with soap from the bathtub drain. Andrew’s faith in their two-year relationship was on the decline, like an investor with a plunging stock on his hands. He had written up a fifteen-page exam, 75 multiple-choice questions. “I want to see if you know who I am,” he said. A passing score was 87. 65 correct answers. Marcy broke the seal with her thumb and took the exam lying down on her couch, listening to Puccini arias and sipping red wine.

There were the standard questions. What is my favorite color? Who is my favorite actress? If I could be an animal, what animal would I be? There was a section devoted to his allergies. If I ate a mango, which of the following would happen? a) my throat would itch  b) my lip would break out  c) my skin would become jaundiced  d) all of the above. He asked her the name of the golden retriever he had as a child. The number of fillings in his mouth. The musician that he considered most devoid of talent.

The questions grew more difficult as the night progressed. How would you describe the shape of my birthmark? What do I think of Kant’s categorical imperative? Who was holding a gun in my dream last Wednesday? Marcy flipped the page, poured herself another glass of wine.

By the thirteenth page, Marcy’s head hurt. She felt her brain contracting like one of those wrinkled apples she kept too long in the refrigerator. She had never liked red
wine – not really – and she felt its bitterness diffusing into her blood. She began circling the wrong answers. *What is my favorite Beethoven symphony?* Seventh, Marcy answered. Even though she knew Andrew hated the seventh. *Which word best describes my belief system?* She crossed out all the words listed – *aesthetic, existential, moral, religious* – and wrote in capital letters: **NARCISSISTIC.**

The print was beginning to blur and recede. Marcy closed her eyes, listening to Anna Moffo sing about Doretta’s beautiful dream. *Folle amore! Folle ebbrezza!* The notes swelling in Moffo’s throat, like a bird was caught there, trying to escape. How beautiful it all was! How different things would be if she could sing! Marcy had wanted to love and to be loved, but she and Andrew always ended squabbling about things. They argued about their friends, about books and movies, about the shoes Marcy wore, and the definitions of words.

It had not always been so. When they first dated, their arguments had taken a metaphysical turn. They argued about things like God and Nietzsche, and even if they disagreed, it was like gazing out of a window at the universe. But what could you do when you began arguing about toothpaste?

*Ah! mio sogno! Ah! mia vita!*  

A few days later, Andrew called her up to say she had failed the test. 64 percent. “I frankly felt insulted by some of your answers,” he said.

“Yes,” Marcy said.

“There was a part of me that wanted you to pass the test.”

Marcy didn’t say anything. She imagined Andrew sketching out diagrams with his colored pencils. He grew cherry tomatoes in his garden and liked to count them on
the stem each morning. He would later chart the data on a graph. Perhaps one day he
would make a chart of all his girlfriends and their scores.

"You've never understood me," he said.

"I have understood you," Marcy sniffed. "I've just never liked you." She hung
up the phone and began to cry. He demanded the impossible. Like he wanted her to
grow another arm. All the stupidity and ugliness of her life erupted. She stared at herself
in the bathroom mirror, her eyes like pig's eyes beneath swollen lids. Her nose was
running, and she wiped it on the sleeve of her sweatshirt. She couldn't recognize herself.

Two weeks later, she was on a plane bound for San Francisco to attend the
Popular Culture Society's annual meeting. Marcy worked in the marketing department of
a small scholarly press that tried to increase its sales by turning out such titles as *Bonfire
of the Humanities: The Rage Against Literacy in America* and *Fantasy Island: Escapism
and Self-Reliance in Television from Gilligan's Island to Survivor*.

Outside her window, Marcy saw the gray wing of the plane shuddering in the
wind. She felt gaseous sitting in the cabin, her eyes drying up from the staleness in the
air. When the plane dropped suddenly, the captain flashing on the seatbelt sign, Marcy
resigned herself to the fact that she was going to die. The plane seemed to be convulsing,
rising and falling without warning. *If I had only one month to live, how would I spend my
remaining time?* The plane grew calm again, the cabin filling up with the smell of twice-
warmed food as the stewardesses lifted bits of foil with their fingernails. Marcy watched
the clouds streaming past, thinking of Peter Donath at sixteen in a mint-green oxford and white pants.

Before leaving town, she had e-mailed Peter who lived in Menlo Park. She hadn’t communicated with him in four years and couldn’t bring herself to talk to him on the phone. She wrote a short peppy note — hello! i’m still alive! — telling him she would be in San Francisco and would he like to meet her for dinner. Yes, by all means, he replied. I did not expect to hear from you this morning.

In high school, she and Peter became friends one day when Mrs. Chitwood separated their class into groups according to the results of a personality test. Marcy and Peter sat alone in a corner together because they both had tested as INTPs. Marcy noticed that Peter was overly thin, sardonic, and suffering from myopia.

"Your personality type is the Architect," Marcy read out loud. "You tend to see distinctions and inconsistencies instantaneously, and can detect contradictions no matter when they are made."

Peter pushed up his glasses and folded his arms. "This test is as accurate as a horoscope," he said. "I don’t believe in the classification of individuals, do you?"

Marcy looked at his hands. His fingers were long and slender, and on his wrist was a large calculator watch. "Why are you carrying a computer disk in your front pocket?" she asked.

"I’m in mourning," Peter said. He touched the edge of the floppy with the tips of his fingers.

"For what?" Marcy asked.

"My disk was infected with a virus."
They began sitting next to each other in class, writing notes to pass away the time. 

*I am withering from this heat,* she wrote him one day. *Do you think Mrs. Chitwood dyes her hair?* The lights had been dimmed, Mrs. Chitwood was pointing to a transparency outlining Dante’s nine circles of hell, and Marcy felt drowsy, listening to the whirring of the fan.

*Good question,* Peter replied. *Is it in Mrs. Chitwood’s character to dye her hair?* *Judging from the way she runs this class, I would have to say no.*

Mrs. Chitwood flipped transparencies with bony, arthritic fingers. Her mouth sagged downwards in a way that made her seem gloomy and tired. Her hard, tight curls reminded Marcy of snail shells. *I don’t know what is more sad,* she wrote. *Mrs. Chitwood going home and dyeing her hair. Or Mrs. Chitwood going home and not dyeing her hair. Do you think we will ever become like that?*

*NO.*

*But we must grow old.*

*I forbid you to do such a thing.*

*Well, I’ll have to do away with myself then.*

*You can’t do that either.*

*Why not?*

*Because I believe I love you.*

Marcy stared at the paper, then looked up at Peter. He raised his eyebrows, nodding his head for emphasis. She covered the note with her elbow, her head bowed over her desk. She could hear the hum of the projector, the gentle whirring of the fan as it blew warm air along her face, Mrs. Chitwood’s voice intoning dully in the air. She
thought her hand seemed like someone else’s, rested in her lap, a stillness marred by faint blue lines. When class was over, Marcy rose from her desk and left the room without looking at Peter.

The next day, Peter handed her another note, his lips pressed solemnly together. Marcy thought that his wire-rimmed glasses made his face look stingy. She locked herself in the bathroom and opened his letter. It was not, as you may have guessed, a thought-out-thing. It just seemed to write itself there on the paper using my hand.

Marcy folded the note into eighths and stored it away in the back of her desk at home. In the same drawer was a sealed letter that she had written to herself when she was fifteen. TO BE OPENED WHEN I AM THIRTY, the envelope read.

She and Peter continued to be friends as before, and in their senior year, he began dating a diminutive girl with short bobbed hair in his calculus class.

“Chicken or steak?” the stewardess asked her.

Marcy was 31 now. Time had a funny way of accelerating. She had never opened the letter, too afraid of who she might find.

The Popular Culture Society attracted all sorts of scholars but mostly the ones with attitude – the hip, the avant-garde, the young at heart. Extroverts and exhibitionists. If you were quiet and introspective, you would probably choose something less flashy – medieval history, say – or maybe something that had no practical application in the world like philosophy or a dead language. Marcy sat on a stool in front of her press’s booth eavesdropping on two scholars flipping through books on display.
“It’s the pretense of feminism that I’m objecting to. That show can’t escape the ideology that it pretends to be criticizing.”

“I know,” the other woman groaned. Marcy noticed that she had pinned a button on her shirt that read: AGAINST ACADEMIA. “Calista Flockhart is the pits.”

The first woman waved a copy of Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace. “Is this any good?”

“One of our bestsellers,” Marcy replied. She was writing out the receipt when Gwendolyn Summers came up from behind and startled her with a hug and a smack on the cheek. “Marcy dear,” she said. “Good sales?” Gwen was the author of Pretty in Punk: Girls Resisting Gender and XXX: A Woman’s Right to Pornography. She smelled of Eternity, and her gold bracelets jangled as she moved. She wore loose flowing purple, her eye shadow as colorful as a peacock’s. Marcy thought she looked like she had just stepped out of a harem.

Marcy handed the woman her receipt. “Enjoy,” she said. She turned back to Gwen. “Are you free for lunch?”

“I have a better idea,” Gwen said. “Let’s do our nails. There’s a fantastic place just a few blocks from here.”

Marcy looked at her hands. She had bitten her nails down to the quick, her fingers blunt and shapeless stubs. When she raised them, Gwen gave a little scream.

“Why don’t you get a pedicure?” Gwen said.

“I hate my feet.”

“Have you ever had a pedicure? You’ll like your feet when you’re done.”
Gwen was one of the few women that Marcy knew who reveled in her femininity. Marcy felt a kind of relief in their friendship. Like it was okay to be shallow. During their lunch hour, she and Gwen walked over to Nail Palace. The woman at the counter told them to choose a color. “I’ve brought my own,” Gwen said, setting a tiny silver bottle on the table. Marcy walked over to the display alongside the wall. There were rows of shiny colored bottles lined up like candy. Satin, opaque, or frost. Poppy reds and bright hot pinks. Pearly grays and blues that reminded Marcy of the moon. Violet, gold, magenta. “Which should I choose?” she asked. She imagined her feet undergoing a crisis in identity.

“I stay away from greens and blues myself,” Gwen said. “They make me think of corpses.”

Marcy chose the faintest opalescent pink, the color of seashells.


A middle-aged Vietnamese woman tapped Marcy’s shoulder and pointed her to one of the raised chairs. “Take off shoes,” she said.

Marcy uncovered her pale, wrinkled feet, stuffing her socks in her shoes. She had been negligent about clipping her toe nails which stuck out haphazardly, some of them chipped on the edges like broken glass. The nails of both pinkie toes had cracked and grown back, extra thick and wavy. She felt sorry for the woman who had to handle her feet. Her heels especially were rough and encrusted, the driest of geological formations.

The woman patted her knee. “Soak here.”
Marcy placed her feet into the small tub in front of her. The water was warm, unnaturally blue, and made her skin feel slippery.

“So how’s Andrew?” Gwen asked. She sat at a nearby table, spreading out her right hand for the manicurist.

“He’s okay,” Marcy said. “We broke up a couple of weeks ago.”

“Oh, God,” Gwen said.

“It’s alright. He gave me a test. I didn’t pass.”

“You know it’s over when they begin giving you tests,” Gwen said. She began talking about her ex-husband and their last year of marriage. Books on infidelity that he left on the coffee table. Insidious words that he spelled out when they played Scrabble.

Marcy didn’t have the heart to tell Gwen that Andrew had really given her a test, the sit-down, take-home kind.

The pedicurist touched Marcy’s right leg. “Okay, now.” Marcy lifted up her leg and rested it against the tub’s edge. The woman sat on a low stool and took Marcy’s foot in her cupped palm. She began shaving off the thick dead skin at her heel with what looked like a cheese peeler. Marcy watched as the woman pared at her foot with quick strokes, white flakes coming loose. Thirty-one years of dead cells falling to the floor.

“Why didn’t I do this before?” she said out loud.

“You see. I knew you would like it,” Gwen said.

The pedicurist massaged her feet with lotion, then clipped her toenails, trimming and shaping the cuticles. She examined Marcy’s warped pinkie nails and filed and buffed the surfaces. She painted Marcy’s nails with two coats of Sandalwood Frost, finishing off with a protective coat and another layer of clear varnish.
“Are you beginning to like your feet?” Gwen asked her.

Marcy gave the pedicurist a large tip, and on the way back to their hotel, she bought a jar of Vaseline at the drug store. Gwen laughed at her, but Marcy was determined not to let her feet dry up ever again.

That evening, Marcy met Peter for dinner. The restaurant had lofty ceilings, wide-open and elegant, with alternating blue and yellow walls. She saw Peter over by the bar sipping from a martini glass, his girlfriend Joanna fiddling with his collar. They were listening to a man with a beard who kept waving his glass around, probably the friend Peter mentioned he would invite to dinner when Marcy called him that morning. Marcy had been disappointed to hear that other people were joining them, a picture in her mind of having a soulful tête-à-tête with Peter. That had been unrealistic. She and Peter were at an age when you were supposed to have a sidekick.

Peter’s hair had grown out to chin-level. He also sported a goatee which made him look like a musketeer. He wore all black, something that she noticed he began doing ever since he went to college.

“Marcy,” he said, giving her a hug. “You know Joanna, and this is Fergus.”

“Hi,” she said to both of them. “I like your name,” she added to Fergus.

“Why thank you,” he replied.

“ ‘Who will go drive with Fergus now...’ ” she quoted.

Fergus held onto his scotch, looking unimpressed. He wore an oriental-looking silk black shirt, dark sunglasses tipped over his hair. Gold stick-like earrings poked out
of each lobe. He seemed familiar to her, but she thought she would have remembered his
name.

When the hostess came, Joanna linked arms with Marcy, an intimacy neither of
them felt. They followed the hostess to their table. Joanna wore black as well, her blouse
so wispy-thin, it seemed translucent as it caught the light. She had a Roman nose and a
sprinkling of freckles. Her straight red hair shimmered and flowed to her waist.

Dyed? Marcy wondered.

Marcy felt suddenly frumpy in her yellow cotton dress. She had gotten it at a sale
– it had little brown windmills on it, and she called it her Holland dress. As a rule, she
didn’t buy things that she had to dry clean. Perhaps for the first time, she understood
what Andrew had meant when he said she dressed like a housewife. Everyone at the
table looked sleek, wickedly cosmopolitan. When the waitress came to their table, all of
them were ready to order except Marcy.

“You go ahead,” she told them hurriedly, scanning over the entrees.

Peter ordered risotto as well as a bottle of cabernet sauvignon for the table.

Joanna chose the mahi-mahi and Fergus ordered the sashimi platter.

“I’ll have the prime rib,” Marcy said.

“How would you like it done?” the waitress asked.

“Bloody,” Marcy said. “I like it bloody.”

The waitress came back with their wine, and Marcy took a tentative sip. She
could tell it was a good red wine. Even if she didn’t like it.

“So how do you sell books that people don’t want to read?” Peter asked her.

“Isn’t marketable and scholarly something of a paradox?”
“Well, that’s why we’re developing a list in popular culture studies,” Marcy said.

“We figure that books about television shows will attract a wider audience than books about books.”

Peter nodded for her to continue.

“We also use misleading titles. For instance, we changed the original title of *Fantasy Factory: The Disembodiment of Intimacy* to *Fantasy Factory: An Insider’s View of the Phone Sex Industry*. Last week, a production company in L.A. called asking for a review copy.” Marcy took another sip of her wine. “So what are you doing these days? Are you still with the same company?”

“No, I switched jobs a year ago.”

“Doing what?”

Peter lifted one eyebrow. “I’m a web developer at Babyuniverse.com.”

Marcy didn’t know whether it was okay to laugh or not. “You and baby products?” she said. “I can’t believe it.”

“Yes,” Peter sighed. “Nipple guards and breast pumps! I can hardly believe it myself.”

“He’s inhabiting a state of irony,” Joanna said with a smile.

Peter shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps one day, I’ll move myself to some unheard-of, godforsaken city –”

“You could move to St. Louis,” Marcy said. “That’s where I am.”

“I could move to St. Louis –” Peter said.

“You can’t, hon,” Joanna interrupted. “Don’t you remember? I’m allergic to Missouri.”
"That’s right. Joanna is allergic to Missouri. So we would have to move to some other godforsaken city—"

"Why not give up the idea of city life altogether?" Marcy said. "You could have an authentic existence if you lived among cows."

"What do you mean by ‘authentic’?" Joanna said. "It sounds like you’re trying to fit your life into some preconceived notion of authenticity which doesn’t exist."

Marcy looked at Joanna, annoyed. She thought Joanna was being didactic, a tedious quality in a human being. Their food arrived, and Marcy plunged into her steak.

Fergus turned to her. "So you’re a high school friend of Peter’s."

She nodded, chewing.

"I’ve heard about you," Fergus said.

"Really?" she asked. She was surprised and pleased. "You work with Peter, right?"

"I do," Fergus said. "In fact, I recommended that he apply to Babyuniverse."

"Did you meet each other in San Francisco then?"

"I’ve known Peter since elementary school," he smiled.

Marcy looked more closely at Fergus, wondered if he was telling the truth. She didn’t like the idea of Fergus knowing Peter for longer than she had. "I wonder why Peter never mentioned you to me," she said.

"He has," Fergus said. "In fact, we’ve met once before. Briefly."

"I don’t think so," she said. "In fact, I’m sure of it."

"I was previously known as Chad."
“Chad,” she said. “You’re Chad?” Peter and Joanna were smiling, evidently enjoying the joke. She had met him once then. She and Peter had stopped by the health food store where he worked as a clerk. Fergus – or Chad as he was then known – had screwed spirals of tissue paper into his ears because he said he could not stand the sound of blenders. He seemed disenchanted behind the counter. When he rang up customers, he jabbed at the keys of the register with one crooked finger.

When Marcy told Fergus she remembered the tissue paper, he launched into a tirade. The screech of a train, 115 decibels, a man shouting at the top of his lungs, 70 decibels. “You can’t escape the sounds of civilization,” he said. Marcy felt herself drifting. Peter turned toward her, murmuring a few words, and she smiled vaguely, nodding her head as she cut another piece of steak.

She thought about the time when she had visited Peter in Boston while they were still in college. They had walked beside the Charles River looking for ducks. Then, in the afternoon, they visited the Christian Scientist Church on a whim. The tiny old woman informed them that the brass organ was one of the ten largest in the world. “Our essences are perfect and immortal,” she said, blinking her blue shadowed eyes. “It is the material, the corporeal that is unholy and unlasting.” She gave them free copies of Science and Health With Key to the Scriptures by Mary Baker Eddy, and Peter remarked as they were going out the door that it was a shame you could only get free books from religious personages. They passed through a deserted plaza of gray cobblestones, slick and glistening from the afternoon rain. A few bedraggled pigeons huddled in the water. In the distance, a brightly colored umbrella surfaced in the air like a stray balloon. Peter began weaving around the fountain, his black wilted umbrella hanging from his wrist. He
looked like a whimsical figure in a silent film, stepping lightly around the courtyard, tracing invisible designs. She began to imitate him, lifting her arms, watching the stones pass under her feet. It was a soundless dance, a weaving and circling as they crossed and then drifted apart.

“Marcy is not with us,” Peter said.

Marcy jerked her head up. Fergus nodded at her, picking his teeth with a toothpick.

“Sorry,” Marcy muttered. She excused herself to go to the bathroom. She was halfway across the restaurant when she realized she had forgotten to put her napkin on the table. It had slipped off her dress and lay in the middle of the floor for all to see, a little white flag. In the restroom, she splashed her cheeks with cold water.

“Are you okay?”

Marcy looked up at the mirror and saw Joanna standing beside her. For a moment, they regarded each other’s reflections. Joanna pulled a long strand of hair off Marcy’s dress.

“Shedding,” Marcy said.

“Here’s another one.” Joanna lifted the hair between icy blue fingernails.

By the time they rejoined Peter and Fergus, Marcy’s napkin was no longer on the floor. Fergus was picking at the holes of the salt shaker with his toothpick.

“Shall we go somewhere for drinks?” Peter asked when the check came. He looked at Marcy. “I feel like we haven’t had the chance to really talk.”

Marcy felt her heart rise. “I’d love that,” she said.

Joanna lifted her face toward Peter. “I’m so tired, hon.”
Peter rested his hand upon Joanna’s head for a moment. Marcy wished he would grab a fistful of her thick red hair and pull, but instead his hand was flat and gentle, like he was blessing her. He turned to Marcy with an apologetic smile. “I guess it’s good night,” he said.

When Marcy got back to her hotel room, she kicked off her shoes and examined her feet. Still shiny and new. She wondered what Andrew was doing in St. Louis at this hour. She imagined him bent over his desk, writing down figures in his painstaking scrawl. She called Gwen’s room, but no one answered the phone.

She decided to put her shoes back on and go down to the lobby. She could hear the tinkle of piano music coming from the bar, a breathy woman singing “How Long Has This Been Going On?” There were hardly any people in the bar, and Marcy felt embarrassed as she ordered a drink. The woman seemed to be sighing as her voice held a note. She wore a blue sequin dress that gleamed whenever she moved. Marcy thought how tiring and lonely it must be to sing every night in front of strangers. She felt as if she was the only person in the bar listening. She finished her drink and went back to her room.

Her phone was ringing when she opened the door. “Hello?”

“Marcy.”

Her heart lifted when she recognized Peter’s voice.
“I’m working at home tomorrow,” he said. “Would you like to come over for lunch?” His voice was low and discreet. Marcy wondered if it was because he didn’t want Joanna to hear.

“I’d like that,” she said.

“Good. We can talk and have lunch overlooking our algae-infested pool. I want to catch up with you. Where have you been these past four years?”

Marcy smiled. “I was wondering the same about you,” she said.

“Well, I’ve been right here in San Francisco,” he said.

She laughed. “And I’ve been stuck in St. Louis.”

“Ah,” Peter sighed, “that must be it then.” There was a pause. “So I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“I’ll be there,” Marcy said. When she hung up the phone, she wondered what it was about Peter that she missed, why she wanted to be close to him again. Andrew always made her feel smaller than she was. He enjoyed palpating her for weak spots. Whereas with Peter – the old Peter, at least – she had never doubted herself.

She arrived at Peter’s apartment at noon the next day. She could only stay for two hours because she was supposed to be at her booth selling books. She looked around Peter’s apartment as he fetched her a drink from the refrigerator. The bookcases and tables were mahogany-colored with a glossy, artificial finish. Everything was put away, neat and finicky. On a shelf, she spotted the book of Frida Kahlo paintings that she had given to Peter many years ago. She opened it and read the note that she had penned on
the inside cover. When Kahlo was bedridden, she did not have many subjects to paint. So she painted herself. I think each of her self-portraits is a revelation of a slightly different self. How strange to have so many different faces. I hope we will be true to each other no matter who we become. Remember, we still have Mexico.

Mexico. She and Peter liked to say that to each other. They had once talked about driving there. It was their first year of college, both of them home for the holidays, and they sat on the floor in Marcy’s bedroom, sipping mint tea and sharing plans of escape. In Mexico, they could live an adventure. Cease to have a name and be truly free.

“You’ve found Kahlo,” Peter said. He was gazing at her, a tall glass of lemonade in his hand.

“How romantic I sound,” Marcy said as she put the book back on the shelf.

“Reading that note makes me ashamed. I wish I could burn it.”

“Don’t you dare,” Peter said. “I like that dreamy voice, the Marcy that you used to be.”

“Isn’t it funny? We were always talking about going to Mexico, but we never did it, we never got there.”

“I was serious about Mexico,” Peter said.

“I took you seriously.”

“No. I mean I was serious, close to calling you up and saying, ‘Pack your bags. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.’”

Marcy laughed. “Why didn’t you call?”

Peter smiled. “I was very close.”
Marcy looked at Peter, his new goatee and longer hair, and couldn’t help but feel a little sad that Peter of all people had caved in to trendiness – to something as useless as style. She longed for the other Peter, the one with the schoolboy haircut and the glasses that made his face severe and uncompromising. The one who had been a snob. Who had scoffed at the world and been incorruptible in his geekiness. There was a discrepancy between the person standing in the room and the memory she had preserved of him, and she wondered if Peter felt this as well. When he looked at her, was he also wishing for the person she used to be?

They sat outside by the pool that smelled of decomposing leaves. They sipped their lemonade, smiling at each other – they were strangers really – yet she felt Peter knew her in a way that Andrew never had.

On her last night in San Francisco, Gwen burst into Marcy’s room with a bottle of champagne. Marcy had been lying in bed looking at the feverish gleam of the city, thinking how full of possibility it was, even though she was only looking at it through a window.

“You look far too serious,” Gwen noted.

“I can’t go to sleep,” Marcy said.

Gwen handed her a glass of champagne, and the two of them clinked glasses.

“To your next book,” Marcy said. “May it have numerous print runs and a long, marketable life.”
Gwen smiled. She closed her eyes, began humming “Summertime.” *Oh, your
daddy’s rich and your momma’s good-looking.*

Marcy listened to Gwen sing. It always seemed somewhat of a miracle when a
person’s voice was beautiful. “You’re a soprano,” she said in surprise. Gwen nodded.
*Then you’ll spread your wings and take the skies.* Marcy took another sip of
champagne, then set her glass down. She pulled the comforter up to her chin, listening to
Gwen’s voice – its sweet sadness – filling the room.

“What is it like,” she asked, when Gwen had finished, the air around them still
alive, even in the silence. “Having music within you?”

“You know,” Gwen said.

“I don’t,” Marcy said. “I have a terrible voice.” In elementary school, she had
realized the extent of its badness, forced to sing alone in front of the school choir. Her
teacher, a pigeon-breasted woman who over-enunciated her words, had played the piano
as the class listened to Marcy belt out “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Halfway through the
song, the teacher had stopped playing. “That’s enough. You’re an alto,” she said to
Marcy. It was a life-long verdict.

“Who cares?” Gwen said. “Let’s sing that song from *Chorus Line.* One!
Singular sensation!”

“No, no, no! *West Side Story!*” Marcy said and she began singing *When you’re a
Jet, you’re a Jet all the way from your first cigarette to your last dying day!* She listened
to her voice – like someone killing a chicken, Andrew once described – but she raised her
voice, sang even louder. They sang “Matchmaker,” “On My Own,” “To Dream the
Impossible Dream,” “Just a Spoonful of Sugar”. They were in the middle of “Memory” when the telephone rang.

“This is the front desk,” a woman’s voice said. “We received a complaint.”

Gwen was hamming it up in the background. *Burnt-out ends of smoky days. The stale cold smell of morning. A streetlamp dies, another night is over!*

“Okay. Just this one last song,” Marcy said, and she hung up the phone to join Gwen for their finale.

Back in St. Louis, there were three messages from Andrew waiting for her. Marcy deleted the messages with a ruthless push of the button. She hooked up her laptop and searched for the personality test she’d taken in high school. 247 hits, and the second site she clicked onto invited her to take the test for free. Was the test a fraud? Maybe she would end up with a different personality. She raced through it: *Is it worse to:* ○ *have your head in the clouds* ○ *be in a rut.* Be in a rut, Marcy clicked. *Does interacting with strangers:* ○ *energize you* ○ *tax your reserves.* Tax your reserves. *What do you wish more for yourself:* ○ *strength of emotion* ○ *strength of will.* Strength of will.

Seventy questions in all. She clicked the SUBMIT button for results.

**Your Temperament is:** Rational (NT).

**Your Personality Type is:** Architect (INTP)

Marcy couldn’t help but laugh.

She thought about Andrew, wondered if she would call him.
The night she and Peter talked about Mexico, she remembered walking him to his
car. Outside, a cold drizzle and the wind rising. Peter said the sky looked apocalyptic.
Wind crawled through his hair, made his shiny black coat rise and fall. At the time,
Marcy was in love with a boy in her biology class, but she wasn’t thinking of him at that
moment. She was thinking of Mexico, of flying to the end of the burning earth with
Peter. Peter, with his black scarf twirling around his neck. And she told herself to
remember, the catching wind, their bodies, their clothes fluttering like birds were caught
inside. Remember this, she said.
The Apartment

No one wanted to rent the Chens’ apartment. It sat vacant for three months collecting dust and heat, the silence now and then punctuated by footsteps ringing along the hardwood floors. Voices came and departed. Mr. Chen closed the door behind him. Sometimes, the drone of a fly butting itself against glass. Until silence fell, and the fly, its legs as thin as eyelashes, dried along the window sill.

It was August when Mr. Chen opened the door again for the fifth time in three months. He felt the hot breath of the room as he entered, the Christian lady following behind. The windows had become as cruel as magnifying glass. Mr. Chen felt his head swimming, as if it was severed from his body and floating in the Pacific waters. He blinked but at first could not see the woman.

“...” he heard himself saying. “...”

Garbage. Electricity.”

His eyes were watering. For a moment, he could not remember what he was going to say. He walked over to the windows and began pulling down the blinds. Outside, he caught a glimpse of trees shimmering in the sun.

“Garden also,” Mr. Chen murmured.

His wife called the apartment their worst investment. “Other than you and I getting married, this apartment has been the biggest mistake of our lives,” she said.
No one wanted to live there. The rent was too high, even though the Chens kept lowering their price, stopping at eight hundred to break even. People called but lost interest when they heard it wasn’t near a Metro station. The ones who actually saw the apartment examined the scratched floors, smiled politely at the 1970’s wood cabinets, inquired whether there was a dishwasher. There wasn’t. Washing machine? Dryer? Mr. Chen shook his head. The laundromat was next door.

After that, there was only the bedroom left to see. This was the moment Mr. Chen dreaded the most. He always felt an urge to apologize for how small it was – the previous owner had called it “quaint” when he showed it to the Chens eight years ago. If the people were kind, they went through the motions of opening the closet door and peering inside. A short while later, they thanked Mr. Chen, saying they would think about it. The door closed and Mr. Chen was left standing alone in the apartment. He was a stout man, but at such moments his body seemed to cave in, as if his bones were softening. The apartment was quiet and hollowed out. A part of him wanted to rest on the dull waxed floor, the same color as the earth. He didn’t want to go home to his wife and tell her of another failure.

They had bought the apartment because Mr. Chen thought it would be safe to invest in real estate. It wasn’t like the stock market where you bought what you couldn’t touch, your money rising and falling due to intangible economic winds. Mr. Chen had a literal mind. He reasoned that the apartment was something solid, therefore something that would not go away. He had promised his wife they would be able to earn four or even five hundred dollars a month once they paid off the mortgage. He hadn’t reckoned that Garden City management would raise their maintenance fee every year, that the
value of the property would fall, and that no one would be interested in renting. It was a bad sign that most of the people living in the apartments were the owners themselves.

When Mr. Chen thought about it carefully, he was convinced that he had been fooled into buying the apartment. He blamed the garden – a conservatory pungent with the smell of overripe flowers which adjoined the lobby. Eight years ago, he and Mrs. Chen had been beguiled by the sumptuous display of magenta lilies as they sat together on one of the wooden benches. Mr. Chen had gotten up out of his seat once or twice, pacing the garden in an excited manner. "Who wouldn't want to live here?" he said in Chinese to his wife.

Mrs. Chen knew that her husband was naive, that he had a habit of promising things he couldn't deliver. When he began exaggerating, her lips would wrinkle in disgust. "Tsui liu," she would say – don't be ridiculous – waving her hand as if shooing away a fly. Sitting in the garden, however, Mrs. Chen was distracted by the huge scarlet peonies that looked clear and delicate as Chinese watercolors. She couldn't help but be lulled by the fragrances wafting beneath her tingling nose as she listened to her husband's boastful talk, all his plans for them and their son. She could not deny that the garden was a beautiful thing. In the end, she agreed that they should invest their savings in the apartment.

Eight years had gone by, and their son was now dead. Whenever Mrs. Chen saw the garden, she felt a bitterness rise up to her mouth that tasted of her own bile. The smell of lilies reminded her of funerals now – their rich, exhausting perfume made her want to claw at her throat. The transplanted flowers were crowded too close together,
and their thin, transparent petals gave off a ghostly luster. This was not a living garden, Mrs. Chen decided, not a place where things came back.

When they first met in the lobby, the Christian lady held out four fingers for Mr. Chen to shake, keeping her thumb hidden. She wore a white blouse and blue pin-stripped suit in spite of the heat, and her brown hair was neatly wound in a bun. Mr. Chen grasped the proffered fingers, which were bony and cold. He wondered if her circulation was poor. Her skin too was watery, a thin, transparent film over a network of blue veins.

When Mr. Chen first called the woman to set up an appointment, he had gotten her answering machine. A listless recorded voice spoke to him. “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.” There was a pause and then a beep. Mr. Chen hung up the phone, for some reason too embarrassed to leave a message. He called back later that night after he and Mrs. Chen had closed the grocery store.

“Good evening,” a woman’s voice answered. It was a tranquil voice, clear but monotonous like trickling water.

“Yes. Hello,” he said abruptly. “I am calling you back. You say you interested in the apartment? Garden City Apartments, 26 Harrison.”

Mrs. Chen listened on the other line as her husband spoke. It was a constant regret of hers that she had not married a more cultured man. Mr. Chen’s brusqueness always became more apparent when he spoke English. It was even worse when he was
on the phone for then he shouted his responses like he was deaf. What must these Americans think, she wondered.

The woman said she was indeed interested. Her name was Vera Lindquist, and she would meet Mr. Chen at noon tomorrow at Garden City Apartments. Mrs. Chen heard a click at the other end as the American lady hung up, and then she too put down the receiver.

"Did you hear?" Mr. Chen said to his wife. "She wants to see the apartment."

"Yes," Mrs. Chen said, "but will she rent it? Bargain if you have to, but don't show her you're desperate. That will only scare her away."

Now in the apartment with the shades drawn, Mr. Chen nodded and smiled at the Christian lady. He noticed that she stepped gingerly around the empty rooms as if she were afraid of setting off echoes with her heels. Her clothes were neat and clean yet hung loosely around her body as if they were made for another person. Mr. Chen judged that she was twenty-six, maybe twenty-seven years old. Her formality and air of meekness made her seem outdated. Maybe she came from another country, Mr. Chen thought, though to his ear, she spoke perfect English.

As they rode down the elevator to see the garden, Mr. Chen learned that the Christian lady worked as a receptionist at a travel agency called World Wide Travel. Might Mr. Chen have heard of it? The office was only three or four blocks away from Garden City Apartments. Mr. Chen said he had not. He didn't know of any office buildings close by. The woman shifted her purse to her other hand, staring at the glowing display of numbers as they descended eleven floors. Mr. Chen scratched his forehead with the tip of his pinkie. He was hoping she wouldn't care about the Metro station.
The elevator doors slid open, and Mr. Chen gestured for the woman to go ahead. In the garden, the brick path was lightly sprinkled with pink and white petals. Light poured down on all sides of the glass building, yet because the conservatory was air-conditioned, it was cooler here than inside the apartment.

“Beautiful garden,” Vera Lindquist said, staring at the lilies.

“Yes. Beautiful,” Mr. Chen agreed.

They stood in silence for a minute longer, and then Mr. Chen awkwardly cleared his throat. The moment had come to ask the woman if she was interested in the apartment. He looked over at her, saw that her pale lips were moving like two thin worms. “And their soul shall be as a watered garden,” she murmured, “and they shall not sorrow any more at all.”

Mr. Chen flushed but did not say anything.

“I would like to live here,” she said, turning to him.

Mr. Chen showed his wife the check for eight hundred dollars. They had signed the lease that very afternoon. Mrs. Chen was happy, but she pretended to find fault with her husband. “You were too hasty,” she said. “Why didn’t you check her references?”

“She looked respectable,” Mr. Chen said. “Quiet. Well-mannered. She works at a travel agency near the apartment.”

“And how did she dress?”

“Like a professional. She seemed educated.”
Mrs. Chen snorted. "Christians are crazy, smiling at you all the time. Your child
dies, and they say you should be happy."

Mr. Chen sighed, looking out the front window. "She didn’t seem like that," he
said. "She seemed very quiet inside." From the living room, he could see one of the two
cypress trees that grew beside their front door. Twelve years ago, when they first moved
into their house, the trees barely reached Mr. Chen’s hip. Over the years, they had grown
thin and tall, dark spires that his wife compared to arrows. When their son was diagnosed
with brain cancer, Mrs. Chen wanted her husband to cut them down. "They’re bad luck," she
said. "They overshadow our house."

Mr. Chen grew angry at his wife’s suggestion. "Don’t be silly. Chopping down
two trees won’t make his sickness go away."

The tumor steadily advanced until the doctors told the Chens that their son’s only
chance of recovery was surgery. The Chens relented because by this time they were
hoping for a miracle. But how stupid they had been, Mrs. Chen wept to her husband. A
person cannot live when their head is sliced open like a watermelon, Western medicine or
not. Why had they let the doctors touch him? He had died on the operating table with no
one to comfort him. A terrible death that no one deserves, and he was only fifteen years
old.

Mrs. Chen’s tongue grew more venomous after their son died. When she opened
her mouth, it was like she was spitting out words to rid herself of life’s bitter taste.

As if in contrast, Mr. Chen became softer, less defined. He rarely talked now, and
the wrinkles on his face deepened so that his forehead began to resemble a tick-tack-toe
board. Mrs. Chen made her words sharp to wake him up. She didn’t like to see him wading through the motions of life.

Neither of them mentioned the cypress trees which continued to twist toward the heavens. It was as if their mutual silence was a tacit agreement to let them grow. Each willing for the bad winds to continue to blow.

In August, Mr. Chen opened an envelope from Vera Lindquist. Inside was a check for $400, accompanied by a note of apology.

“Not two months and already she can’t pay,” Mr. Chen muttered to his wife.

When he called her number, he heard her voice – so strangely lacking in expression – recorded on her answering machine. “I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice –”

He was about to hang up the phone when the Christian lady picked up. “Hello,” she said as the other voice droned on.

“For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas –”

“Hello?” Mr. Chen said.

“Yes?”

“. . .the waters compassed me about –”

“Can you turn that off?”

“It’s almost over.”
Mr. Chen waited until the voice ended and he heard a beep. “This is Mr. Chen. I receive your letter,” he said.

“Yes, I am sorry.”

“I am unhappy about this, very unhappy…”

“I understand.”

“When can you make payment?”

“I’m trying to find a new job.”

“Why don’t you ask help from parents? Your parents can help, right?”

There was a pause. “My parents are dead,” she said.

Mr. Chen was silent. For the first time, he wondered if the Christian lady was a liar. “Oh, too bad,” he finally said.

“Yes.”

Neither could hear each other’s breath. Holding the phone, Mr. Chen felt a curious lightness in his body. Who was this woman, he wondered. He didn’t know her, yet he felt as if her voice, her presence had become an imposition. He was too embarrassed to bring up the subject of money now.

“I will forward you the money as soon as I receive it,” she said.

“Okay,” Mr. Chen mumbled. “Thank you.” And he hung up the phone.

Two weeks passed by with no additional check in the mail. On Monday afternoon, Mr. Chen decided to let his wife manage the store without him and drove to Garden City Apartments. It usually took him forty-five minutes to drive into the city, and
he had come to regard all the driving back and forth as a waste of gas and time. The worst was when people made an appointment to see the apartment and then didn’t show up. He would wait in the lobby, looking up from his newspaper at each person who passed through the front door. When an hour passed by, Mr. Chen was forced to fold up his paper and drive back home. It was on such days that he believed people had no respect for each other.

When he entered the lobby, Mr. Chen asked the doorman whether he knew if Vera Lindquist was in her apartment. “If you’ll just wait a second,” the doorman said, “I’ll call up and see if she’s there.”

“No, no, I go up,” Mr. Chen said. “She go out every morning?”

The doorman shook his head. “Not that I know of.”

Mr. Chen took the elevator up to the twelfth floor, stopping in front of the apartment, number 1208. He strained to hear what was going on inside, but there was only silence. “Miss Lindquist?” He knocked on the door and waited. He wondered if she was going to pretend not to be in.

A door abruptly opened across the hallway. A large woman in a robe and sneakers peered at him from her doorway. Mr. Chen could hear her breathing heavily through her mouth. He smiled and nodded, and the woman closed her door without saying anything.

“Miss Lindquist?” Mr. Chen said, more softly this time. He turned the knob gently to see if it was locked. Then he reached into his pocket for his key. If she was there, he would apologize, saying that he remembered a previous tenant complaining about a leak. “Hello,” he called out as he opened the door.
The apartment’s silence was familiar, he could tell from the hushed stillness that there was no one inside. The rooms were surprisingly bare, the scant pieces of furniture looked as if they had been left behind. A fold-out table with metal legs. Two dusty-looking chairs made of dark-stained wood. There was a bookcase that held a handful of paperbacks, a porcelain dish filled with pennies and paper clips, and a round-faced clock stopped at 6:35. In the center of the floor was a small blue silk rug that seemed to change colors when Mr. Chen walked to the other side of the room. It was the only valuable thing in the apartment and seemed at odds with the rest of the furniture.

In the bedroom, there was a twin mattress on the floor with a gray wool blanket barely covering the edges. She had covered an upturned box with an embroidered handkerchief and set her radio on top as well as a worn-looking copy of *When God Whispers in Your Ear* by James Townsend. Mr. Chen pushed open her closet door and saw her few clothes drooping from their hangers. The shelf above the rack was perfectly bare except for an old maroon hat with a black wilted feather. When he took it off the shelf, the hat was stiff and light in his hands, the velvet marred by dark oil spots.

In the kitchen, she had placed on the counter a blue bowl filled with water, the head of a white rose floating. On the refrigerator door, Mr. Chen peered at two photographs that had faded in the sun. Two little girls in orange bikinis were standing in a plastic pool in the front yard of a house. One of the girl’s mouths was open like she was screaming in delight, her hands clutching her hair, her child’s belly exposed to the camera, as the older girl gazed quietly on. In the second photograph, the same two girls were dressed in bright-striped shirts and bell-bottoms, holding a winter melon together in their arms. The younger one squinted in the sun, her lips parted, showing two large front
teeth. Mr. Chen thought the older one, the girl who seemed more quiet and self-possessed, was Vera Lindquist.

He let himself out of the apartment, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Downstairs, in the garden, he found the Christian lady. She sat on a bench beside the white roses, her eyes closed, her lips moving like she was talking to herself. At one point, she opened her eyes and gazed right at him. Mr. Chen looked quickly away, but then realized she didn’t recognize him. Or maybe she didn’t see him. She wore a gray plaid dress, her neck so long and thin, her head seemed to float disembodied over her clothes. She looked gaunt and unnatural, like she was sick or like she was starving herself. The suggestion of illness filled him with dread, and he turned away, heading for the lobby doors.

On the way home, Mr. Chen found himself stuck in traffic, amid a procession of alien glittering cars. He didn’t know why he had left without talking to her. The image of the Christian lady sitting in the garden with her eyes closed and her lips moving seemed like a fragment of a nightmare. A car honked at him, and Mr. Chen realized that the cars had begun to move forward. He pushed the gas too hard, the engine roaring to life as his car leapt forward a few spaces.

When he came home, he found his wife in bed propped up against her pillows.

“Do you know what day this is?” she said.

Mr. Chen looked at her blankly.
"Today is our anniversary," she said. She narrowed her eyes, looking at him carefully. "I'm not surprised that you should forget. There isn't anything happy to remember about this day. Do you remember we spent two hundred dollars for the reception? Ha! That was a lot of money to us then."

"It still is a lot of money," he said.

"You always were stingy in your heart," she said. "That woman can't pay a few hundred dollars, and you go sniffing for it like a dog."

"What do you want," Mr. Chen muttered. "You complain if I go, and you complain if I don't."

"That's because you make me sick," she said. "Do you hear that? Nothing you do will make me happy." She began to cry and wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. She got out of bed and went into the bathroom slamming the door. Mr. Chen heard a sound of something smashing. He was silent for a moment. "Shao Wen," he said. He knocked on the door. He could hear his wife sobbing. "Open the door," he said.

"Go away," she cried.

Mr. Chen went back to their bedroom. He sat down on the edge of their bed in a stupor. In a few minutes, he heard her opening the door. "Do you know what I regret the most?" she said. Her face was a terrible sight. He could stand any viciousness from his wife, but he couldn't stand her tears. They made him deeply afraid.

"I don't want to hear," he said.

"Do you remember that time when he cried outside our door? He was four years old and he cried outside our door wanting to sleep with us. We didn't let him in because
we didn’t want to spoil him. He cried for an hour maybe and we listened to him for all that time, and when he was quiet, we thought he had gone back to bed. But in the morning, we found him lying outside our door, his forehead burning with fever. Do you remember?"

“Yes,” Mr. Chen said.

Mrs. Chen got into bed, turning her back away from him. “That memory makes me feel bad,” she said. “I can’t ever forget it. It’s what I regret the most.” She reached over and turned off her light.

In September, the Christian lady sent Mr. Chen a check for $300. It was a bad sign that the amount was getting smaller so Mr. Chen left a message on her machine saying that he would be stopping by her apartment that evening. Vera Lindquist never called him back. He expected, maybe even hoped, that she wouldn’t be in as he drove to Garden City Apartments. Outside, the trees were flailing in the wind. He gripped the steering wheel when he felt the wind pushing his car into the other lane. The sky was dark and clear without a hint of rain.

In the apartment building, he was surprised to find her door half-opened like she was expecting him. He glimpsed through the crack and saw her kneeling on the floor. At first, it looked like she was patting an animal, but then he saw she was straightening the fringe of her rug. He knocked on the door. “Come in,” she said, standing up. She slowly wiped her hands against her skirt. She wore a blouse with tiny red flowers embroidered around the collar.
“Hello,” Mr. Chen said, nodding. He continued to stand even though she motioned to one of the two chairs in the room. “I like to talk to you about this check.”

“You must forgive me,” she said. “It’s all I can give you.”

Mr. Chen flushed. “I can’t afford to have tenant that cannot pay,” he said. “Isn’t there someone – sister maybe – who can help?” Vera Lindquist gazed back at him without any expression in her eyes. “Maybe you find another roommate? Someone to move in here, someone you can talk to, you pay only half the rent?”

“I like living here alone,” she said.

“What about work?” Mr. Chen said. “You work, right?”

Vera Lindquist slowly turned her head to gaze out the window. Her brown hair was flat and shiny, parted perfectly in the middle like a young girl’s. “Lately, I’ve been afraid to go outside,” she said.

Mr. Chen looked more closely at her. “Bad weather,” he murmured.

“I’m always looking for signs,” she said. She pointed a finger toward the window. “What do you see when you look at the moon?”

Mr. Chen unwillingly turned his head to look. The moon was red, unnaturally large, filling up the entire window. It seemed to gape at him like a cut-open eye. He felt as if he were being watched and wanted to pull down the shades.

“It makes me afraid,” she said. “I think terrible things will happen.”

Outside, the wind was rising, an ocean in his ears. He could see lights flickering in the distance, the moon glowing pitiless and red. The woman stood gazing out the window with her back toward him. For a moment, Mr. Chen imagined her to be faceless, with no breath inside of her. His own body felt vacant and cold. The apartment seemed
to be a still life – he felt like he was watching their own deaths, incorporated into the silence of the room.

The woman turned, and Mr. Chen took a step back. Though her mouth was moving, he couldn’t hear anything. Only the sound of his blood in his ears.

“Mr. Chen, are you well? Would you like some tea?”

He shook his head. His body had broken out into a cold sweat, and he realized he was shivering. “Sorry,” he whispered hoarsely.

“Mr. Chen,” she said. “Why don’t you sit down and rest?”

“No, I’m okay,” he muttered, moving toward the door.

“I promise I will pay back what I owe,” she called. “Every dollar.”

Mr. Chen barely nodded as he shut the door behind him.

Driving home, he was afraid of the trees bending in the wind. They twisted and turned as if they would break in front of him. The woman had said she didn’t go out because she was afraid of what might happen, her world made up of signs, undermined by whispers, things floating in the air. Mr. Chen felt as if his mind had been infected. Black leaves streamed in the wind, slapping his windshield, getting tangled in the wipers as the dark moving trees stretched high above him.

At home, his wife sat at the kitchen table, waiting. She heard Mr. Chen unlock the front door, and then raised her eyebrows as he came in. “Well?” she said.

“Nothing,” he muttered. “Soon she’ll be living there for free.”

“You need to kick her out,” Mrs. Chen said.

Mr. Chen took off his coat, slowly nodding. He had wanted to give Vera Lindquist more time, but he was beginning to realize that this was useless. That he would
only be delaying. And was there ever any doubt in his mind as to what he would do? She could not continue living there for free. Perhaps once she was out of the apartment, she would be out of his mind as well. “I’ll call the lawyer that the Lees used,” he said.

“Good,” Mrs. Chen said. “That woman is a rat. I’d like nothing more than to sweep her out with a broom.”

Mr. Chen looked out the window. “She isn’t well,” he said. “Something wrong with her head.” The window had turned reflective with night, and he could see his own silhouette against the darkness.

Mr. Chen could not sleep. Though it was winter, he didn’t need a blanket because his wife’s body burned like a furnace all year long. At first when they married, he joked with her about the temperature of her body, pretending to burn his fingers whenever they touched her skin. She was a young woman then, her passion had been a great deal of her charm. Now, as her temper increased with age, Mr. Chen thought she possessed too much fire within. He feared she was like a burning log that appears firm and unyielding until it collapses suddenly inward.

Mr. Chen turned over in bed and looked at the red eyes of the clock. 3 a.m. In four hours, both he and his wife would be up – she to open their store, he to drive to Garden City Apartments. He wondered if the Christian lady would be gone by that time, the apartment clean and bare as it had been five months ago, not a sign or trace that she had ever lived there. Mr. Chen had learned from his lawyer that she had never showed up for the hearing. Such a strange woman. He wondered if what she said was true, that
her parents were dead and there was no one to help her. He turned over in bed once more, flipping his pillow to get to its cool side.

His sleep was no longer good. Even before his son died, he remembered waking up in the middle of the night, his temples smarting as his thoughts turned inexorably against himself. He would escape by going to the bathroom, flicking on the light, and then he would wander down the hallway to check on his son. He would stop by the doorway, listening to his son’s breathing, heavy and asthmatic in the darkness. Usually, he had kicked his blanket to the ground. Mr. Chen would stoop to pick it up, awkwardly pulling at the corners of the blanket to cover him up in his sleep.

It was Mr. Chen’s lasting regret that they had never been close. His son had preferred his mother who had a lively tongue. Somehow, Mr. Chen could never find the right words. His questions were always gruff, and he didn’t know how to smooth out his tongue. Where were you? Did you eat? Why didn’t you wear your jacket? Have you finished your homework? To these questions, his son had replied in monosyllables.

What Mr. Chen had meant to ask was whether his son was hungry, whether he was cold, whether there was anything that he lacked which Mr. Chen could provide? He hadn’t been able to show his love in any other way than by providing for him, and so he gave him food to eat, clothes to wear, and a bed to sleep in. These things hadn’t been enough to keep him alive. His head felt swollen on the pillow as he looked at the darkened windows, waiting for the sky to lighten.

At 7 a.m., Mr. Chen rose from bed. His mind was racing, but his body felt tired as he stared at the neat, modest row of his clothes. His fingers were slow as he struggled with the buttons of his shirt. Before leaving, he walked over to the bed to wake up his
wife. Her face was slack against the pillow, her brown lips parted slightly, cracked with dryness. She seemed to be lost in sleep as he stood watching her, but then her eyes suddenly opened. "I'm leaving now," he said. Mrs. Chen stared vacantly at him, and he wondered if she had understood what he said. "I'll be back before noon," he told her. But she only looked at him with glassy eyes. Her thin hair straggled along the pillow, matted at the roots so that he could see the unnatural white of her scalp. Mr. Chen finally turned away.

When he got onto the beltway, there were rows of gleaming cars stretching ahead in the distance. Mr. Chen sat and waited, the inside of his car filling up with exhaust. By the time he reached Garden City Apartments, he was already fifteen minutes late. In the lobby, he was met by two police officers and a man in plain clothes from the Justice Court. There were also two movers hired by Mr. Chen to remove Vera Lindquist's furniture. "Sorry I am late," he muttered as he shook hands with the men gathered around him.

"This shouldn't take too long," the man in the dark suit said. "You'll have your apartment cleared out in no time."

On the door of the apartment, Vera Lindquist had taped a sign in neat handwriting. "Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven," the note read. The man in the suit took down the sign and crumpled the paper in his hand, smiling briefly at the two police officers. He then knocked loudly on the door. "Miss Lindquist," he said.

Vera Lindquist opened the door. "Good morning," she said. Mr. Chen noticed that she wore the same blue suit that she had worn on the day that he had first shown her
the apartment. Her hair was pulled neatly back into a bun, and her face was pale and composed.

"Good morning, Miss Lindquist," the man in plain clothes said. "I am sorry to inform you that we have been charged by the Justice of the Peace to remove you and your possessions from these premises. We have a Writ of Assistance which entitles the owner, Mr. George Chen, to the recovery of his property. I am sorry but I am going to have to ask you to leave this apartment."

"I understand," she said. She opened the door wider, and all of the men including Mr. Chen filed into the apartment. Mr. Chen nodded awkwardly at the woman as he passed by. "How are you," he said under his breath.

Vera Lindquist smiled though it was clear she wasn't listening. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"Are these boxes your own possessions?" the man in the suit asked.

"Yes," she said.

"And this table here? These chairs?"

"Yes. Also the mattress in the bedroom."

"Very good. If you will please step aside, these gentlemen here will take your furniture and belongings downstairs."

The movers began to load her boxes onto a dolly. Though she appeared calm, Mr. Chen could see her hands trembling. She glanced once around the room and then dragged a small black suitcase over to the window. When the movers returned with the dolly a second time, she clutched the handle of the suitcase. "I will hold on to this
myself," she said. Mr. Chen wondered what she had placed inside. He doubted that she owned anything of real value.

The two police officers stood watching the proceedings with their hands folded somberly in front of them. The man in the suit was examining the possessions and making a list. Mr. Chen did not know what to do. He felt helpless now that he had set things in motion. He almost felt angry at the woman as she stood there passively beside him. If she would just yell at him. Spit in his face. But she did nothing, standing silently in the room, her eyes unfocused as she looked out the window.

It did not take more than half an hour for the movers to finish clearing out the room. All of Vera Lindquist's possessions had been moved downstairs to the lobby, and the apartment was empty once again. Echoes sounded off the bare walls whenever any of them moved. The pale morning light hung over the apartment like a dream. They stood there, silent, gazing into their separate spaces.

The man in the suit broke the silence. "Miss Lindquist," he said, "it is time now for us to leave."

She picked up her suitcase.

"Let me," Mr. Chen said, reaching for the handle.

"I can manage, thank you," she said. She walked toward the door, followed by the policemen and the man in plain clothes who was folding up his list. Mr. Chen took a last glance of the apartment, and then closed the door behind him. When he turned, he saw the woman facing him. "I would like to return your key," she said, and she placed something cold and silver into the palm of his hand.
In the elevator, Mr. Chen watched Vera Lindquist standing with her hands folded in front of her, staring at the glowing panel of numbers as they descended eleven floors. The doorman approached as they got out of the elevator. “Miss Lindquist,” he said, looking embarrassed. “I’m sorry, but you cannot leave your furniture and boxes here.”

“Please,” she said. “I won’t leave my things here for more than a day.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Lindquist, I truly am, but our manager has informed me that you can’t leave your things in the lobby.”

The woman clutched her suitcase. “But where can I put my things?” she said.

“I’m sorry. Not here,” the doorman said.

The movers were already beginning to carry her boxes and furniture outside to the street. “Wait,” she said to one of the movers.

“That man told me to begin moving these things out,” the mover said, shrugging.

Mr. Chen watched as Vera Lindquist began to drag her suitcase across the lobby. She looked frantic standing outside on the sidewalk beside her possessions. People stared at her and then at her things as they walked by. The movers came and continued to dump boxes and pieces of furniture on the ground, all of her possessions growing and spreading into an island around her feet. Everything was in a pile, jumbled together. Her table, her chairs, her bookcase, her boxes, her rug, her mattress. Everything was in disarray. The movers departed, and Vera Lindquist was left standing alone amid the disordered heap of her objects. She seemed at a loss. She ran back into the lobby and Mr. Chen heard her beg the doorman if she could use the phone at his desk.

While she was dialing numbers, Mr. Chen came up and tapped her on the shoulder. She flew around, staring wildly at him.
"I am sorry about this," he said. "I had hoped – I had hoped you already moved."

She hung up the phone slowly. She looked at him in a daze, tears in her eyes. "I was so happy to live here," she said.

Mr. Chen looked at her sadly. He felt as if they had been brought together to bring each other grief. "I'm sorry," he said.

Vera Lindquist picked up the phone again and began dialing. Mr. Chen turned away and slowly walked out of the building to his car. On the sidewalk, people were going through her possessions. Two women had opened a box and were taking out her clothes. Another man was dragging a chair away from the heap. Mr. Chen felt a tiredness in his bones that made him want to lie down and rest, to close his eyes and to forget. He thought about the silent apartment twelve stories above, and he knew it was an emptiness that he would return to.