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The Way I See It

— nurse

I’ve never heard anyone scream like that. I spoke to her a few minutes before, in the little room where I draw the blood. She made a joke of some kind; I don’t remember it now. I guess that must have been a sign of her nervousness—a high-pitched little laugh, almost giddy. Then she went off to the room where they do the procedure. A few minutes later, I heard it. She was crying out, “No!” like some kind of bird—like a mother bird, diving to protect her nest. That’s what I imagined for some reason. And then it was silent. The anesthesia. I was surprised that they went through with it after such a protest, but I suppose they thought it was just drug-induced hysteria. So they did it.

I decided to go check out the waiting room, I remember. I wanted to see who might be there for her when she came out. There was an older man, maybe forty-something, sitting a seat or two away from a young girl—a redhead—about the same age as the one inside. Both the man and the girl looked utterly horrified. I felt uncomfortable staring at them, and so I turned to go back inside. But then I noticed why I felt so awkward standing there, so conspicuous: they were the only two people in the waiting room. It didn’t make any sense. There were supposed to be other women waiting—they had appointments—some of them had already checked in! Other women had been sitting there a few minutes earlier… Then I realized: the screaming must have frightened them away.

I went to check on the girl. She was in the recovery room, had just woken up I think, because she was staring at the wall in a daze. As I got closer, I saw the tears streaming down her cheeks and dripping onto the front of her dressing gown. But her face was set and she didn’t make a sound, didn’t look around at anything. She stayed like that for a while, at least a half hour, maybe longer, and then she heaved a sob and brought her hands up to her face, wiping away the tears. I brought her a cup of water, and she took it without speaking, but before she could drink any, the cup slipped from her hand onto the floor. Well, that was fine. I cleaned it up, told her not to worry—there was plenty of water to go around. But when I brought her another cup, she turned her head away from me.
It was still those same two sitting there when I returned to the waiting room—the older man and the redhead. The girl looked up expectantly at me, but not the man. He looked nervous, eyes darting back and forth. His forehead was covered in sweat, in spite of the room being air conditioned, and there were dark stains around the armpits of his green polo shirt. He ran a hand through his wavy hair and finally shot a sideways glance at me. I said to him, “Are you the one responsible for that girl in there?” And he said, “What?” and then, “Yes, I mean no, I mean…,” and then he turned and looked at the girl next to him—who must have been her friend—like she was going to save him. She stood up and walked away, pulling a pack of Newports out of her purse on her way out the door. “Did you bring her here?” I asked him, and he looked around like a little boy caught stealing candy. So I told him, I said, “She wasn’t ready for this. She needed to talk to someone. You should be ashamed, taking advantage of a young girl like that, and then bringing her here to dispose of your problem.” And do you know what he did? He yelled at me—told me I didn’t know what the hell I was talking about, and that I should mind my own f-u-c-k-i-n-g business.

Well, I wasn’t going to stand for that sort of treatment, so I went back to see the girl. There was another woman in the recovery room by that time—it had been almost an hour since the screaming. The new patient was chatting away to the other nurse, going on about how her husband would kill her if he knew what she’d done, but how she didn’t want any more kids, being in her thirties already. She was laughing. I could see that the girl was struggling, listening to the other woman go on like that—she looked…tormented.

I offered her juice and crackers again—she hadn’t eaten or drank anything—but she refused it with a jerk of her head. When I pointed toward the bathroom and told her that her clothes were already in there, she sat up. Gripping onto the arms of the white recovery chair, she turned her body so her legs hung over the side, lowering one foot then the other to the ground, almost in slow motion. Three or four steps later she collapsed. She’d fainted. After we got her back in the chair, I had to go and let her friend and that man know that it might be awhile before she would be ready to leave. I didn’t go into any details—new patients had arrived in the waiting room.
—patient
I heard the poor thing hit the ground. I felt so bad for her, my god, she was so pale; she really looked terrible. They put me a few chairs away from her, and when I came to I saw her—she was just staring at the wall, pale and still, like a ghost. She was quite young, poor thing. I couldn’t help but look over at her at first. She was so sad and forlorn, like a lost bird—yes, that’s exactly what she looked like. And her hair, it was so messy—all those dark strands falling from the loose ponytail around her face, and the tears on her cheeks—I was only three chairs away. I thought someone should help her, fix her up a bit, but…well, she didn’t appear to want company at the moment in any case.

I was explaining to the nurse a little about my situation, how there was no way I was having a third child at thirty-five years old; how I had left the family at the beach house, telling them I was going to the spa for an overnight package. I was really just planning to staying in a hotel for the night, since bed rest is recommended for a day or two. My husband would kill me if he ever found out, and this could have finally been the son he so desperately wants, but really, a woman has to be the one to decide. It’s my body, and it’s not getting any younger.

Anyhow, the nurse and I were chatting pleasantly enough while I ate my cookies when I realized that the girl had fallen, and that not only had she fallen, but she was unconscious. The other nurse called out, “She’s fainted, I need some help over here,” and everyone rushed in and they lifted her back up onto her chair. I guess she must have reacted badly to the anesthesia: some people are more sensitive than others to that sort of thing. She was awfully small—her arms and face were very thin—and so the dosage, or whatever it’s called, was probably too high; she just inhaled too much gas. But she was young, so I thought, she’ll be fine, she’ll bounce back: you recover more quickly when you’re young.

To be perfectly honest, I really wanted to get away from her. I didn’t feel bad or anything, about myself or what I’d done, but it was depressing to be around someone like that just then, no matter how sorry I felt for her. So I finished my juice and changed back into my clothes in the restroom. She was still there after I had gotten dressed, awake again, but sobbing in small fits. I tried to smile at her before I left—a small gesture—but I don’t think she even knew I was there.
On my way out of the clinic, I had to pass through the waiting room, and I saw three women there, all of them young, sitting with their boyfriends or whatever. I especially remember one girl, a pretty, young redhead. She was visibly nervous, biting the nails of one hand while twisting her fingers through her curly hair with the other. She sat near a man who was obviously quite a bit older than her, and though he was handsome, with gorgeous, dark eyes, I noticed that he was sweating profusely—like a pig. For a moment—I don’t know why—I felt sorry for this girl tugging at her red curls, but then I thought of the one back in the recovery room. You see, there were no single men in the waiting room—just the three couples—and so I guess she had come alone, like me, the poor thing. So I thought, at least this one—the redhead—has the handsome pig to come out to when it’s all over with. But they were both young—the two girls—they’d both be fine, and most likely better off—especially the girl inside. She appeared to be completely alone in the world, like a lost bird, and that is certainly not the time to become a mother.

—friend
I remember how I almost lost it when she walked into the waiting room. I had been on edge, waiting for like two hours for her to come out. I mean, she looked so sad and weak—like she was about to pass out—I never saw her like that before.

She came with me about a year earlier when I was the one, you know, for the same thing, so of course I went with her. But what’s so messed up, is that’s not even where we were going in the first place. She had a doctor’s appointment that morning—her first appointment with the baby doctor, you know. He came to pick us up—he was supposed to be there to support her. But once we were on the road, he told her that he’d made her another appointment—a different kind of appointment. He told her she could choose where she wanted to go, but that if it was to her appointment, then she was never going to see him again after that day. What a fucking dick, right.

But I always knew he was a dick, and so did she. I went with her to the Cape that summer, worked with her at the restaurant—his favorite restaurant—that’s how they got together you know: she was his waitress. He came in all the time and requested her, gave her huge tips, flashing money around like some bigshot. Anyway, he’d only been telling
her for about two years that he was gonna get a divorce, but he still lived with his wife and kids in their big house on the water, and they didn’t know anything about her—not then, anyway. I couldn’t understand it—why she put up with him. I mean back in high school, she was untouchable, wouldn’t let anyone come near her practically, but for some reason, she couldn’t tell this old prick to leave her alone. She always listened to his bullshit and really believed that he would eventually do what he kept telling her he was gonna do. Actually, that’s not totally true.

She did try to break it off with him once, just before Thanksgiving after that first summer on the Cape. I’d already moved back home but she had stayed at the beach—even though the season was over and there really wasn’t any money to be made or shit to do—to be close to him, I guess. But something must have happened, because she packed up her car and moved across the state to get away from him, closer to home, where she could see her friends and family more. She started waitressing at this pretty cool spot, even started dating someone else for a little while, one of the cooks there, but he didn’t like that. He would call her all the time—in the middle of the night—tell her he couldn’t live without her, that it was killing him, that he loved her, and all that bullshit. Then one day he showed up there to win her back, made more promises, told her he’d rented a place for them, that his wife knew everything, and they would finally be together. So she went back to him. And instead of leaving his wife, he put her up in a nice little apartment back at the beach—far away from her friends—where he could visit her on the weekends when his wife thought he was away on business.

And that’s where he dropped us off that day, rolling out of the driveway before we were even in the door. He might’ve stayed longer, but she didn’t say a word the whole way back from the clinic, never mind look at him. I told him to get lost and he practically gushed with relief, glad to retreat in the safety of his shiny, green SUV. Just about everything the prick owned was green—his obsession with money, I guess.

Anyway, we just hung out all day, watching TV or sitting out on the porch looking at the ocean. I’m not that big on conversation most of the time anyway. She’s usually the talker, though, so I guess the silence was a little weird, you know. Like, she’s usually the one who has some crazy story to tell, or some random observation on shit that no one else bothers to think about or mention. But that day it was quiet, even when she
cried, and once she looked at me and whispered, “I killed my baby.” I didn’t know what to say. I think I said something stupid after a few minutes, like: “Are you hungry?” What the hell do you say to something like that?

Oh, and then her cousin called, but she didn’t want to answer so she let it go to voicemail and then put her phone on silent. Her cousin left a message saying that she had driven up for a surprise visit to find out how her first doctor’s appointment went. She sounded all excited.

The thing is, everyone back home knew she was pregnant; she told her family and close friends, and word had spread pretty quickly. She had planned on keeping the baby. That’s why she told people, to stop herself from doing something she knew she didn’t want to do—like, a willpower thing. She used the same trick when she quit smoking: tell everyone you know that you quit, and then you’ll be too embarrassed to smoke in front of them; tell everyone you know that you’re having a baby, and then…well, you get the idea. The dickhead had been trying to talk her into getting rid of it for weeks, since she first told him about it, and so she told her family—and me—as a way to make it real: so she would feel like it was real.

Like when it happened to me, I hardly told anyone, ’course people obviously found out because everyone likes to talk shit about everyone else. But, the point is that I never thought about it as anything more than…I just tried not to think about it. She’s not like that. She thinks about everything, too much. She thought about it as a baby—as her baby—and, well, once you call something a baby, then I guess that’s what it is, even if you can’t see it. It’s real because you make it real.

That morning in the car, I guess the reality of the fact that she was only nineteen and she was going to be a single mom, stuck at home, living with the family she had been running away from for so long; the reality of a dead-end life in a dead-end city raising the baby of this asshole next to her who wouldn’t even look at her and swore he’d never have anything to do with her or the kid ever again…shit…It must have seemed more like a nightmare, with only one way to wake up.

I watched from the back seat while she stared at him, but he kept his eyes on the road, straight ahead, waiting for her to tell him which way to go. She must have been
hoping he would turn and see the look on her face. I could see it. But his head didn’t move an inch.

Fine. That’s what she said. One word, that was all it took.

We hid inside her apartment with the lights off and the door locked while her cousin knocked outside and called her cell phone over and over again.

“I can’t talk to anyone.” I think that was the only other thing she said to me all day.

—cousin

I was so excited to see her. It was the first chance I’d had to visit since she told me over the phone that she was pregnant. She was going to see a doctor that morning, and so I thought it would be perfect timing. I would take her out to lunch and she could tell me all about her appointment. I knew her friend had stayed overnight to go with her to the doctor’s in the morning, so I didn’t rush, but figured I’d catch up with them after for lunch. I wanted to surprise her, so I didn’t call until I was almost there, but then I got her voicemail. It was already a few hours after her scheduled appointment time, so I guessed maybe she was at home taking a nap. I knocked for a few minutes, but no one answered the door. Her friend’s car was there in the driveway… I thought maybe they had gone to lunch or to the beach, or shopping—really, they could have been anywhere.

There was a café down the road. I had a salad and called her a few more times, but she never called back. I wasn’t worried—I mean, she could have gone out without her phone or the battery could be dead—I was just disappointed. I really wanted to see her and hear all about the doctor’s visit and talk about baby names and just spend some time with her—my little cousin. But after lunch and a few hours of shopping around town while I called her a bunch more times with no answer, I got in my car and drove home. I didn’t know she was hiding from me.

She finally called me back a few days later and told me what happened. She sounded really bad: her voice cracked, and her tone was just miserable, like she was sick. She apologized for not answering the door, said she couldn’t face anyone. I felt like she should have trusted me, I mean I’m family, but I realized I had shown up too late. If I had been there earlier—darn it—I could have stopped her. Not that I would try to tell her
what to do—because you can’t tell her what to do, everyone knows that. You see, she wanted to have that baby. That’s why I was going to see her—I was excited because she had been so excited when she told me about it on the phone a few weeks earlier.

When I heard that he was the one who drove her to the clinic, and not to the appointment with the OB-GYN, I just knew that he bullied her into it somehow. Her friend’s nice and all, but she wasn’t the best person to have around in this case—everyone knows she’s already had two or three of them…removed, like it’s some form of birth control. And so I still feel guilty, like I let her down. If I had just driven up the night before, I could have brought her home that morning. She told me on more than one occasion that she believed in it for other people, but it was something she could never do herself. I would have stood up for her when that jerk tried to bully her and now she wouldn’t have to live with this on her conscience for the rest of her life.

She was done with him for good, that’s what she said on the phone, so I told her she should come home for a while, that she could even stay with me, but she had already made other plans. Apparently her father had set her up with a sales job over by where he lived. She said she was moving in a week. I guess she didn’t want to face everyone. Her mom told my mom—and everyone else—that it was a miscarriage, but no one really believed it, especially after she stayed away. I offered to come help her pack and stuff before the move, but she got weird on the phone. I think she had started crying. “I really just want to be alone,” she said. I don’t think she saw anyone until she got to her father’s house. She was always kind of independent.

—father

I told her she was better off. All she really needed was a fresh start. Listen, she was the smartest kid you ever saw, okay, and I’m not just saying that because I’m her father. You ask anyone and they’ll tell you: she could read and write when she was about four years old—unbelievable. So she had a rough time in high school, fought with her mother a lot, experimented with drugs, hung out with the wrong crowd—it happens. God knows I did my fair share of acid and partying when I was her age.

After graduation, she went to work at the beach for the summer and started up an affair with some married guy. I met him; he wasn’t that bad. I mean, did I like the fact
that my daughter was sleeping with a married man more than twice her age? No, but it
could have been worse. She could have still been screwing around with those gang
bangers, those drug dealers back home. Those kids are dangerous: they have drugs,
guns—fifteen is middle aged in their world. At least this guy gave her a nice place to live
and kept her out of the gutter. She wasn’t gonna die from screwing some rich guy, but
she sure as hell might’ve if she’d stayed in that cesspool. That’s what the city where I
grew up turned into, with all the immigrants and the welfare: a home for druggies and
criminals.

It wasn’t like that when I was a kid, but things change, and we gotta take care of
ourselves when they do, because no one else is gonna do it for you. That’s why I got the
hell outta there years ago, and I was glad when she did the same. So it didn’t work out
perfectly—life never does. I told her she should look at the whole thing as a new start, a
clean slate, a chance to do something more with her life than work in some restaurant at
the beach. So I called some people and got her hooked up with a good sales job here, in
the suburbs, where it’s safe. One of the old ladies I work with had an extra room to rent
out.

She moved out here, got decent a job, a place of her own: now she could get on
with her life, make some money, put the whole thing behind her. She’s got her whole life
ahead of her, that’s what I told her. Someday she’ll look back on all this and think, thank
god I did the right thing.

Listen, I never wanted her to have that asshole’s baby. Yeah, he wasn’t as bad as
the punks, but he was still an asshole. When she told me she was keeping it, I said,
_Honey_, listen to me, this is the rest of your _life_ you’re talking about. Then she told me he
didn’t want it. No shit, I thought, he’s already got a family. But people don’t think about
that kind of thing with a clear head when they’re young and in love. Trust me, I
remember. This guy wasn’t gonna leave his wife ever, not after this. If he really loved my
little girl he would have done it when he found out about the baby. How do I know?
Cause that’s how I ended up with her mother. I got her pregnant when I was still married
to my first wife with a kid at home. I was in the exact same situation.
So what did I do? I divorced the first and married the second, and why? Because I loved her, and that’s what you do if you’re a man. This guy either didn’t love my daughter or he was a fucking coward; either way, enough’s enough.

Now, I know her mother wanted her to keep it—I didn’t have to ask, I just knew because that’s how she is—but that would have been a mistake. She would’ve ended up living back at home, and soon enough she’d be slumming around with the same shitheads as before. Oh, let me tell you, her mother would have loved it if she came home to live with her, a real source of power that would’ve been for her: look at me, I’m here sacrificing to take care of your daughter and grandchild, and where are you? You see, her mother is a manipulative woman, and she hates it when she can’t control people. Everything she does, she does for a reason, and if she told our daughter to have that baby it was so she could lure her back home and into her web. The whole damn city is like that: a fucking flytrap.

—mother

I was heartbroken when I found out she did what she did. I knew that guy was no good for her, but this wasn’t about him, it was about us, our family. She wanted to keep that baby and so she should have, end of story. There was absolutely no reason for her to let him manipulate her like that. She has a family full of people who love her, no matter what she’s done in the past. I would have taken her in without a second thought. Of course I would have—I’m her mother, and when things get bad, who else are you supposed to turn to? She could have come home and had that baby, and all of us would have supported her. She could have got financial aid and gone to community college. My house is big enough for her and a baby…not that it matters now. It’s not like she can take it back.

She called me first when she found out, before anyone else, and she said to me, Mom, I’m pregnant, I’m having a baby. She was sure and happy and there was no doubt—uncertainty about the future, yes; fear, of course—but not doubt.

I know why she felt the way she did about the whole thing. It’s because of her brother, my son, my first child. I had him when I was only sixteen—three years younger than she was when she found out she was pregnant. I was a single mom, a teenager, but I
never even considered giving up my baby; it just never entered my head, never occurred to me. The boy who got me in trouble ran off and joined the army and I’ve never once seen him since. By the time I got together with her father, my baby boy was already three-and-a-half years old. I had been a single mother living at home with my parents all that time.

Then I married her father and had my two girls. And then we got divorced, because her father was just as bad as the bastard she fell for—couldn’t keep it in his pants.

Once her father skipped town, her brother was more than just a big brother to her, he was almost like a father. He’s only four years older, but she idolized him when she was a little girl. The point is that if I had done what she did, she wouldn’t have had a big brother to take her to the movies, and the amusement parks, and camping, and everything else.

That’s why she felt like she couldn’t face us and had to run off and live way out in the middle of nowhere with her father. I told everyone she had a miscarriage, including her brother. Just think how he would feel if he knew…no, sometimes a lie is kinder than the truth.

I don’t blame her. I’m not angry at her, just sad that she let the men in her life take advantage of her. Obviously her father supported what she did or she wouldn’t have gone to him. First he supported her relationship with a married man, and then he supported her letting that man force her to do something she didn’t want to do. I’m just grateful her sister isn’t going the same way she did. At least someone is learning from her mistakes.

—sister

I was so mad at her for a while, when she moved away and met him, because then she didn’t want to visit me anymore, or take me to the mall, or even just listen when I wanted to talk to her about what was going on in my life. She would come home for holidays and be on the phone with him the whole time, totally ignoring her family. I was growing up and she didn’t care. She was just obsessed with some old guy who treated her like crap.
She came to visit me a little while back and we talked about it all. It’s a good thing she didn’t have a baby, because she didn’t even know how to take care of herself. If she had a kid then, it would have grown up even more messed up than she was, and I guess she knew it. Mom swears up and down that the only reason she did it was because he made her, but I don’t believe that. I know my sister and I’ve never seen anyone make her do anything. And regardless of what an idiot she is sometimes, she’s not stupid.

When I think about everything she said, it’s almost like, well, I sort of think maybe she *let* herself get pregnant, to test him, to find out if he was ever really going to leave his wife. She said his wife was sick, dying maybe, and that’s why he couldn’t leave her and the kids. I don’t think it was a conscious decision or anything, but lots of people have sex without getting pregnant, and like I said, she’s not stupid. I don’t think she wanted to trap him—she just needed to push him, one way or the other. Once she got pregnant, I guess then he had to show how much he really loved her.

I don’t know whether she thought he would be happy about it or not. Maybe she expected it to finally bring them together, and it backfired on her. Or maybe it confirmed what she already knew deep down. It’s not like I’m saying she was nonchalant about the whole thing, because it was the complete opposite—it was really hard for her to even talk about.

But it forced her to move on. She said it was the hardest decision she ever made and she doesn’t think she’ll ever feel right about it. I can’t really imagine how she feels, and I guess, in some ways, I don’t want to. I love my sister, and it hurts me to see her in pain, but she’s the one who got into that mess in the first place. I just know I have to be smarter than she was, so I never find myself facing the same choice.
Absent Brushstrokes

Excerpts from the Private Journal of Guan Daosheng

All excerpts written in the final year of Zhongtong of Yuan, except for the last, which is from year one of Yuezhen of Yuan.

***

A woman must wield her wit as a passport when traveling in the world of men. Her wit. That is what I attempt to instill in our daughter, though lately she wields her looking glass as the ultimate confirmation of her status in the world. Of course she is beautiful, but what of that? What joy can Xinran ever find as a pet? A bird in a cage she shall be, all her talents lost to these shallow times.

When I was her age, I longed for knowledge. My gaze fell to the outside world, and there I found beauty far surpassing anything in my own reflection. But times change. It is now the fashion for young girls to primp all day. Female education is discouraged under the new rule while marriage supposedly provides all a girl should ever hope for or dream of. These northerners will turn our world—our people—into a shallow image of what we once aspired to be.

Perhaps I am simply growing old. The past calls to me, the present unravels me, and the future gallops at me like a wild horse. The stampede advances: will I catch hold or be trampled into dust?

The wind was insolent today. Wang Ping and I took tea in her garden. Gusts descended, rousing the leaves from their branches, causing them to crackle and fall about us. After some long moments, the air became calm. The rustling and howling faded, until we could hear geese flying overhead, migrating further south for the winter. As we gazed at their aerial procession, formed in the same shape as the hairs that peak toward the center of Ping’s forehead, the wind renewed her attack, violent enough to pull our bound hair from its tight coil.

These days, the wind and I are of one mind, one temperament, though the lucky wind has more freedom of expression. Even now, as I sit with my brush, documenting all that you shall never truly know of your abandoned family, the wind plays the temptress outside my window. It is dark and late, all the household slumbers, and the only sound, the only stirring, is made by the wild wind, gusting like mad brushstrokes. A feminine
temper, surely, for the very same storm rages inside me, hidden by my skin. My gentle exterior protects those whom I meet from my volatile nature, just as this house protects me from the very breath and motion of Nature herself. For what or whom does she yearn, I wonder? As she rattles at every door and window, rolls over the mountains and streaks through the valleys, seeking, screaming for lost love, so I wish to run from the safety of this place, barefoot through the fields. I would climb the trees to the very top and call out your name, Zhao Mengfu, my husband, why do you not return to me for so many seasons?

A house, a shelter for the body
The body, a house for the mind;
Between the two exteriors,
Secure space.
When two bodies under one roof dwell,
Two minds rest at peace.

The thread of my story has been lost with the wind—let me return. Ping and I took tea and eventually discussed our husbands, as we women are wont to do, though I doubt if you men ever bother to discuss your wives. Well, you know Ni Zan to be a uniquely fastidious man, washing his hands and face with fresh water and a fresh towel seven times a day. Recounting his odd habits, Ping and I laughed, and then Ping said, “The man bathes more than the Emperor,” and of course, we fell nearly into a fit at the irony in that. But this is not the crux of the hilarity, which I am bound to report, as it must be a novelty of the ages. “What will he think to do next,” I commented, “have his face polished like the silver?” And this is when Ping revealed her husband’s latest obsession: “Daosheng,” she spoke confidingly, sudden seriousness pressed upon her fleshy, heart-shaped face, “he has commanded that the servants must wash the trees every day, with scented water, and then pat them dry with a clean towel. Is he not quite mad?” And then we laughed so terribly that Ni Zan overheard us and came out to inquire what devils of hell had possessed us. Just as he pronounced the word “devils,” yet another burst of wind flooded the garden in a torrent, upsetting the tea bowls (nearly empty, thankfully) as if in answer to Ni Zan’s question. Sobering, I begged my leave of Ping with affection, bowing
to Ni Zan with all the seriousness I could muster. The man is a genius with a brush, but I
dare not ask Ping how those sparse, frigid strokes translate to the bedchamber.

Our son has seldom put the brush down these some five or six moons past. He has
your manuals and he pores over them for hours. In your absence his heart grows bold to
please you. You will return to find the boy you left behind has become a young man. He
and I discuss the strokes categorized in your album. We sit together at times, down by the
lake, or in our bamboo grove—the one you and I planted just before you left; the husks
are tall and leafy now. He and I paint together, and yet alone, as all artists must. His style,
onece so like your own, has evolved, and now resembles nothing so much as his own
amateur impressions. His use of color lately is (dare I say) inspired. I have begun a hand
scroll of our grove, since you are not here to watch it grow. Soon you shall be reminded
of the length of time passed out of our sight, though you remain, constantly, in our
thoughts.

***

The last scroll to arrive made me shiver and weep. I imagined dissolving into water,
flowing up those blue mountains, through the fissures, over the summit, to sprinkle down
upon you on the other side. Your brushwork is changing, though from what influence I
remain ignorant. What inspiration have you found out there in the world?

Per your request, the painting has been passed on as a gift to your dear friend
Zhao Mi. He thanks you infinitely for your thought and consideration in creating for him
an impression of the ancestral landscape he has never seen. He wonders when you will
find your journey at an end, and return south. Will you ever listen to my subtle calls, my
mild persuasion, and give up your attempt to be part of this foreign court? Or do you find
satisfaction in service to the invaders: men who’ve never held a brush, much less
contemplated religion, philosophy? So many in our circle resist, yet you felt a calling—
why? What loyalty can you, a descendant of true emperors of old, possibly feel toward
these barbarians?

Even as I brush out these thoughts, I wonder: Am I envious? Do I wish,
somewhere inside, that I were a man? That I could leave this home and come to know the
land as you have? My life is geographically small. The world I know cannot compare to
that which you have seen. And yet, I believe I am content. I have books and painting and
poetry. I have a family, and friends. I have grass and trees and a lake and a boat. I lack only the person to share it with.

    The simple pleasures of our life await you, but your children and your wife grow older with every passing day.

        To Princes and Lords belong
        The great positions in human life;
        But wealth and fame, fleeting, are not freedom.
        How can they compare
        With a single boat,
        Gazing at the moon,
        Poetry on the wind,
        And leisurely returning home to rest?

    And now I must lay down my brush, as another night will shortly come to a lonely end.

***

The wind carried on today as it has for most days of this long, cold season. All last night my dreams were full of your body in my arms. Do you remember embracing for days, between poetry and painting and calligraphy? Do you remember my lips on your neck, kissing the soft skin, sniffing for the short, downy hairs on your earlobes, my tongue and teeth teasing out sighs of urgent pleasure? Do you remember how warm we could be, naked, in the dead of winter, and how our bodies could twist and join together in more ways than would seem possible? How is it you can do without for so long? My own ministrations to these desires are inadequate, counterfeit reproductions of the sublime joy create when we come together. My dear Mengfu, I miss your shoulders, the collarbones, the blades of the back, your snaked spine, the sharp bones at your hips, your muscled limbs, arms and legs and fingers, all of you. But most of all, the depths of your eyes when you reach into the depths of me, my core, to melt my stone center into sweet fruit.

***

Today was not pleasant. You are not even here, and yet you pierce me with your words. What shall I tell our daughter? Yes child, nurture your vanity. You are correct to value physical beauty above all else, since man is incapable of resisting its promise. Ah, but
that is only part of the tale, for beauty will not last, no, and then the next and the next will fill the withering vacancy.

I finished the painting: our bamboo grove. Tomorrow I will inscribe it with my answer to the scroll that was delivered to me this morning. You would have a concubine. You are lonely. You have needs. Guan Daosheng will always be the first lady of your heart. Please understand and give thy blessing in response. Zhao Mengfu, come home. The answer is to come home.

The bamboo was first planted
On the day milord left;
Already the bamboo has formed a grove,
And milord has yet to return.
Once faded, my jade visage
Can hardly be restored—
Unlike a flower which dies to bloom again.

Our most illustrious Emperor has apparently had an influence on you. He that has four principal wives with ten thousand attendants each, and takes forty new concubines every year. A scholar-official surely shouldn’t be denied just one of each. Every man must decide where his happiness lies, and every woman must create a life independent of her husband.

I desire none but you, yet you would find love with another. How will you look at me, when you finally return, after you have been with her? Will you bring her here? Will I be jealous of her youth and beauty? Will Xinran prefer her to me? Will you?

You claim to be making successful strides within the government, easing the burden on the true descendants of this land. Your work is important, fulfilling, necessary—fine. But can you not carry out similar tasks in the South? The simple fact is that once you take another woman as your partner, our bond will dissolve. I cannot give you my blessing. No.

***

Zhao Yong has requested leave to join you in the North. Selfishly, I want to keep him close by me, a beloved companion in substitute for you. And is he not young still? Just
fourteen springs have passed since he was a baby in my arms, yet he would have his father’s influence and guidance.

“Wait,” I said, “Wait until we have our next message from your father. Then we shall decide how to reply.” His features confronted me with hopeful resignation, but he said nothing more. So lost was I in my desire for you, I did not hear that the wind was also calling Zhao Yong.

Xinran cried when she heard her brother might be leaving. She pulled at her hair and cursed me for letting her father and brother leave us all alone. “We women must make our own world,” I told her calmly, prying her fingers from her hair. “We shall go and take tea with Wang Ping tomorrow, and you will find how enjoyable the company of intelligent women can be.” She stared into my face for a moment before turning abruptly and running from the house. Zhao Yong followed her, tossing me a generous smile over his shoulder, meant to assure me that there was no real reason for concern.

They returned home for dinner together, and we all ate in near silence, uttering only polite necessities. Of course, it was not really silent. The wind often rose and rattled through our home and through my chest—and through Yong and Xinran’s chests—teasing us with stories from far-off provinces, and then dashed away, leaving us behind, shaken, waiting for the next rush. And so here I sit, at my wooden table, writing words for you that you may never read, waiting for your next message, still shaken by the last.

***

Xinran will not take up the brush. “It is too manly,” she said, “not what a real proper lady should do. Besides, none of the other women paint or write, only their husbands. You think you are a man. That must be why father left.” And before I could respond she ran out the door, as she so often does these days. What would I say? It is true that most women choose not to learn brushwork, even for simple record keeping, never mind calligraphy or painting. It is true that the few women who do learn keep their work secret, so as not to offend. What, then, does that make me? The question never bothered me while you were here, while we brushed together, side by side. I felt only pride in my abilities and a sense of purpose greater than what I assumed other women felt. Do you remember the poem I brushed on to my first finished painting?
To play with brush and ink
   Is a masculine sort of thing,
   Yet I made this painting.
   Would someone not say
   That I have transgressed propriety?
   How despicable; how despicable.

There is far less humor in it without you here to mock-scoff at my insolence.

Even Wang Ping I used to urge to take up the brush. “Don’t you want to leave your own mark on time?” I asked her once.

“My children are my mark,” she replied.

“They are your husband’s children, also, and yet he paints. He concerns himself with the mysteries of nature and the elements.”

“Daosheng, I am not like you. I am happy with the traditional feminine duties and pastimes. I prefer to create that which is of use to my family: clothing, dinner, household peace. My husband comes to me to leave his intellectual pursuits. I provide him a physical and emotional sanctuary. Besides, with you as my friend, I have all the chance I need to ponder the wonder, beauty, and meaning of the world.”

I didn’t understand her then. I thought surely her marriage must lack the bond of ours. Now I see that all relationships function on some level of dependency and need-fulfillment.

Wang Ping and I did take tea again together recently, but she ventured here, as Ni Zan was having all the furniture moved to the garden so that their home could be washed without anything in the way. “Won’t the furniture become soiled in the garden?” I asked her.

“Oh yes, but that is fine,” she replied, sipping her tea. “You see, each piece will be washed, dried, and polished on the doorstep as it is carried back inside by a line of servants, so that everything will enter the home in the most immaculate condition possible.” The proud woman buried her face in her tea bowl, leaving me unable to decide if she wanted to laugh or cry about the ludicrous business. Finally she looked up, and there were tears, but she was smiling.
“Your husband may be eccentric, but at least he is present,” I told her, finding myself near tears. We sat there for a moment with our heads bowed in silence. Then we realized how silly we looked, two grown women ready to cry into our tea bowls at the slightest provocation, which set us off on one of our painful laughing fits. And those only bring more tears. Many thanks to the heavens for my dear Wang Ping.

***

It is bitterly cold today. We dare not leave the house, any of us, and so our children and I spent the morning playing games like we used to when they were smaller, and you were here. First, we played our favorite word game, starting with the word wind. It seemed fitting since the sound of it filled our ears. The associations we came to were rather fanciful and Xinran was so pleasant for once. I had nearly forgotten how she enjoyed excelling at such witty exercises. I said, “wind,” and then Yong, after a moment of tight-eyed thought, said, “Wind streams,” turning to Xinran with that playful, challenging look of his. And Xinran responded slowly, saying the two words like she could see them in the air above us, below the beams of the roof. “Wind…Streams…Precipitate,” she finished, and then actually smiled at me.

I barely stopped to think at all. “Wind streams precipitate grand…” and then Yong repeated it all, stressing each word in an effort to remember, and added dreams.

Here is how the story ended up:

\[ \text{Wind streams precipitate grand dreams evaluate drowned themes infatuate kind gnomes facilitate hand poems illuminate blind stones predominate sand homes encapsulate fond} \ldots \]

And that is where it finishes, because Yong was unable to recall the word encapsulate. I declared Xinran the undoubted winner, since she chose to use complex rhymes, rather than our simple monosyllabic offerings. We missed your verb modifiers.

***

You are coming home, back to the South. To receive the news after so long a wait…it is hardly real. Reassignment—the word is music. Today, as the first plum blossoms arrive on the trees, a parcel arrived with your seal. The album you sent of bamboo paintings and calligraphy has sent Zhao Yong into a state of supreme concentration. For myself, I shall now mark the waning and waxing of the moon with expectant pleasure till your arrival,
so transformed am I by the prospect of your return. Though the reason for it may have
more to do with the death of the Emperor and the accession of his grandson than with any
urging on my part, I am satisfied. Trust in the universal and eternal, facilitated by our aim
to live virtuous, compassionate lives, is explanation enough for this desired turn of fate. I
shall not question it any further.

Indefinite waiting fills day and night
To expansive proportions,
Lengthening each moment like a slow breath.
Now the end is near
My breath quickens
At the thought of you
Climbing over mountains home to me.
Hawai‘i Trade

AUDREY

Melody, darling, put Mummy’s underpants back on the pile. Go tell Daddy you want your swim floaties, then you can play in the pool. Good girl.

This is a nice house, isn’t it? Large, clean, new—expensive. Nearly an acre. A hell of a lot nicer than the cabins I lived in on the cruise ships, cramped in with two other girls. Sleeping on a flimsy little mattress, no privacy. Not that it was all bad. There were plenty of opportunities to party, beautiful islands at every port, gorgeous men…We had our fun, sure, but that’s no way to live for long. Just a step on the ladder, a staging ground. I wouldn’t ever call my years of service to idiotic tourists a sacrifice, exactly, more like a period of growth—personal and financial. There was always a plan for the future. The business I’d have, the house I’d own, the money, the family…

God help me, raising a child in this country—a daughter. She’s not even three years old yet, but I’m already thinking about it. How she’ll be as a teenager—an American teenager. Sure, Hawai‘i’s different, but not so much; not for long. I can’t stand American girls, and I don’t mind saying so. They’re so self important, so sure of their sense of entitlement, like goddamned princesses. Maui’s full of them, useless rich brats who think they’re supermodels. Glasses full of champagne, noses full of cocaine.

My father built up a million dollar business in New Zealand, from nothing, one little fishing dingy, and I didn’t take so much as a dollar from him to start my business—our business—the shops: Hawaiian Creations in Waikīkī and Pacific Jewels here in Lahaina. Matt and I worked our butts off for two years on the ships after we got together, and then he went on that Salmon fishing expedition up to Alaska. We were apart for six months. No contact at all. But the money was good, that’s why he went. We decided it was worth it. Maybe not…There was a strain, for a while. He wouldn’t talk about his experience on the fishing boat at all, and he absolutely never wanted to go out again. I don’t know to this day what he hated about it so much exactly, except maybe just our being apart when we were so in love. It was hard for me too—we’d only been married a few months…not like that’s really any excuse, but it was only one night…

When he came back, that’s when the problems started. I would catch him looking at me like he was trying to look straight through to my mind, read my thoughts or
something...But it all turned out alright, because we had a plan, a vision, and so we worked for it, not letting anything get in our way.

Matt’s not your typical American. He doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty. Then again, he’s a man. These girls, these little brats raised on American TV and all the American conveniences, they think the world should just be handed to them. They want to get paid for standing around and doing absolutely nothing.

I worked in the shop until a week before I went into labor with Melody. One of the girls that works here in the Lahaina store, she tells me, “I can’t work this week, Audrey. I’ve got to rest. I’m stressed.” She’s works about fifteen hours a week and spends the rest of her time at the beach. The last thing she needs is more time off.

Lei was different—that’s why we left her in charge of the Waikīkī store. She wanted to work. She put in the hours, made the sales goals, kept things clean and organized. The only flag was her boyfriend, Mike. Always hanging around the store, calling, coming in with his friends. We warned her about how boys and friends love to get free gifts. I knew she wasn’t perfect, but who is? And so I wonder what really happened. She calls me on a Sunday night at dinnertime. Matt’s got steaks on the grill and I’m folding laundry with Melody—well, actually, Melody’s unfolding the laundry…

_Audrey, it’s Lei. I need to talk to you about—_

Matt fired her last week. He left Christina in charge. The new girl from the mainland that moved in above the store with Lei a few months ago. He said Lei was ripping us off, giving stuff away to her friends, stealing…

_He had no right to fire me...he’s lying to you, Audrey. I didn’t do those things—_

Melody’s banging on the screen door and Matt looks in, sees me on the phone. I meet his eyes and for a moment I wonder: Is there a glint of fear there? Paranoia? He’s always had a sixth sense, like when he came back from Alaska and he just seemed to know…Melody stop that!

_Audrey, I would never do anything to hurt you. I’m your friend. I was loyal to you for three years. I put my heart into that job, my life, it was my life. Every day in the store, cleaning, merchandising, selling, working hard, and the only reason he fired me, the only reason he’s telling you all those lies about me is because he’s been lying to you—_
For months, she says, he’s been lying to you for months. She’s crying, nearly hysterical. I smell the steaks and Melody’s got herself buried in a pile of laundry, socks flying, Matt’s calling my name—“Audrey, who’s that? Dinner’s ready,”—and I’ve got this girl on the phone telling me that my husband…

*He’s cheating on you. He’s having an affair with Christina. He’s doing all this to cover it up, because he knew I would tell you. He wants me out of the way so he can keep his secret—*

I’ll be out in a minute, Matt. So I say to her:

“Listen Lei, I couldn’t give a shit who Matt’s fucking, as long as he does his job and takes care of Melody. That’s the kind of relationship we have. So I really don’t see why he would fire you over that. But what really puzzles me, what I simply cannot understand, is if you’re such a good friend to me, and you believed my husband was lying to me for *months*, then why are you only telling me now, after you’ve been fired and kicked out of the apartment, where I presume all this fucking was going on? Goodnight Lei.”

And now to find out if my husband of nine years is really having an affair. It certainly would explain a few things.

NIKKI

“Aloha, welcome to Hawaiian Creations. If you want to see anything in the case just let me know…”

“Made in Hawhyee,” the woman says, reading the sticker on the bottom of one of the wooden bowls.

“Yes, ma’am, all made here in Hawai‘i, the carvings and the jewelry too.”

“Wow,” she says, “authentic Hawaiian stuff.”

Yep. The real deal.

She buys a necklace with a shell hanging off a leather cord and a small carving of a paddle. One hundred fifteen dollars total. Mahalo.

My shift’s almost pau. Another hour. I already rang over fifteen hundred in sales this morning. That’ll keep the bosses happy. Keep ’em rich. But hey, I get paid pretty good, a little raise every six months, so I’m not complaining. I keep the store nice, all
clean and polished, like one art gallery, and the tourists come in all swooning, dying for take home a genuine piece of aloha. Me, I’m just the middle man. I do what I’m told. That’s what a part-time job’s all about, right? It’s not my store, not my story. Anyway, I’m not complaining.

So Christina’s the manager now. I wen’ tell her from the start, before any of this drama broke out, no fuck around with Matt-Audrey them. And now, just look what happened to Lei. Me, I only work part time, I go UH, international business, so I no care about this job too much, get bigger things on the horizon. I no take um too seriously. But Lei, she was all in, you know, never liked school, since we were kids, but she really liked running this store, and now…well, I no really talk to Lei these days. I tried to call her a few times, left messages with her parents, but no reply. We been friends since fifth grade when we got paired up for one science presentation. She’s the one who went get me the job here, way back, before she even got her promotion. We were like sisters. Not like I did anything bad to her, but I guess, since I still work here…I guess she thinks I choose them over her. But it’s not like that. For me, it’s just a job…

So I told Christina again, no get too involved if you can help. Audrey’s not the kind of woman you want on your bad side. She get a tongue like one razor blade, and a shotgun to match. Me and Lei, we went stay at their house in Maui one time, couple years back, helped set up the store over there when it first opened. They had just bought these new leather sofas for the living room, right. Real nice, green and so soft. But they had one cat, calico, fat, all orange and white colors—super cute. Well that cat, Piko I think was her name, she never knew better, so she went reach up the arm of one of those new sofas and dug her claws in, brought um down, and tore right through the soft green leather. Audrey came in and saw that. She went grab her shotgun, grabbed the cat, threw it outside and shot the fucking thing dead. So I told Christina, when I seen how she stay talking with Matt, all close and personal, like they get history together or something, I said, you better watch it you no end up like one fat dead calico cat for scratching up one other woman’s leather.

But she no listen, that girl. She planning for go on the buying trip with Matt in October—Thailand and Bali. Says it’s one good opportunity, that Matt wants to teach her. Tries for make like that’s all she’s interested in—learning about the business. Says
she wants to have stores of her own someday. But don’t mention anything to Audrey about me going on the trip, she says to me. Matt said she wouldn’t understand, she says. You think?

You know what, I’m not the smartest or the wisest girl on this island. But I figured out a few things so far as I go along in life. Lots of people, they’re climbers. Always trying for get at something that stay just out of reach, like the stars. Like they no can see that some things are better left in the distance, cuz once you get too close, it burns. I not one climber, kay, but I try not for get stepped on either. Everyone walking around smiling, talking pretty, when inside they stay kicking, clawing, and stomping at each other’s faces.

“Aloha, welcome to Hawaiian Cre..."
your bacon mushroom burger’s overcooked so I have to take it back and tell the manager I accidently ordered it medium when you wanted it medium rare.

“Focus, Lei, remember what we say about focus!” Please order me around like I’m your personal slave, stare at my ass as I walk away, and wink when you say you want the “Big Boy Island Special,” like that’s just made me weak with desire for your Hawai‘i vacation special.

“Hey, where’s our drinks? We’ve been waiting forever?”
“I wanted a salad instead of fries!”
“What’re you doing after work, Lei? Such a pretty name, Lei, just like the flower necklaces the natives give you at the airport.”
“I wouldn’t mind getting a lei from you, Lei. You can lay me any day.” Just lie down, Lei, and let them all screw you. I suppose I should’ve slept with Matt when I had the chance, and there was plenty of opportunity with him staying in the same apartment every time he visited from Maui for the weekend. But no, I actually had some respect for myself. I have a boyfriend of my own. Didn’t want to have sex with my boss, my married boss. Didn’t know that was how to really move up at Hawaiian Creations…but I found out…

It happened a few weeks ago. I had a pounding headache after a long, busy day—over twelve grand in sales—so I closed the store fifteen minutes early. I walked upstairs to the apartment, but I heard noises before I reached the door. It was Matt’s voice, all heavy and strained, “Oh Christina, oh yeah, just like that…”

I silently stumbled back down the stairs out to the street. Vomited in the side alley. But I didn’t say anything. I wanted to tell someone, but I couldn’t. Not Nikki. Not even Mike. It was too shocking, like finding out your parents aren’t who you thought they were, that you were adopted, something like that. But I watched closer after that, and then all the little moments of the previous weeks started to make sense. The way Matt would find a reason to leave the store whenever Christina was off or even during her lunch breaks. The way they’d be sitting there together, drinking beers when I came up to the apartment after closing, quiet, smiling, making small jokes that I didn’t totally understand. How did I miss it?
And then Christina’s got a new Gucci watch, and new Armani sunglasses, and she’s dressing in only Banana Republic and Guess?, and I start to feel a little bit annoyed, a little bit irritated, because don’t I really deserve all these “perks”? Haven’t I worked the right way? Where’s my bonus? She’s the thief. She just walks in and takes over, steals my apartment and my job right out from under me. And I was the stupid one that opened the door for her.

She showed up at the perfect moment—right as I was about to lose two employees who had fallen in love and decided to spend the summer road tripping across the mainland. Not more than an hour after they break the news that they’ll be leaving in three days and I put a Help Wanted sign up in the window, she comes in looking for a job. I liked her right away. I guess everybody does. Except Nikki. Not that Nikki didn’t like her, but when I asked after the first week, “What do you think of her?” Nikki said, “She’s fine.”

“Don’t you like working with her?” I pushed.

“Yeah.”

“So what?” I could see that she was holding back, not saying something. Nikki never likes to say anything bad, never likes to get caught up in anybody’s problems. No drama, that was her motto all through high school. But I wanted to know what she was thinking, so I asked again. “What?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Christina just has this way about her, like she’s not even listening to what you’re saying. Like when she asks you a question, before you even get two words out, she look like her mind already stay thinking about something else.”

I hadn’t noticed that.

“When can you start,” I asked Christina, not even having her fill out an application. She’s got such a bright personality, I know she’ll be good with the customers.

“As soon as possible—now, if you want.”

She laughed, but not a nervous laugh, an intimate laugh, like we were sharing a joke, like we were old friends.

“I’m new, just arrived two days ago, and I really need to start working.”
“How about tomorrow then,” I said. “I can train you. Would you rather do opening or closing shifts?”

“How about tomorrow then,” I said. “I can train you. Would you rather do opening or closing shifts?”

“Both. Any. I’m staying at the hostel right around the corner until I find a place. I am at your disposal.”

The way she said it, I felt like this was someone I could trust. I talked to Audrey a few days later about letting her stay in the apartment with me, in exchange for which she’d work for two dollars an hour less than what we usually pay new employees. It’s a done deal. Everyone’s happy. We worked opposite shifts so that we weren’t crowding each other’s space. I had the bedroom and she was on the pullout couch. A couple of weeks went by and things were better than ever. I got a few mornings off, a few evenings, and I felt confident that the store was in good hands. Plus there was Nikki, who worked with Christina during the busy times. Sales were up. The shop looked great. The future was bright and full of possibilities…

“What about when the boss comes?” she asked one night as we sipped wine at the little counter that divides the kitchen from the living area. “What about when Matt comes? Where will he sleep?”

“I’ve got a blowup mattress for the living room. He can use that. He used to take the pullout, but he said he’ll be fine on the blowup. “

“So when’s he coming next? I’m curious to meet him after everything you’ve told me.”

I noticed that her eyes sort of sparkled in the lamp light. I had seen the sparkle before, when she was selling something to a customer. It’s how she draws them in.

“I don’t know,” I told her. “He likes to pop in unannounced. Try to catch us slacking off.”

“Ah, well, he won’t catch me.”

“No,” I said, “he’ll like you for sure. It’s hard to find good employees.”

And I was right. They hit it off immediately. Talking to each other like they’d been working together for years after only a few days. So why was I so surprised…?

They could feel it, I guess. They knew that I knew. They wanted me gone so they decided to say I’d been stealing. I didn’t steal anything. Everything I had, I paid for…besides, they’re making a fortune off the merchandise. The markup’s insane.
And Audrey, she doesn’t even care. She blamed me. After everything I gave them, they can just toss me out like yesterday’s rubbish. It’s not right. I’m so frustrated it makes me crazy sometimes.

But what can I do? What power do I have? I’m just a fricken waitress.

CHRISTINA
There. Clean and organized. My apartment. Now I just need a hot shower before I go down to work in the store for the night. Wash it all away. I guess after seeing Lei today—I didn’t know she’d starting working at Big Island Burgers. I sat down for lunch at the bar and while I was waiting for my food, I saw her, taking an order at a table. I asked the bartender to wrap my food to go, but it was too late. She saw me on her way to the kitchen. She stopped and stood there looking at me. She started shaking. I cancelled my order and left. I definitely won’t be going back there again.

I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I moved out here to get away from trouble. To start fresh, a clean slate. What could be more perfect than Hawai‘i? When you grow up in the middle of nowhere—upstate New York—and marry the guy that you went to the prom with, only to find out after five years that he’s been having a secret life with another woman the whole time and that he’s addicted to oxycodone—when that’s your adult life in a nutshell, you want to get hell away from any possible reminder of it and start over. Hawai‘i—as far as you can get from upstate New York and still be in the good old US-of-A.

My parents didn’t want me to leave. Go to counseling, they said. Work it out. Stand by your man. What I really wanted to do was lock myself in the closet and tie a plastic bag over my head. I came close, had the bag in my hand, home alone. I stepped into the closet, pulled the door closed, stood there in total darkness next to the vacuum and the winter coats, breathing. I lifted the bag and covered my face with it, tried to breathe, but the thin plastic took the place of air. I held it there for I don’t know how long, until I felt I would faint, and then I pulled the bag away. I breathed again, long, deep breaths. I stepped out of the closet and bought a plane ticket. One-way.

When I got out here and found a place to work and a place to live all in the first week, I couldn’t believe my luck. It was the universe telling me that I’d made the right
decision. Leaving the past in the cold. Quitting my job at the children’s museum. Leaving my family and my friends. I used the savings from my private account for the ticket and showed up here with five hundred dollars cash and a suitcase full of clothes. That’s it. The sum of my twenty-four years on this planet.

Now look at me. I’m managing a retail store. I have my own apartment. I have nice clothes—linen and silk. I’m an independent woman, for the first time in my life, and I’ve never been so happy. For all those years, I thought I knew who I was, where I belonged. But all I knew about myself was what other people saw in me. Christina, the pretty one, the good girl, the little sister, the young wife. All anyone cared about: “When are you going to have kids? It’s about time, isn’t it?” “What’s taking so long, you’ve been married since you got out of high school?” That’s how I found out about Joey and his other woman. He got her pregnant. And my family wanted me to stay with him after that. He wasn’t even the one to tell me. She did.

I knew her from high school, would see her out sometimes. Imagine my surprise when she shows up knocking at my door one day, a tight shirt showing off her round belly. Right there on the doorstep she told me that the baby was Joey’s and that he was going to have to start paying support, and that I might as well know the truth already. “He’s an addict,” she said. “Got a serious habit. He needs help.” And then she left. I watched from the doorway as she got in her car and drove away. She looked like she could pop any day. I was gone before the baby arrived.

And now I’m in love. In the beginning, I thought it was just innocent, harmless flirtation. I mean, he is really attractive. And he is my boss. I was just…being friendly. Trying to make a good impression. Sure I liked him right away, but I didn’t think anything of it. He’s married. He’s got a little girl. I’m not some kind of home wrecker. I’ve never even been with anyone besides my ex. Matt and I just had a lot in common, a lot to talk about. I honestly didn’t think anything was even possible.

After leaving my husband, and my home, I’ve been isolated. Living with Lei and working with Nikki and not much else. To have a man look at me and talk to me like that, with so much interest…Maybe I was a little careless in my flirtation, a little too friendly, especially after a couple drinks. I guess I figured he was just humoring me, at first. After the night on the beach, though, I knew we were in trouble. And I came here to get away
from trouble. A shower, that’s what I need now. The world always feels fresher after a shower.

MATT
“Daddy,” she says, and opens her arms up to me. I lift her into a hug—she’s so light, but getting bigger every day. And she’s beautiful, truly beautiful. A miracle. I never thought I would like being a father. I didn’t want kids. I didn’t want her. I had no idea what it could be like. Watching her grow and learn. The way she sees the world. The wonder tempered by a budding intellect. You can see it all in her eyes, her beautiful green eyes, just like her mother. Like Audrey. Those eyes mesmerized me…

She’s at the store today. I’m home with Melody, bouncing her on my knee, doing paperwork, paying bills, getting ready for the trip next month. I’ve got new carving samples to bring to Bali. I think they’ll be great sellers in the Waikīkī store. Women dancing hula—all different poses and sizes, from a foot to five feet tall. They’re gorgeous. The samples are koa, but the teak in Indonesia is just as nice. Tourists don’t know the difference. The design is Hawaiian. We could never afford to have them produced here on a large scale—we’d go broke. I’ve explained it all to Audrey. She understands the numbers. The bottom line, I told her a few years back, when our old lease expired and they raised the rent in Waikīkī, is that if we keep producing here, then we’ll lose our house. She didn’t say anything after that. For her, silence is acquiescence. That was when she stopped coming with me to O‘ahu to check on the Waikīkī shop. Decided to put all her time and energy into Island Jewels here on Maui. Just one more rift in a long series of separation.

I need to buy the tickets for the trip. Two tickets. I’ll buy one first-class, then trade it in for two coach. That way the credit card bill will only show one ticket purchase. If there’s any fee for change, I’ll pay with a different card. Audrey never checks the bills that closely anyway.

“Daddy, I’m hungry,” Melody says, looking up at me from my lap with those big green eyes.

“Okay, let’s get some cereal.” I carry her to the kitchen, put her in her highchair. She loves cereal. Matter fact, so do I. I pour us each a bowl with milk, sit down at the
counter, and eat with her. This is the life, right here. Through a mouthful of Honey Nut Cheerios, Melody says, “Daddy…?” looking at me wide-eyed with her spoon in the air. And I say, “Melody…?” giving back that same look as best as I can. And she bursts out laughing, the happiest girl in the world because her daddy’s here next to her eating cheerios. Really, everything would be perfect…if Audrey wasn’t such a cold-hearted bitch.

She’s always been tough—the Maori blood from her mother’s side—warrior blood. It’s what I loved about her. A woman who knows what she wants and knows how to get it. No nonsense. Work hard, play hard. We met on the ship. She was really something. Had the whole crew under her spell, plenty of the guests, too. The women followed her lead. The men tried to get her alone on the beach. I knew of a few. Good-looking guys she’d gone off with while the ship rested at port. There were other nights when she’d come back just before we shoved off, and everyone gossiped about the possible man she’d spent her time with. I never gossiped. I never tried to get her out on the beach. I was the quiet one. She would catch me staring at her. I never could look away in time; I could never stop looking; so I stopped looking away. And then, of all those men, she chose me.

We swam naked under the moonlight. We hiked through the rainforest and made love behind a waterfall. It was her idea to get married. “Hawai‘i,” she said. “Let’s settle in Hawai‘i after we save some more money and start a business there.” She wanted to be close enough to New Zealand. She needed a passport to live in the US. She wanted to make her life with me. I would’ve done anything she asked.

But that was almost ten years ago. She’s not the same person. I’m not the same. Not for a long time…Then she went off the pill without telling me and got pregnant on purpose, knowing I didn’t want a kid. I couldn’t stand to look at her after that. What do you do with a woman you can’t trust?

“All done!” Melody says, holding her bowl up in the air.

“Good girl. Time to use the potty?” I take her to the bathroom, she washes her hands, and then I put her down for a nap, read her Goldilocks and the Three Bears, kiss her precious little face.

Back in my study I check my phone: one missed call. Christina.
“Hey Beautiful,” I say when she answers.
“Well hello.”
I can hear the smile in her voice. A sexy smile. “What’re you doing?”
“Working. You?”
“The same. Paperwork at home. I’m about to buy our tickets.”
She squeals a little on the other end of the line.
“I miss you,” I say, putting my hand down my shorts.
“Oh, Matty, I miss you too. I really missed you last night. I was tossing and turning, all hot and bothered.”
“Really? Did you touch yourself?”
“Maybe. A little.”
“Were you wet?”
“Mmhmmm.”
“Did you taste it?”
“Mmhmmm.”
“Did you want me inside you?”
“So bad.”
“Did you want me to fuck you good?”
“So good.”
“I love you, Christina…I love you…”
“I love you, too,” she whispers as I explode onto my T-shirt.
“Is it busy today?” I ask after a few seconds.
“Pretty good. Nikki’s with a customer now. Looks like he’s going to buy one of the five-foot paddles.”
“Nice. She’s a good little sales girl.”
“I better go. They’re ready to check out. Call me after you get the tickets. Bye.”
“Bye,” I say, but she’s already hung up.

AUDREY

I decide it’s about time to make a trip to O‘ahu. Meet this young lady that’s been given the reins to my store. “Hello Christina.”
She sounds nervous as hell.
“Oh, so you recognize me,” I say. “Not to worry, they’ll be here in a bit. I sent
them for coffee and pastries. Won’t that be nice?”
I inspect the store, checking the shelves for dust, straightening clothing racks.
She’s a pretty little thing. Eager, though, like a rodent.
“So what brings you to Waikīkī?”
“Well I own a store here, and so I like to drop by every once and a while, just so it
doesn’t slip my mind.”
“Oh, right. How was the flight? Does Melody like planes? You know I feel like I
know you both, Matt talks about you so much.”
“Does he, now? That’s a treat. How’s your mother?”
“My mother?”
“Isn’t that why you’re taking two weeks off in October? For your mother’s
surgery?”
“Oh, yes, yes. She’s…okay right now. It’s her knee. She’s a runner, so her knees
aren’t good, especially one knee. So the operation will keep her off her feet for a while.
But I’ll be there to help, so that’s why I need to take off. Yes, thank you, for asking.”
“And how are you liking Hawai‘i? Does the weather suit you, all this heat?”
“Oh, yeah, I hated winter. How about you? What’s New Zealand like in winter?
Or it’s opposite seasons there, isn’t it? Do you call the warm season winter, or do you
switch it around and call this time of year summer?”
“Right. So have you got a boyfriend yet?”
“Me, oh well, there’s one guy, we’ve been out a few times.”
“A nice boy, is he?”
“Yes, very sweet. But I’m so busy with work—not that I’m complaining, I love
this job—but it really takes most of my energy. How’s business over in Lahaina?”
“We do alright. I also like to think I devote my time and energy to making that
store successful. We’re looking at a location on the Big Island, you know.”
“Really, no, no, I didn’t know. That’s great.”
“I don’t suppose you’d want to hop on over to Kona if we get it started?”
“Really? That’d be fun, opening a new store. Why not? If you need me.”

“But of course you wouldn’t get to see your little boyfriend at all then, would you?”

“True. I’d better think about it.”

“Yes, perhaps you ought to. Think before you act—I’m always telling Matt that. Decisions made in haste can have the most awful repercussions. I remember one time, before Matt and I fell in love. Before our beautiful wedding on the beach. I was in love with this older man. He was quite attractive, an artist—this was in England. I spent the summer there, staying with an aunt on my father’s side. I was young, nineteen maybe, on my own. I met this artist at a café in London. It was stinking hot in London in the summer time. I just sat around and smoked cigarettes, drinking lemonade, really just in awe of the sense of freedom I felt to be away from home and all on my own. My aunt was completely oblivious to my presence.

“He was from Italy, the artist, and he was actually an art dealer, as well. He spotted me at the café, and I suppose there was something about my youth and foreignness that struck him, like we both didn’t belong there. He started up a conversation and before you knew it we were back at his hotel in bed together. He sketched me on paper with charcoal all afternoon and we made love again and again. I thought I’d never feel that way about anyone ever again. We spent the week together and then he went back to Italy. Back to his wife and children. I still have the sketches at my parent’s home in New Zealand.

“It took me months to get over it. There was a point later in the summer when he came back to London and found me at the Café. I’d been going there every day hoping to see him again, and I guess he counted on that. Some men have a way of twisting a woman’s heart so that she’ll do exactly what he expects her to. And I did. And we spent another week together. Another round of sex and sketches, delicious meals and nighttime strolls. But in the end, I realized I’d wasted my whole summer and most of the rest of that year thinking about someone who would never be mine. If only I’d been a bit more cautious to begin with, I could have avoided the whole thing. Live and learn, I suppose. I’ll go look and see if Matt’s almost back. He might just need a hand what with the kid and the coffee and all.”
We all come back together, a happy family. It’s terribly obvious how Matt’s trying not to look at her, like he’s afraid he’ll give something away, but Christina, she’s fine, playing with Melody, peek-a-boo and ABC’s, like she’s her aunty. Like playing games with my daughter and my family is her natural vocation. There’s certainly something going on. Hopefully a healthy dose of reality will scare the little bitch away from Matt. She ought to realize by now—he’ll bring her nothing but trouble.

He wasn’t always like this, a liar. In the beginning we shared everything, so young and innocent. So much trust. But relationships change…people change. These past few years, since Melody, I feel like I can’t trust a word that comes out of his mouth. Always finding reasons to stay away. Sleeping on the couch when he’s home and taking extra trips to the other islands to scout locations, supposedly. I’m glad he wants to build the business up. It’s what I want as well. I just don’t know how we lost our…our affection for one another in the process.

I decide I’ve seen all I need to see. We go over the books, look at the new window displays, Melody pulls down a rack of hats, which Christina diligently moves to repair.

“Well Christina, it was very nice to finally meet you. I hope your mother stays healthy and that you and that boy of yours find some time for innocent young love. Come on, Matt. Grab Melody. Let’s go have lunch at Big Island Burgers. I’ve got a craving.”

I look back because Christina’s knocked over the hat rack again. Melody laughs and claps her hands.

“Is there something wrong with that rack?” I ask her.

“No, it was my fault. Lei works there now, by the way. At Big Island Burgers.”

Matt’s frozen in place, his eyes travelling everywhere except toward me or Christina.

“Well, then we better go somewhere else,” I say. “Wouldn’t want our burgers spat in.”

NIKKI

So Christina finally confides in me about her and Matt. We’re in love, she says. Get one special connection, she says.

He get one special connection, I say, and it’s called marriage.
We’re at the outdoor bar, right on the beach, having a drink together after work. It’s sunset. Christina hired a new guy, one mahu, for close the store a few nights a week. Blaine. Guy can sell the pants off just about anybody.

“I’m so confused,” she says. “I don’t know what to do.”

She sucks down the rest of her Mai Tai and I finish my beer, so I wave down the waitress and we order two more. I definitely need another drink to talk about this.

Before I can even think of anything to say, she starts into it, telling me the whole story. How on her birthday he surprised her with a joint and they went to the beach to smoke it together.

“Why would he bring you a joint for your birthday?” I interrupt.

“Oh, because I had told him how on my fourteenth birthday I smoked a joint for the first time. And this was my twenty-fourth birthday, so he thought it would be a good surprise. And it was, don’t you think, really thoughtful and sweet?”

“I guess…I don’t know how sweet it is to bring your employee a joint for her birthday, but I guess Matt’s not your typical employer.”

“Exactly—he’s cool.”

She goes on, tells me how they smoked right out there on Waikīkī beach, except there was no one around because it was late, and how they kissed that night for the first time. Christina’s birthday was back in early August. Back when Lei still ran the store.

I start to get kind of a sick feeling listening to her. I don’t want to know anymore about all this, so I get up to use the restroom.

When I come back I say, “You should end it, right away. Nothing good can come of this.”

“But, we’re going on the trip together next week.”

“Don’t go. Stay here, keep your job, and move on. We can go out to the clubs together. You’ll meet someone new.”

She frowns a little and sucks down the rest of her drink. I can tell she not gon listen.

“Why’d he fire Lei?” I ask.

“You know why. Because she was stealing.”

“And what made him think she was stealing?”
“Nikki, you saw all the jewelry she started wearing. If you didn’t ring it up and I didn’t ring it up, then that means she stole it.”
“Yeah, but how did Matt know?”
“He noticed, I guess.”
She looks around for the waitress, holding up her empty glass. Right then, I know for sure what I always suspected but never let myself think about. Christina told Matt to fire Lei. Yeah, she justified it to herself. Lei supposedly took some jewelry without paying for it. I don’t know and I don’t really care. But Christina told Matt she stole because she wanted Lei’s job and she wanted the apartment, Lei-free, so they could carry on this affair.
“I gotta go,” I say, tossing a twenty on the table. “Have another one on me.”
She looks at me but doesn’t say anything, and I turn and leave her sitting there, walk away without looking back.

CHRISTINA
We’re meeting at the airport. Nikki and Blaine are working extra while I’m gone and Audrey’s going to be there for some of the time. She’s going to stay in the apartment. With Melody. I wonder if they’ll sleep in the bedroom or on the pullout. Probably on the pullout. Not that it matters. Either way, it’s a bed where Matt and I have made love.

I get to the airport early and make my way to the gate, sit, look at all the people. Look out the large windows at the planes all lined up. I’ll be on one soon with Matt. Flying away to another country. Just him and me. I’ve never loved anyone so much in my life. It’s a desperate love, the kind that burns and tortures and can’t be ignored.

It was fate that brought us together. There’s really no other explanation. Fate has brought me to this moment right here: terminal A, gate 16. They say the best way to test a relationship is to travel together. But you can’t argue with fate. Whatever happens now, it was written in the stars in the moments when this world was born. It may sound a little crazy, but I know it to be true. How else can you explain the sequence of events that led us to one another? We grew up three towns apart. We even know some of the same people. But we never met. It wasn’t the time. Our destiny was to meet here, in Hawai‘i,
both of us arriving on the winds of fortune, searching out better futures than anything our
hometowns could possibly offer.

Audrey doesn’t even like Hawai‘i. She’s very negative, Matt says. I think she’s
beautiful, but she looks a little…old. Too much sun, maybe. There’s definitely a
roughness about her, inside and out. Matt can’t stand it any longer. He wanted to leave
her years ago, but then she got pregnant. Their time together is past. It’s sad, but I don’t
feel guilty, because I know he’s not in love with her. That’s no way to live—lovelessly. It
would destroy them all in the end. And Melody would suffer the most. So in a way, fate
is saving them all by bringing Matt and me together. She probably won’t see it that way
at first, but in the long run…

Maybe Audrey will go back to New Zealand. Then Hawai‘i can belong to us. Or
at least if she stays on Maui and Matt moves to O‘ahu…but we haven’t talked about any
of this yet. Not really.

There he is! Matty, my love. I jump up from my seat, beaming. Why doesn’t he
run to me? He walks, looks around, gives me a quick peck on the cheek. His eyes are
overwide and his body seems racked with tension.

“Is something wrong?”

“No. Here, let’s sit down—”

He’s not normal. There’s a different energy about him. I sit and neither of us says
anything for a minute. Finally I ask again: “What’s wrong?”

MATT

This trip is a mistake. She shouldn’t be here. I left her back at the hotel, told her I needed
to exchange some money, that I’d be back in a few minutes. That was over two hours
ago. I don’t know where I’m going, just walking, passing by the small shops and eateries
that line the roads. The people around Bali all smile at me, offer up their wares. I try to
smile back as I pass by, but I know they see a man twisted and grotesque. I keep walking,
try to look away. I feel my internal strife rise to take hold of my features whenever I meet
someone’s eyes.

I’ve already placed all my orders, finished the business end of things. But we
don’t go back for another three days. I can’t stand to even look at her. I knew it the
moment I saw her at the airport. The guilt is too much. I feel like a fugitive. It never felt like this before. It was exciting, sexy…We haven’t had sex, not once on the whole trip. I…I can’t.

Christina completely blew my mind. It’s never been like that with Audrey, or with any woman. She wanted me and she made me feel so…strong, but also, young. Like a man and a boy at once. The future opened up when I met her, where it had been a closed cycle before, everything already determined, no more choices, no more surprises. The same hill and the same rock every day. Christina represented landscape, colors, life in all its forms. But on my last trip to O‘ahu, everything changed. Christina kept talking about Audrey, asking if she suspected anything, asking if she’d said anything after our family visit the week before. I would change the subject, but I had the same feeling. Every time I touched Christina, every time we kissed, and when we made love in the apartment, I felt like Audrey could see us somehow, like she was there in the room, watching.

Now, here, in this land surrounded by foreignness, I think of my home. I see a man feeding his child by the door of his home and I think of my child, how she loves to eat whatever’s on my plate, even if she spits it out after. Whatever I feed her, she’ll taste. She trusts me. She wants to know what I know. She represents the future—my future. I’m not only betraying Audrey, I’m betraying my child and myself—my family.

I have to end it with Christina. First, I’ll call and change the tickets so we fly out tonight—I don’t care what it costs, and then I’ll go back to the hotel and tell her we’re leaving. Maybe I’ll make up a story about an emergency back in Maui. Audrey’s sick…Melody needs me, and there’s no one to watch the store…Yes, that’s what I’ll do. And then in a few days, after we get back to Hawai‘i, next time I’m on O‘ahu, that’s when I’ll tell Christina that it’s over. That I love her, of course, but I have a responsibility to my family. She’ll understand. It’ll be hard at first, but eventually…

“Hello, yes, I’d like to make a change to my itinerary…”

CHRISTINA
Ah, finally. This is the best cigarette I’ve ever had. I don’t usually even smoke, but they make these delicious clove cigarettes here. Matt’s inside showering and I feel I could float right off this lanai. I can’t believe we have to leave tonight. I absolutely love this
island. It’s much more authentic than O‘ahu. Over there it’s almost like being in the regular United States, whereas here, everything’s exotic, tropical and lush. The people are nice and helpful, always smiling. What you wouldn’t believe is the prices—so cheap! This is truly paradise.

Not like Bangkok—that was awful. It smelled bad—like sewage—and the streets were crowded and dirty. There were homeless people sleeping all over the sidewalks. And the worst part: I got sick on the second day. My stomach wasn’t right for the whole first week of the trip.

There were some really cool spots—restaurants and outdoor markets. But what I hated the most—what pushed me over the edge on that first night so that I was crying on the street as we walked back to the hotel—was the prostitution. You wouldn’t believe how young the girls are. Lined up like cattle on parade in small, dark rooms. Being sold. We went in by accident…

It was our first night. We were bar-hopping, drinking and trying to have a good time, trying to shake off the conversation we’d had over lunch that day. I hadn’t been able to stand the silence any longer.

“Do you wish you were here alone? Do you want me to go back? Because I’ll leave tomorrow if this is how it’s going to be the whole time.”

He finally looked at me, really looked at me, without that nervous veneer he’d been wearing since the airport in Honolulu.

“I feel guilty.”

He said it like it was some big confession. Of course you feel guilty, you idiot, you’re cheating on your wife, duh. So I said aloud, “Matt, that’s only natural. You’re a good man in a difficult situation. You don’t want to live a lie any longer. That’s why, when we get back, you need to tell Audrey the truth. Not about us, but about your feelings. You need to tell her that you’re not in love with her anymore and that you want a divorce.”

For a moment, he didn’t say anything, but his mouth opened a little and all the nervous tension that had briefly dissolved, returned. His head started to move side to side, millimeters at first, but gaining in momentum with every shift. Fear, that’s what I saw.

“It’s not that easy, Christina. I can’t just…There’s so much at stake.”
“I know. I understand. It’ll be hard and it’ll take time, but Matt, it’s the right thing to do.”

I could see he didn’t want to talk about it anymore, so I dropped the subject. It got quiet again. We finished our lunch without saying more than a few words, but I knew he was thinking about what I said.

We spent the rest of the day buying jewelry, mostly for the Maui store. After showers back at the hotel, we hit the streets for food and drink—lots of drink. After our second or third bar, we accidentally stepped into the dark room with the stage and the line of girls in their underwear. My head was spinnny with alcohol, so I didn’t understand for a few moments.

“Let’s go,” Matt was saying, trying to drag me back outside. But I wouldn’t budge. Instead I moved further into the room. There was a bench along the wall opposite the stage where old men sat with beautiful young girls, touching them. A woman emerged from the darkness, smiled at me, pulled me to the bench, Matt still connected to my hand. Two girls, one with her leg over my lap and her soft skin on mine. Her pretty face right next to mine. Her breath in my ear: _Hotel? Room number?_ She stroked my arm, put her fingers in my hair.

“But you’re so beautiful,” I said. “You don’t have to do this…”

“Christina, let’s go—”

He tried to pull me away.

“You!”—the woman, the madam—“You do this to them. Why? How can you? It’s disgusting…”

We were halfway back to the hotel before I realized I was crying and people were staring at us. Before I heard Matt’s voice telling me to _please stop, calm down, listen…_

Then, the next day, I got sick. We spent two more days in Bangkok, but I didn’t leave the hotel room. I was still sick when we got to Bali. The flight was awful. I spent another few days here in the shelter of the hotel grounds—a beautiful resort with gardens and big pool. Matt worked while I recovered. It was only two days ago that I ventured out for the first time and saw the town and the people outside the hotel. I joined Matt while he visited the last few shops, where they carve the wooden paddles and bowls. We finished all the business yesterday and the next few days were supposed to be ours to
finally enjoy. But he comes back this afternoon and tells me that Audrey and Melody are sick. That we have to fly back, tonight. So I decide that we aren’t leaving this room without fully enjoying it, at least once. I don’t say anything. I sit him down on the bed and jump behind him, massage his shoulders, his head, take his shirt off. Then I move down off the bed, kneel in front of him, unbuckle his pants. He lets me touch him and move him, kiss him and ride him until we both climax. It’s the best sex we’ve ever had. He looked into my eyes all the time, searchingly, and I gave back all I have to give. Our connection is deeper now, I’m sure. Now I know that when we get back, he’ll do what I asked him to do. He’ll leave her. And we’ll be together.

So like I said, finally. My cigarette’s finished but Matt’s still in the shower. I go back in and get dressed. Still showering. I write a note: *At the bar*. It’s still a few hours before we need to leave to catch the flight.

LEI
Of course, that’s perfect, why didn’t I think of it before? So simple, and I don’t even have to do anything. They’ve already done it. They’re the liars. And now they’ll suffer.

AUDREY
He’s not right since he came back from the buying trip. I think he’s finally cracking up.
“Listen Matt,” I tell him. “I don’t really care anymore. I know all about you and Christina. I had a private detective follow you around in Waikīkī on your last visit. I’ve got pictures. I’ve got the phone records with all your calls back and forth to each other. So if you want to leave, leave. But just know this: you won’t get a penny. I’ll destroy you in court.

“Now, I’d rather have you stay on as my business partner. God knows I have no interest in spending any more time than absolutely necessary on O‘ahu. So just relax, get over it, and get rid of the girl. Go over there, stay as long as you need to, fire her and hire someone else in her place. A man, preferably. Or promote the gay guy, Blaine. I liked him. Okay, love? Otherwise you might as well go ahead and off yourself. You’re no good to anyone like this, certainly not to me, and least of all to your daughter.”
MATT
I need to get away from them, all of them, women. I hate them. They fuck with you, manipulate you, they use you and hurt you. Audrey never loved me, I was never good enough for her. The sex was never how she wanted it—never long enough, never good enough to get her off. That’s why she cheated on me. She did, that cunt. While I was on the boat in Alaska, I know she did. I felt it, and I lived with it, for years, but it was ruined. Rotten inside.

We wanted the same things, had the same dreams, and we made them come to life. I’ve worked so hard and now I’m going to lose it all, for what?

Christina’s just the same, just another whore. No, oh fuck, she loves me. She truly loves me, and I—I lied to her…But no, that’s not true, I love her, how she makes me feel, like I never felt before.

I’m so fucked, so sick. Too much, it’s all too much. That bastard on the fishing boat, thought he could bend me over the railing while his thugs held me down. Gotta show them you’re not their bitch, wait for that motherfucker on deck with a knife one night…They all try to fuck you over, everyone, no one you can trust in this world, no one to live for, nothing, all dirty, evil, pain, there’s nothing in this whole goddamned world worth the pain…

…except Melody. My daughter. My fucking daughter. She’s all that’s pure, my baby. But Audrey’s probably right—she’d be better off without me. But then wouldn’t she always wonder where her father was, if he missed her, if he loved her? I just need a break, a rest to get my head straight. I just need some time so I can be healthy for her, for Melody. I need to live for my daughter, my baby girl.

LEI
I haven’t seen Nikki in months. So much has happened and I have something really important to tell her, so I meet her on campus for coffee.

“Lei,” she says, “sister, I’ve missed you so much. I’m so happy that you called, cuz I wanted to apologize for not sticking up for you back when all that shit went down. I didn’t realize it at the time, but—”
“Nikki, it’s fine. It’s over and done with. It’s not what I came here to talk about. Let’s just leave it all in the past, kay?”

“Kay,” she says, and then we’re both quiet for a few moments.

“Mike’s taking his last final,” I tell her, “and then he’s done, ready to graduate. Nikki, I’m getting married—look!” I hold out my hand for her to see.

“Oh my god! I’m so happy for you, Lei.”

We’re up and hugging and I realize how much I, too, have missed my friend.

“And you’re going to be my bridesmaid,” I say, sitting back down. “I have to tell you something, though.”

“You gon make me wear some ugly pink dress wit all kine ribbons and bows and shit.”

“We’re leaving. After the wedding, Mike and I are moving to Philadelphia.”

“Moving?”

“He’s got family over there. And he got accepted to law school. So…”

She’s looking at me in shock, like she can’t believe I’m going to leave Hawai‘i.

“Look Nikki,” I say, “there’s nothing for me here. I want a better life, and I’m going to get it with Mike. We’ll come back when we can afford to live here without lowering ourselves.”

When we were in high school, and everyone was applying to mainland colleges, and Nikki could have gone to probably any college she wanted because she got a perfect score on her SATs, she didn’t apply anywhere except UH, like me. “Fuck the mainland,” she said. “This is my mainland.” And we both promised then that we’d never move away from Hawai‘i, because this is our home, and we weren’t going to be those people, always looking for the better life somewhere else.

“You know the store’s closed now?” she asks.

“Yes, I heard.”

“The landlords cancelled the lease after all the protests.”

“What a shame. I don’t really want to talk about this, Nikki.”

We return to the topic of the wedding, and things cheer up. Does she know, I wonder, that it was me? That Mike had the idea? He told his classmates in the Hawaiian Studies department about a shop in Waikīkī called Hawaiian Creations that was making a
fortune selling merchandise labeled “Made in Hawai‘i” that was actually made elsewhere. Does she know that it was Mike and his classmates that led and documented student protests as part of their final project? Probably, or why did she bring it up? Maybe she saw him there. Of course I already knew that the store closed. She knows I would have heard about it from someone. Oh well. It doesn’t matter now. It’s over. Do I feel better knowing that Matt, Audrey, and Christina lost as much as I did? Yes. Absolutely.

NIKKI
They’re all gone now. Audrey still stay on Maui with the kid, Melody. She still get the store over there, the one that wasn’t operating under a false pretense. I don’t know where Matt went hide, but I know some people working in the Lahaina store, and they say they haven’t seen him since Hawaiian Creations closed down.

They also say that Audrey’s doing just fine, even started dating one younger guy. I’m not surprised. She never was the type to get knocked down. You gotta respect that. I guess everybody has strength. It’s just everyone shows it different.

Like Lei. She fought back, though not in a way that anyone would probably suspect. And then she left her whole family to go live way out in Philadelphia, and she get one big family, too. But that’s how she strong.

And Christina, she strong, too. Real independent. A lot like Audrey, actually. Both all opinionated and hard-headed. Like when Christina came back from that trip with Matt, she had come to all these new conclusions about things, new convictions, all determined…

“I told him, Nikki, I said, ‘You either leave her, or this is finished. I don’t want to be this kind of woman. I’m twenty-four years old and I need to start living in a way that I can respect myself.’”

We were in the store, polishing the wood carvings, and she’s flinging oil off her brush all over the place as she gestures with it to make this point or that.

“So he said he would tell her this month, before November, and that he would come here and live with me. They’ll just have to split the businesses up—this one for him and that one for her.”
“And what about their daughter,” I asked. “They gon cut her in half, too?” She didn’t like that. Gave me that look.

“Nikki, I’m trying to do the right thing.”

“And how do you know what that is? What makes you think breaking up a family is the right thing?”

“Oh please. If their family was so perfect, he wouldn’t have come looking for me. Matt loves me. He doesn’t love Audrey anymore. It’s cruel of him to stay with her, really, since he obviously can’t be making her happy when he spends all his energy on me. That’s how I know I’m doing the right thing.”

She was so sure of herself—of her future. And then, a few days later, the protests started. Pickets out in front of the store. Reporters harassing her, questioning her. That was when Matt disappeared. After the store closed and they kicked her out of the apartment and she couldn’t get a hold of him for a while already, she called Audrey. Told her everything.

“Fuck off, Christina.” That’s what Audrey said to her, and hung up the phone.

She was staying with me at my parents’ house then. I took her in cuz I felt bad for her. The next morning, she was gone. I don’t know where she went. I guess she wanted to start over again. I know she had some money put away. Anyway, she’s a climber that one. She gon land on her feet, eventually. Like one cat. Oh yeah, she get claws, but a shotgun takes out a cat any day. I warned her. I just didn’t know they’d come at her from so many directions all at once.
Among the People
May sits in her chair in the corner, watching over her daughter and son-in-law. She holds
a small turtle, carved from pine wood. Though the doors and windows are sealed, a gust
of winter air swirls through the small dwelling. May brings the turtle to her lips, closes
her eyes, and listens.

“Lin…Oh, Lin—be strong, please, you’ve always been the strong one.” Joe
squeezes his wife’s hand, kneeling beside her where she lies on the bedding.

“I feel so strange, Joe, so weak…and the pain—the pain is…Is the doctor
coming?”

“Yes, he’s coming, I sent for him, he’s coming, Lin, he’s on the way.”

“Good, that’s good.” Lin cries as a wave of pain flushes through her. “Joe…” she
says weakly, breathing through the aftershock.

“Yes?”

“The baby, Joe, the baby’s coming…soon.” Lin’s eyes drift from her husband’s
face. Her head moves slightly as she searches the small, dim room. She tries to sit up.

“Joe—”

“It’s fine, everything’s going to be fine. Just be still, don’t strain yourself.”

“But Joe, I feel Tami, I feel her near me. She’s here to welcome the new baby…”

“Oh, Lin…”

“No, Joe, she’s here, she’s next to me, our little girl…”

“Do you really feel her? How? How do you know she’s here?”

“I can feel her, Joe, just like I always could. When she would read her book in the
corner…but you could always tell she was there, even though she never said
anything…sometimes for hours…”

“It’s all my fault, Lin. It’s my fault. I’m to blame, for not seeing…you knew all
along.”

“No…no, you had the right ideas—always. It wasn’t the idea that was wrong…It
was…it was the people carrying it out…But not you—you’re good, you’ve always been
good. So good to me. I know…I know how hard I’ve been on you. But it’s not up to
us…that’s why it didn’t work…nobody can force a river off its course, Joe…Not without
consequences…It’s better to just float, you know?”
Joe nods and Lin smiles weakly. In seconds, her body jerks and her face tightens up. She cries louder and more desperately than before.

Sitting on the chair, May opens her eyes, sets the turtle on her lap, lifts her flute from the corner and begins to play.

“Oh, Mother…that’s lovely,” Lin says, breathing again. “Tami never wanted to play, did she? She was like you, Joe…full of knowledge…but she loved to listen to Mother and me play, just like you…She can hear you, Mother—she’s here now.”

May lowers the flute from her mouth to speak. “I know, my child. I know.” She lifts it and resumes the notes, clear and bright, like wind over water.

“Maybe the new baby will want to play…like us, Mother. Maybe I can teach him…like you taught me—oh, Joe, did you hear? I called the baby “him” again…I keep doing that…I think it must be a boy…”

Lin screams out as the pain returns. A knock at the door goes unheard under the sound of her cries. The doctor enters. Joe stands as soon as he sees him, offering the place by his wife’s side. The doctor kneels down and opens his bag. He begins to examine Lin. Her pain passes once again and her breath comes heavy and labored.

“Oh my, this boy…is ready to leave my body…but it’s early doctor, he’s early, I think…I say he because it feels…like a boy, but we can’t know, can we?…But the pain this time…is really…strong…I’ve never had good luck with child bearing, but you know that. You were here…when I lost my…but then we had Tami…She’s here, her spirit—I can feel her…She’s come to welcome—”

Lin screams again, and again.

The doctor wipes her brow with a towel from his bag. “Yes, Lin, that’s just fine, let it out, let out the pain.” He turns aside to Joe, who has a fist in his mouth and tears in his eyes. “How long has she been like this?”

“She’s been in bed since this morning. But, Doctor, this is normal, right? Just a painful labor?”

“It’s hard to tell. She’s nearly due, but based on her history of complications, well…Tami was also a bit premature, but she was fine…I’m sorry, I—”

“No, it’s—”
Lin’s screams again, louder this time, breaking into sobs. “Joe, hold my hand—Mother…”

The flute music ceases. Joe takes one hand and May the other. The doctor works to deliver the baby, his hands under the sheet. Lin continues to cry out in the strain and effort of giving birth.

“Push,” the doctor tells her, “Push, Lin. Here’s the head…”

Her cries fill the small room, and then, all at once, there is silence.

“The pain, it’s gone—I don’t feel anything, just both your hands in mine…And there’s my Tami—Oh, Joe, I just realized!…I thought she was coming to welcome the baby, and she was, but Joe…oh Joe…she’s come…to…”

An infant’s cry rings out high as the doctor holds up the newborn child, the cord still attached to its mother.

“She’s come…for me…I love you…”

The doctor turns and hands the bundle to May, quickly cutting the cord. Lin cries out once more, almost in ecstasy, looking up above, and then falls silent. Joe takes both her hands in his own, whispers her name over and over. The baby continues to cry.

The doctor reaches for one of Lin’s hands, but Joe doesn’t let go. He checks her pulse.

“She’s gone. I’m so sorry, but she’s left you with a perfect baby boy.”

May holds the baby out to Joe. “Nature is mysterious,” she says as Joe takes his son for the first time. She retrieves the carved turtle from her chair in the corner and places it in the hands of her deceased daughter.

***

The night is warm—the first of the season: spring. Joe walks, tired, down the road to his home. He hears music flitting on the air like dragonflies before he sees his wife. She sits on their wooden bench—the one Joe built with his own hands and tools, with the lumber he cut from the nearby pine grove—in front of their modest home. She sees him, but plays on until he is only footsteps away.

“The moon is nearly overhead,” she says, tilting her neck so her chin slopes over the flute still propped in her hands. “I watched it rise alone.”
Joe stops before her, turns, and looks up to the sky, finds the moon large and round, glowing against the backdrop of darkness and stars. “Where was Tami?” he asks. “Oh, she and her book fell to bed straight after supper. She’ll wear out her eyes.” Joe smiles to himself, still gazing skyward. “Who ever knew a child’s head so filled with the classics?” Lin asks. “Come sit. I’ll play for you, and you can tell me about the meeting.”

Joe sits and listens for a while to the music, breathing in the fragrant evening air of early spring. “Well…?” she asks, eventually, then pipes a few expectant notes. Weariness replaces the air in Joe’s lungs. “There was an official from the capital—a senior party official, High Brother Lee—sent down to…” “Yes…?”

He can’t look at her. He rubs his thumb on the curved arm of the bench. “The decision has been made…We all agreed—for the people, for the people’s sake…we agreed to join—” “We? Are you and I not we?” she asks, interrupting him. “I meant the council,” he explains. Joe has an idea where the conversation is headed and wishes there were some way to avoid or alter the destination. “Oh, the council.” “Yes. The council deems it best to fall in with the movement.” Lin says nothing and he knows what she is waiting to hear. “I agreed.” She rises from their bench. “Perhaps we’ve both heard enough for tonight.” “Lin…” There’s a gentle plea in his voice. “I think I’ll sleep now,” she says, and walks to the door of their home. “Why don’t you tell me the rest tomorrow in the fields, when I can turn my thoughts with the earth.” “Lin,” he calls, stopping her. “We’ll have to go from here.” She turns back to face him, slowly. “What go? What we?” “Us. Our family—you and me and Tami. We have to, to…to relocate.” “Where? Why? Why us?”
He can see her chest rising and falling more quickly as the features of her face show him how disturbed she is by his words. “We’re not the only ones, Lin. Some other families from our village will join us. There will be…convenience to it.”

At his last words, he sees a change come over his wife, as though something has been settled, a look that he can feel in his gut. “When Joe?”

“It will all happen in a short time. The complex is ready.”

“Wait—what about Mother? She can’t leave here, nor can she stay here alone.”

“No. She’ll stay in the village—she’ll be cared for.” He stands and takes a step toward her.

Lin lifts a hand to halt him. “What do you mean, she’ll be cared for? Who’s going to care for my mother?”

“No one will leave this place; and the distance is less than a full day’s journey. We can visit after the harvest.”

“Oh, well, that’s reassuring—how can I possibly object now?”

“Lin, you must try to understand—the people’s Father will bring prosperity to our land. This is his great strategy for a shining future.” Joe gains strength as he speaks. “We are smiled upon to have such a Father for the people. We’ll dream of nothing, for all our needs will be satisfied.”

“You’ve come home with another man’s tongue.” She steps to him, stands and looks full into his face, his eyes. “And what then if I say I would stay in my home?”

Joe registers the fierceness, the determination, the strength and beauty that brought him to his knees for this woman ten long years earlier, when they were still so young and life so ripe. He puts his hands on her shoulders, rubbing them.

“The other women are excited, Lin. They smile at the airy images of days so close to life. Think of Tami’s maturity, free from kitchen strings, to drop the seeds of her mind in the moist, tilled soil our labors will produce. Think of the fruit to be born, how sweet it shall taste in time to come.”

“How can you know the future? Our lives pass well, honest, simple—why should we change?”
He moves to embrace her fully, but she pulls away.

“Don’t answer—I’ll sleep now. Alone.”

She enters the house and Joe sits back on their bench, gazing up at the stars and the bright round moon. After a moment of silence, he pulls a partially carved block and a small knife out from his pocket.

The next day grows warm as the sun rises in the east. Joe and Lin work side by side in the field, tilling the soil of their small plot in preparation for planting. Lin glances in the distance, where under the shade of a tree, her back against the bark, their daughter Tami sits, her face absorbed in a book.

“We’re needed at the complex now. We must leave by the week’s end.”

Lin stops working. “But, that leaves only two or three days from now—we need to pack all of our belongings, settle our affairs.”

“We don’t need to bring anything, only the essentials.” Joe says, rhythmically swinging his tool into the soft earth.

“But, how can we decide?” She takes up her hoe again, using it with more force than before. “What to take, what to leave?”

“We’ll leave it all, just bring the clothes on our backs, a few tokens, food for the journey—a day’s trek.”

“But Joe, what about my dishes and cookware? What about my flute and my loom? My grandmother’s spoons?”

“By all means, bring your flute.”

“Oh, you’re so generous,” she says, but the sarcasm is lost on Joe who’s lost in images of the future.

“Everyone loves to hear you play. But as for the rest—the pots and pans—there is truly no need. They will be of more use here.”

“But how will I cook?”

“You won’t have to. There will be people who work in the kitchens and people who work in the fields—assigned people to do everything. And we’re going to develop industry alongside agriculture—the complex will have everything we need to live.” Joe pauses for a moment, thinking. “I suppose you might work in the kitchens…I’m not
actually sure how that will be decided. But regardless, there will be community pots and pans, bowls and spoons, everything."

“I suppose Mother will appreciate me leaving the spoons. But Joe, who will look in on her, cook for her?”

“She won’t stay in the house. She’ll have to move with the other elders; they’ll be well cared for.”

“Move where? Cared for by whom?” She stares sideways at the man beside her, wondering who he is that he can say such things so carelessly.

“Oh dear Lin, I haven’t told you the best part; she will be happy.” He steps to her, wiping the sweat from his forehead on his sleeve, but she looks back to the earth, swings her tool with great force, dangerously close to his foot, so he moves away but continues with his explanation.

“The landlord of our village has been evicted from his big house. He left with his family for the city. The house will be converted into a happiness home for the aged, and some of the young women from the village will move in to care for them, as family would.”

Lin moves further in the opposite direction, still beating at the soil with full strength. “Who is it that has the right to remove families from their homes? What is natural or good about ordering people to live here or live there? What will become of our home, then, our plot of land?”

“It will be converted, re-allotted.”

“So, we’ll have no home to return to?” She whacks at the dirt.

“Why do you think only of returning, of the past? Look to the future, Lin.”

“Why do we have to go when others are allowed to stay?”

Joe stops working again, carried away by his thoughts. “The other families that are staying are much larger than ours, with many young children, whereas we have only…Tami, our blessing after our early losses. We have always said since she arrived and survived that we have all the joy we need. But for her there will be education at the commune, and she will have other young people her own age to play with.”
“There are plenty of other children in the village, and she loves her tutor. She is happy just the way things are, like me.” Tami walks over while Lin is speaking, as if she sensed her parents’ thoughts turned towards her.

“Mama, Papa, your foreheads are dripping; refreshment is due, and our shadows are too short to stand. Can we go in for lunch now? I’m so thirsty.”

Joe wipes his brow with his sleeve again. “Yes, my wise little girl, let’s go, and I’ll tell you all about our upcoming adventure. Oh, and I almost forgot.” He reaches into his pocket and removes a small wooden object. “This is for you. I finished it last night.”

Tami takes the gift and turns it over in her hands, holding it close to her face, examining it in detail. It is a carving of a turtle.

“Thank you, Papa. It’s perfect. The wise turtle.”

“Wise like you,” he says, leaning down to give her a kiss.

Joe and Tami begin to walk toward their home.

Lin feels rooted to the earth where she stands. Joe looks back, reaches a hand out, but she shakes her head.

“Mama,” Tami says over her shoulder, “come with us.”

At the sweet smile from their daughter, Lin’s heaviness lifts somewhat, and she finds that her feet move to follow them.

* 

We’re leaving our home tomorrow, joining the movement. Papa believes in the movement. Mama does not. This has caused a rift between them. The harmony we enjoyed as a family no longer exists. Our own movements, as a family, within and around the home, have lost their melody. Grandmother says all things happen as they must. Even when it feels all wrong. Grandmother is not coming with us. She left today to go live in the big house on top of the hill. I gave her my new turtle to hold until we next meet. I didn’t want her to be lonely. I have all my other animals to care for. Papa says I have to wrap them carefully so they won’t be damaged during the journey.

He says we will journey together with other members of our village, and meet even more travelers on the road. I have never left Pine Village. We will travel by foot and I will see the countryside. My country. A home is more than a house, more than a village,
but also less. My family is my home. Grandmother is part of my family. She lives in the big house on the hill now. Mother hasn’t played any music today.

* 

The sun is near to setting when they reach the complex. Each family checks in, separately, with a man sitting at a table under a tent. Joe, Lin, and Tami step up to the tent together.

“Welcome, siblings,” the man says with a big smile in his voice, showing none of the fatigue they all feel from the journey. “I’m Brother Ken. Welcome, young sister, to your new home.”

“Thank you. I’m Tami, and this is my mother and father.”

“Joe and Lin, from Pine village,” Joe explains.

Ken signs a paper and hands it out to Joe. “Here you are. These are your assigned quarters, in building three, just over there. Uh, Tami, was it? What’s that you’ve got there?

“My book,” she answers, holding it up for him to see.

“Oh, well, uh, we don’t have ‘my’s here, Tami, only ‘ours’s, because we share everything. So, you’ll have to leave that here with me, along with any other personal possessions you may have brought, so that we can distribute everything proper and even.”

Tami looks up at her parents, holding the book close to her body.

“But, she carries that book with her everywhere, you can’t—”

“We’ll gladly turn in everything else,” Joe says, speaking over his wife, “but wouldn’t it just be possible for her to keep this one thing?”

Ken smiles, sighs. “I’m of the mind that it can’t hurt for a girl to have a book, especially if she’s sharp enough to read it. But, I’ll have to bring it to the council meeting this evening—which you’re welcome and encouraged to attend—and, well, the council will decide upon everything, based on what’s best for the people.

“Thank you for understanding,” Joe says, nodding emphatically, and they begin walking toward building three.
“Halt siblings... If you please, you will need to leave all of your possessions here with me. If there is anything else of concern to you, we can mark it so, and discuss it at tonight’s meeting, along with the others.”

They turn back. Joe notices all the families waiting to check in after their long journey.

“Do you really mean everything?” Lin asks. “Our soap and brushes even?”

“Papa, my animals,” Tami says looking up at her father, her eyes wide with worry.

Ken stands and motions them back to the table. “We have stocked each complex with enough toiletries for all the residents, along with clothing and other necessities. You will find the showers behind each building. The mess hall serves at sunrise, noon, and just after sundown. If you need for anything, please, come to me; I’m in charge of this unit.”

Lin looks as though she wants to argue, so Joe puts a firm hand on her shoulder, takes all their bags and places them on the table. “Thank you, Brother Ken. Come, let’s go make ourselves at home.”

* 

My book has been taken from me. My favorite book. It feels like I have lost my closest friend in the world. My daily companion. A part of myself. And beyond that, all of my animals that Papa made for me out of the wood from our grove.

Mama and Papa have lost things also, so I shouldn’t be selfish. But I can’t help it. It was not my wish to leave Grandmother and give away my book and my animals. Mama has kept her flute. I saw her hide it under our mattress on the night we arrived. That was almost one week ago. She has not played any music since before we left our village.

Papa works many long hours every day. We used to spend the evenings together, as a family. Now, we don’t.

At night, after we lie down to sleep, I hear Mama cry. Maybe she doesn’t like her job in the factory. Mama has always loved to be outdoors, under the sun. Maybe she misses Papa, like I do. Or Grandmother. I’m sure leaving Grandmother was the hardest for Mama.
I start my new class tomorrow. They finally listened to me. When I turned in my homework yesterday, the teacher, a rough woman, pulled me outside and asked, “Who did this?”

“I did,” I told her.

“Don’t lie to me,” she said, squeezing my shoulder so hard I felt like I couldn’t breathe.

“I’m not lying, Sister.”

“Really. Well, then I suppose you can come inside and write all of it out on the blackboard just as it is here on your paper.”

She dragged me inside the class by my shoulder. I have a dark purple bruise there now, but I didn’t show Mama for fear she would cry even more tonight.

All the rest of the class watched as I took the bit of chalk in my hand and began writing on the board. My strokes would have been a disappointment to my tutor, could he have seen them. Before I had finished the first lesson, the teacher yelled, “Enough,” and went to her desk. She wrote a note and sealed it in an envelope.

“Take this to the main administration building at the north end of the compound,” she said, handing me the envelope.

I didn’t know exactly where that was, but I didn’t want her to grab my shoulder again, so I left and walked in the direction I figured to be north judging by the position of the sun. It took me quite a while to find the right building, and then even longer to figure out who I was supposed to give the envelope to, but eventually, I did find out. And now I have been moved to a new class, which I will start tomorrow. Today has made me very tired. I hope tomorrow will renew my energy.

* 

Lin and Tami sit together on a blanket in the grass outside the dormitory. It has become dark since they settled down to wait for Joe after dinner, a dish of food in Lin’s lap for him to eat when he finally returns. Tami holds a book, but she isn’t reading.

“What is your new book about?” Lin asks her, stroking her hair.

“The writings of the People’s Father.”

“And do you learn something new from it?”
“There’s always knowledge to be gained, isn’t there Mama, from every situation?”

Lin wonders, for maybe the thousandth time, at her daughter’s serene wisdom—an old soul, May said, the day Tami was born. “But, are you enjoying your new class?”

“It’s much different than it was back in the village with my tutor…”

“How do you mean, different?”

“We don’t have discussions about anything here; we just copy lines from these new books, and then recite them: ‘Revolutions are like battles: after a victory we must at once put forward a new task,’ and then we have to repeat in our own words what they mean. We’re not allowed to ask questions or offer other opinions, like I always did with my tutor.”

“Not allowed?”

“No. I asked my teacher if we could compare these modern texts to the classics, but…she said we no longer have need for the old information. She said it doesn’t make sense in our modern world.”

“Not very much does…”

“Mama, I’m so sleepy. Do you think Papa will be home soon?”

At the word home, Lin pictures in her mind their small house in Pine Village. “I hope he will,” she says to Tami, blinking back to the present place and time. “But it’s already later than last night.” Lin feels a heaviness settle over her chest. “Perhaps you had better go in and lie down, and when Papa gets back—after he eats his dinner—we’ll come and tuck you in, yes?”

“Okay, but try to hurry him, because I think I might fall asleep soon.” Tami stands and hugs her mother. “I really wanted to see Papa tonight. Will you ask him to come back from work earlier from now on…or, at least sometimes?”

“Yes my Tam-tam, I’ll tell Papa what you said.”

Under a small tent set up in a barren yard, Joe works, welding metal in the heat of the day. His blue shirt doesn’t fit him properly, too tight around the shoulders, and it’s faded and worn. He works without pause, oblivious to the world around him. He does not see
Brother Ken crossing toward him, does not hear his name being called over the sound of his torch and his hammer.

“Brother Joe, Joe…” Out of breath and panting a little, Brother Ken taps Joe on the shoulder, startling him.

“Ah, Brother Ken. What brings you out here?” Joe turns off his equipment and lifts his mask.

“Oh, well, you know, we’ve just been going over the weekly production figures, and, you know, realigning the system, like every week… We have a new task for your excellent abilities.”

“Am I changing workstations again?”

“No, no, just adjusting your shifts, so you can add in a new slot a few days a week—working on the plumbing commission.” Brother Ken beams at Joe, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Plumbing?” Joe asks, not returning any of Ken’s enthusiasm.

“Yes. You’ll be trained on the job.”

Joe sighs, lowering his head.

“Now, d-don’t despair, Brother. It’s not as if this is just to do with waste removal—no! We’ve got irrigation to think about, and we need a keen and steady mind on the team.”

Joe stares at Ken, saying and showing nothing.

“Everyone’s really happy with your work, Joe, really. One of the best in the whole unit, a lot of people say.”

Joe sighs again, releasing his anger and frustration into the heat of the day. He knows Ken is a good man.

“Brother Ken, I’m glad to do my part. So long as my family is taken care of, I’ll work your extra shifts, but Brother, where do some of the men get off? Stripping us all of our due? I don’t blame you, but you are the unit leader…”

“Oh. You mean the cattle, then. We’re thoroughly looking into that. It seems some members of the community decided to have a midnight bonfire and…but we’re not sure who was responsible…” Brother Ken stops bouncing and slumps a little.
“The missing cattle, the unequal work hours, the lack of organization—so that there isn’t even any dinner left at mess when I finish my shift. And look at my shirt—it doesn’t fit. Most of the good clothes have gone missing, the fine clothes my wife made, that I brought from my home—I never saw them again, or anything of the like.” With everything Joe says, Brother Ken appears to grow smaller.

“We must be patient Brother,” Ken says in a mouse’s voice. “Order will come. It…it just takes time for these things to…to work themselves out. These are big changes we’re bringing about, for a better future…”

“I believe in what you’re saying, Brother Ken, I really do. It’s just that for three months…it’s only gotten worse, and everyone seems…so tired.” Joe pulls his mask back down. “You’ll post the new assignment schedule on the building board?”

“Yes.” Brother Ken’s voice and posture bounce back with relief. “It’ll be there this evening.”

Joe moves to light his torch welder again.

“They’ve called for a meeting, at the next full moon. High Brother Lee will attend and report on our conditions here…the good and the bad.”

Joe nods.

“Come see me Joe, if you have anything of note you’d like to speak about before then. Anything that you think may be useful for the leaders to know. I weigh your opinion heavily.”

“Thank you Brother. I’ll think on it these few weeks ahead.”

Lin sits on the bed brushing out her hair. Tami sleeps in the next bed. On three sides of their quarters hang grey curtains, dividing them from the next family, a common wall at their back. Lin hums softly while she brushes, her eyes closed.

Joe enters through the divider in the front curtains and Lin opens her eyes, falling into silence.

“What did you tell him?” Lin asks, putting the brush in a drawer beside the bed.

“Nothing new,” he answers, taking a towel and pajamas from the closet. “All the things we’ve spoken about together.”
“And will he report to High Brother Lee?” Lin removes her robe and hands it to Joe for him to hang in the closet, then quickly slides into bed under the blanket.

“I imagine so. I’m sorry, I’m very tired now Lin. I’m going to shower.” He exits the way he came.

She extinguishes the lamp and closes her eyes again, now with her head on the pillow, the blanket pulled over her chest. As always in moments of quiet and darkness, her mind returns to Pine Village.

On this night, she dreams of Joe as a young man and their time spent by the lake at the edge of the trees. The place where they first came together, even before they were man and wife. The dream is vivid, like life but sharper. The pine needles under their blanket prick her bare skin. The cool evening air slides over her flesh, raising the soft hairs from her arms. The stars in the sky burn into her eyes. Joe enters her and the pain cuts—she gasps—but a moment later the warmth floods down, spreads, and there is a new pleasure. Joe looks into her eyes, asking if she wants him to stop. Her head moves from side to side, a smile plays in the creases of her mouth and her eyes. She invites him further, pain becomes pleasure with every shift of his body. He moves his mouth to her breast, kisses her skin, sucks at her nipple, and deep inside her, where the pain and the pleasure mix, a new connection ignites—from his mouth to her breast, trails like starlight streaming through her insides, to where he fills her with anguished bliss. She loves him then, more than she knew, more than she can bear—the experience becomes increasingly unbearable with each press of painful pleasure; with each suck on her nipple, sounds from deep within escape her chest, her throat, and pierce the air over and over until she shudders and flails and digs her fingers into Joe’s back.

She opens her eyes in bed, in the dark. Her skin is moist with perspiration. Beside her, she finds Joe, in heavy slumber. Tami’s blanket rises and falls in a regular rhythm in the small bed beside theirs. The dormitory is quiet. The pulsing of blood thumps in her ears. She turns back to Joe, wraps her arms and legs over him, entwining their limbs as best she can, and she holds him, syncing her breathing to his, her heartbeat to his. She doesn’t sleep again for what feels like an eternity.
Ken stands outside the door to High Brother Lee’s office, takes a few deep breaths, lifts his hand, and stops. He takes one more breath, releasing it very slowly, and then knocks twice on the door.

“Enter,” he hears from within. He opens the door and steps inside.

“Brother Ken, come in, come in. Have you something to add to your reports?” High Brother Lee sits at a massive desk, with piles of papers and folders in orderly stacks of varying sizes.

“Yes, High Brother. I, ah, I…” He takes another deep breath and then speaks without pause, the words coming out as one long stream. “I regret to report that there has been a fair amount of dissent among some members of the commune who consider themselves to be overly taxed or unjustly employed.”

“Dissent? What form of dissent?” When Brother Lee says dissent, his features contort as though he smells something foul in the air.

“Well sir, livestock has gone missing, um, ah, and shifts have been cut by scheduled workers of late, and…and the ones who are putting in all the hours, all the hard work, they’re the ones feeling neglected—under compensated.”

“From each according to his ability, Brother, and to each according to his need. Wherein lies the problem?” Brother Lee’s voice is smooth but with an undercurrent that makes Ken’s knees soften.

“Sir?” Ken says, a mouse squeak.

“It is your leadership that is clearly lacking, Brother. You need to put these men under your strong arm, lest they should knock you over with their dissent.” Brother Lee raises his fist in the air of the office, wielding it over his paper city.

“But High Brother Lee, I was simply attempting to inform you of—”

“Brother! You have informed me of quite enough on this topic.” High Brother Lee stands. “I have read your reports on the quantity of grain your unit has produced, and it is paltry compared to expectations. You will go to the people of your unit and explain to them what is expected from the masses in a state of constant revolution. We are doing this for their sake—for their children’s sake. If they cannot appreciate such commitment to the people’s cause, it is because they are not properly informed of future benefits.
Everyone must do their part, Brother Ken, and your part is to make sure that all in your unit understand that. Do you understand me, Brother?”

“Sir…yes, sir.”

High Brother Lee takes his seat again. “Good. Go.”

Ken turns and leaves. Lee stares at the door for a moment and then yells:

“Sue?”

His secretary Sue enters from a side office. “Yes High Brother?”

“Dictate this message to the party for me. Ready?”

She leaves and returns with a pen and notepad.

“Yes?” he snaps.

Sue nods vigorously.

“Good. Greetings High Siblings: The yields from all units have been counted and are just what we expected based on the mass energy of communal output. I have at hand some 10,000 tons of grain to distribute secured from my commune’s fields and labor. The People’s Father’s plan is swelling accordingly. All shall assuredly prosper in a state of constant revolution. Signed, High Brother Lee. Do you have it all? Good—send it off immediately. I’ll need a response before I can leave for the general assembly.”

Sue leaves at once. Lee begins pacing around the office, thinking…How can the yields be so much lower than estimated? A mere 7,000 tons, from so great a labor force… I’ll never advance by reporting numbers like that. If people aren’t willing to work hard, well, then they’ll just have to suffer the consequences… I’ve done everything according to the highest ideals of the party. I don’t deserve to lose because of a few lazy peasants… no… they’ll learn to work harder next year, it’s the only way…

He is disturbed by a knock at the inner door, and then Sue’s voice: “High Brother Lee, sir?”

“Yes, come in.”

“Your reply has come back, sir, from the High Siblings. Shall I read it out?

“Yes, of course. What do they say?” He sits again.

Sue reads from the transmission: “Greetings High Brother Lee. We are pleased to hear of commune 232’s excellent harvest. Based on your population and the needs of the people, we have decided that half of the grain supply shall be sent to the capital for
redistribution and export, while the other 5,000 tons should be sufficient to feed the workers of the 232. We look forward to hearing your full report at the conference.”

“Send out the orders for 5,000 tons of grain to be loaded into the trucks by sundown. Have everything ready. I’ll be delivering them personally.”

“Yes, sir,” Sue says, and exits to send the transmission.

* 

The winter has been so long. The snow fell for so many days I lost count. The short walk to the mess hall fills me with dread on such days. The portions are hardly worth the energy. But we must eat. Sometimes, Papa goes and brings back food for Mama and me. But I wonder then, if he saves any for himself. He looks smaller these days, not large and strong like before…

When spring comes, we will visit Grandmother. And then Mother and she will make music together, like before, and Father will carve animals out of the soft pine and I will begin a new collection. Grandmother still has my turtle. I will tell Papa I want a rooster and a rabbit. In the spring, we will find our harmony again, as a family. It is almost spring.

* 

Lin steps out of the dormitory, her flute tucked away in her skirts, with a blanket tied over her shoulders. She walks briskly, as if escaping. Joe meets her on his way back from a late meal at the mess hall.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“Just out to breathe the open air.”

“May I join you?”

She nods and continues walking. “It’s a full moon,” she says when they reach the fields. “Just like the night you told me we’d be leaving our home. Nearly a year ago now…”

“I remember.”

She stops, suddenly feeling the freedom and the need to have it out in the open. She has the strength, after months of depletion, to face her husband and the choice he made for their family. “And, so, are you happy to be here, Joe? Are you thankful to the People’s Father?”
“Oh Lin, back then, it all made sense. When we discussed everything at the meetings, we knew it was the right thing for the future, for the people. But it’s all turned out wrong. And I don’t understand why.”

His cheekbones stand out, big and round on his face, and his eyes look too large. She realizes she must appear the same. Taking his hand, they continue to walk the fields.

“It hasn’t been so far from the original ideal,” he says after a long moment of thought. Lin knows that with Joe, silence is never empty. “The people have worked together. True, the adjustment wasn’t as simple as…as joining a new club or choosing a favorite sport, but we’ve been changing the whole system, the way people operate. It isn’t meant to be simple. And we’ve done some wonderful things, haven’t we? Made some real progress…Think of the harvest, bringing in all that grain together—we were practically dancing in the fields at the sight of such abundance and good fortune.”

He stops now, pulling his wife by the hand to face him.

“But that’s just it…Where is all the food gone to, Lin? Why is there barely a meal to be had? We brought in a harvest as good as any of us has seen. Yet people are starving…Something has gone wrong, and it isn’t with the farmers, or the weather, or some act of God or nature. There has been a mistake, a fault committed by someone in charge of all this. But it’s not the plan, not the original idea that’s flawed, just among the people carrying it out. Some of these people are doing it for all the wrong reasons, Lin. Brother Ken, he’s a good man, has the best intentions. He follows the rules, the orders from above, but he treats people with decency and respect—he’s a very good man, but…I wonder if he sees it…The flaw.”

Lin begins walking again, pulling Joe along with her.

“His wife is sick, you know. So many sick. We’re all suffering…How’s Tami—she’s nearly always asleep before I return…so much to do…”

“She does seem less enthusiastic lately, but aren’t we all? I asked her how she felt this evening at dinner because she was so quiet and she replied, ‘peaceful,’ that was all.”

“We should return soon, look in on her, although, that is one of the true benefits of communal life—such a large family right there with her in the dormitory. That’s one example of how it truly works with the people, how we’ve overcome so much to care for our neighbor. But of course, it hasn’t been easy…We were used to having so much
privacy, our own place, space…a mere curtain between our bed and the next, no, that hasn’t been ideal…and sharing clothes, belts, sometimes even my boots were missing—you know—and I had to use another pair. But, Lin, everyone started to really care, didn’t they?…Become a large family, brothers and sister. Most of these people have become more giving, less selfish. It’s so beautiful, but at the same time, so sad—we share the pain, the suffering—it brings us together. We’ve witnessed the manifestation of humanity, humility, love…but without joy.”

Lin stops in a clearing of grass, spreads the blanket, pulls Joe down with her.

“I’ve missed you, Lin. Ever since the night of that full moon, all those months ago, we have been a different couple than we were. You shine so beautiful in the moonlight.”

“I have my flute.”

“I haven’t heard you play for so long. Will you play for me here, under the night sky?”

She nods and begins to play, a strange song filled with beauty and sadness. Joe unbinds her hair and runs his fingers through it.

“Maybe we were all wrong, all flawed and doomed to fail when we try to make life better than it is…than it was. I miss our bench, our kitchen, our pots and pans. I miss your cooking and Tami’s classics. I miss our bed and your unashamed nakedness in the sanctity of that space…”

He kisses her neck and she lowers the flute. They lie back, embracing, and make love for the first time since they left home nearly a year earlier.

Lin and Joe awaken at sunrise to the sound of their names on the morning air. Lin fixes her clothing and binds up her hair.

“I think that’s Brother Ken calling you.”

Joe wakes fully and looks off into the distance, towards the dormitory.

“Brother Ken, over here. What is it, what’s happened?”

Ken runs for them, calling their names, “Brother Joe, Sister Lin—we’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Why, what’s the matter?” Lin rushes to meet him. “Is Tami all right?”
Ken says nothing, suddenly quiet.
“Tami,” she asks again, her voice becoming high and timorous, “Is Tami all right?”
“She…she has a fever,” Brother Ken finally says.
“What, since when? She was fine, how high is—”
“We should get back,” Ken breaks in. “She’s been asking for you both.”
Lin looks to Joe. He grabs her hands.
“Lin…Tami.” He pulls her and they all run back toward the dormitory.

Back home, in Pine Village, Joe builds a coffin for their daughter made of pine wood from the grove. They bury her early in the morning, next to the graves of the two infants lost in childbirth in the years before Tami came into the world from the same womb. After the service, Joe and Lin walk back to their small home, supporting May between them. “Nature is mysterious,” May says, tears streaming freely down her cheeks.

They remain in Pine Village, in their small home, the three of them. Due to mass starvation, the complex has been shut down. Lin and Joe work side by side, tilling the soil, planting their small plot. Life is quiet. Joe carves no wood. The women play no music. At the time when the next full moon arrives, Lin feels the return of life, deep inside. A child, growing in her womb once more.
Rules of the Game

Her first time, whenever she thinks of it after, brings a flush of humiliation, and then almost immediately, an external flinch, as if to disrupt the memory, a rock to break the surface of a well.

For over a year, she has been intimate with Marcus, since just before the start of her freshman year of high school. He isn’t her boyfriend. She knows about his other girls, and he knows she knows. Therefore, Rachel holds on to other prospects as well, keeps her options open. In her view, there is nothing more pathetic than a girl in denial.

Nevertheless, she believes that Marcus spends a respectable amount of time and attention on her. Unlike most guys, who call only late at night, or after many days of silence, Marcus clocks hours. He comes over after school when he doesn’t have practice, he often calls her before bed, he even takes her to the movies, sometimes, on the weekends. They never go to the mall together—just the two of them—because that would equal a public announcement, a declaration, a commitment.

But Marcus does most of the other things that a young woman values, including bringing a present to Rachel’s house on her birthday—a nice present—new ski boots. One of the clasps on hers broke the season before so that she’d had to use duct tape. He remembers. He makes an effort to remember. He wants recognition for all his effort. He is almost senior, not a virgin.

They come close a handful of nights over the summer. Rachel feels the desire, deep, deep inside, feels the gush and the heat, but she stops him, at the last minute, every time. She can see and feel his frustration, and she tries to assuage it in other ways, with her hands, and even, once, with her mouth.

The first month of her sophomore year, Rachel finally relents. But not to Marcus. He calls her in a rage, swearing, yelling.

She’s in her bedroom, smoking a cigarette out the window. “It just happened,” she says. “It didn’t mean anything.” For a week now, she has asked herself why, with no answer, no understanding of her motivations. And now Marcus knows. Who else? He’s probably bragging…

“Why him?” Marcus demands. Why give your virginity to a guy with a reputation for sticking his dick in any girl who’ll spread her legs? Why him and not me?
Her insides swirl down, like a whirlpool. Her mouth opens and words come pouring out, grasping for air. “Because I care about you. Because you don’t want to be with me. You won’t be with just me. And so I didn’t want to give it to you.” Her voice breaks, hisses. “I hated it…I hated every second of it.” In her head, a tingling like a sneeze that won’t come, that stirs and swells but never touches down on shore. What she says is true. She begins to understand her own actions, her passive submission to what she can’t bear to recall without flinching, breaking the surface, ripples and shards.

She went to the party with Simone, but Simone left early, claiming a headache. Marcus hadn’t called since the semester started, nor had he made any attempts to bump into her at school. So Rachel stayed at the party, though none of her good friends were there. She drank beer and flirted. And then one guy, whom she found flattering and fairly attractive, offered to smoke her out. He had good weed, he said. Rachel followed him up the stairs to an empty bedroom. Before she knew it, they were making out on the bed in the dark, kissing, and his hands were under her shirt, unhooking her bra. His fingers on the front of her jeans. Cool air on the skin of her hips and thighs, her socks sliding from her feet as each pant leg is pulled off. Naked, from the waist down.

“Are you sure this is okay?” he asks in a whisper.

She says nothing. Then he’s above her, on his knees, the sound of his belt buckle. She can see it in the dark like a shadow extending from his body. The wet crinkle of plastic, his hands moving over the shadow.

He drops down, on top of her. “Is it okay?”

“Okay,” she whispers back, the loose bra uncomfortable under her shirt.

It hurts. There’s no gush, no heat. Only jabbing, then thrusting.

After a few minutes, he’s done. He tosses her jeans on the bed, underwear still inside, and leaves the room. He never took out any weed.

She dresses and walks back downstairs. Two older girls standing together look at her when she enters the living room and she wonders if they know, if he said something, if they can just tell. She looks down and smooths out her shirt, notices that her feet are bare. She left her socks up in the room. He’s in the kitchen, doesn’t look as she passes by. So Rachel steps barefoot into her shoes at the door of the apartment and leaves the party.
where no one is her friend. She walks home, feeling tender between her legs with every step.

“I hated every second of it,” she tells Marcus on the phone, her voice small and pained.

He asks if he can come over, to talk.

“Yes,” she tells him. “Come over. I miss you.”

They lie on the trampoline in her backyard and talk, holding hands, staring up at the stars.

“He’s an asshole, Rachel. He took advantage of you when you were drunk.”

“I wasn’t that drunk.”

“He’s an asshole.”

“Yeah. Fuck him,” she says. And after a few moments of silence, they look at each other and laugh, rolling around on the trampoline.

A few weeks later, she and Marcus have sex for the first time. He still doesn’t want to be her boyfriend. But she likes sex with him. It’s nice, pleasant not painful. Since the night on the trampoline, they are closer. She trusts him more. He makes her feel protected, even though she continues to hear about him and other girls, here and there.

He plays three sports. He has girls falling all over him. She understands, because she has to. Because if she doesn’t, she’ll lose him completely. And what she has from him now, she decides somewhere inside, is better than nothing. When she goes out with Simone, she still flirts, sometimes kisses, sometimes more. She’s not a girl in denial.

One day, after having sex in her bedroom, she asks him a question, though she’s not sure she wants to know the answer. “Who would you have for a girlfriend, if you had your choice of any girl in school?”

“I don’t want a girlfriend,” Marcus says. “I told you a million times, Rach.”

“I know, I know, that’s what you always say, but,” she persists, “if you could have anyone. Is there no girl worthy of your complete attention?”

His face curves into a thoughtful downward smile. “Well,” he says after a moment, “maybe Michelle Miller. She’s pretty fly.”
Michelle Miller, that bitch. Her long hair always curled under perfectly at the ends. How long, Rachel wonders almost every time she sees her, does she actually spend in the morning in front of the mirror? An hour? Longer?

On a good day, Rachel’s lucky to zombie out of bed twenty minutes before the homeroom bell rings. Ten minutes to get ready, ten to walk to school. Her hair, she knows, generally looks like shit: ponytail peasants, that’s what she and Simone call themselves. If either one wakes up early enough to do her hair, the other spends the day in envy, a lonely peasant. Simone did her hair, Rachel remembers, the day of the M&M incident. That’s what she and Simone call Michelle Miller: M&M.

Simone, that bitch. If only Rachel wasn’t alone in ugliness that day, if she’d had her sister in scrubbiness, she might have handled the situation with more…finesse.

It’s second to last period. Rachel’s at her locker, struggling to get the right book out from underneath the pile of wrong books. It’s not going well—the struggle, the day, her life at that moment in time, which happens to be that time of the month. She fights with the books, ready to dash to the bathroom before class, where she’ll not only change her tampon but also pick at the hormone-induced pimple pulsating on her chin, but before she manages to wedge Algebra II out from its lodging place, she hears a chorus of laughter passing behind her.

She stops, mid-struggle, straightens her back.

The laughter lingers. Her skin starts to prickle. Her face starts to burn. Relax, she tries to tell her body. It probably doesn’t have anything to do with me, she tries to tell her mind. Relax, Rachel. But it doesn’t work, because she can sense it, how the high-pitched chimes are aimed straight at her, like canaries attacking a glass window. So she turns around.

And there across the hall, along with four of her friends, is Michelle Miller, M&M, that bitch. The girls look around at each other and laugh a little louder when Rachel meets their eyes, and then they start to walk away.

No one’s paying any attention.

A second passes by. And then another one.
And then Rachel opens her mouth. “Is there something funny?” It doesn’t come out how she wanted it to. Her voice sounds high and weak in her ears. Immediately, she wishes she hadn’t said anything.

Michelle snaps around. “I’m sorry, were you, aha, speaking to me?” She puts her hand to her chest and tosses her head when she does the little aha snicker.

A bitch-snicker, Rachel thinks. But that’s all that crosses her mind. She scowls at them, rolls her eyes, knowing how pathetic she looks. And now people in the hall are watching, listening.

Afterwards, she thinks of all the retorts that should have come to mind. *I don’t know, were you the one laughing like a hyena?* That’s her favorite.

At the time, she says nothing.

They all start laughing again, and now a real crowd is gathering, surrounding them on both sides. Rachel panics, more fearful than ever to speak but knowing she has to say something.

“You know what, you have ugly fucking hair.” That’s what she says. Not even an insult, because insults have to be believed to be effective.

The entire hallway fills with laughter at Rachel’s comment.

A moment later, Michelle steps forward, stopping only inches from Rachel’s face. The rest of the students hush in order to listen.

“And you, Rachel,” she says, her voice just loud enough for the crowd to hear, but still very calm and cool, “are a slut. A dirty, nasty little girl who sneaks around in the dark with other people’s boyfriends because you can’t get one of your own.”

Gasps erupt around the hall. People say, “Ho, damn” or “Schnap” or “In yo face”…

Rachel’s skin burns. Her chest hurts under the pressure of her heart, inflamed and pumping like a fist pounding a punching bag.

What can she do…? A slut…maybe…but Rachel is also a product of public schools—unlike Michelle Miller who went to Catholic school and only switched to public for high school—and so Rachel really has no choice. A girl has her pride, even if she does not have her virginity.
She grabs M&M by her long, pretty hair and pulls her down to the dirty floor, her arms fueled by the blood rapidly pulsating through her dilated veins.

_Slut. A girl who likes sex. Because liking sex makes a girl dirty._ Rachel writes notes in her diary at home in her room during her suspension from school. _Guys have it different. Guys are called players, cause I guess it’s all a game. But, for some reason, the rules aren’t the same for guys and girls. Girls are supposed to play hard to get. Girls are supposed to not want it, not like it, and only give it to their dearly beloved boyfriends. And it’s total shit. So I make my own rules. And if some people don’t like it, well, I don’t like some people._

_I do like boys, however, even now, after everything. One boy, let’s call him Pete, who I may or may not have made out with in the staircase after school, just happens to be Michelle Miller’s boyfriend. He told me they were broken up. Anyway, it’s only high school. If you’re that serious about being in a monogamous relationship, don’t date one of the biggest players in the school and not have sex with him because you’re saving yourself for marriage, or at least graduation. Like he was about to wait two years for you. I don’t care how perfect your hair is. Bitch._

Rachel’s scrap in the hall with M&M occurred three days after her alleged kiss in the staircase, which she confessed to no one except Simone.

“Michelle Miller?” she says to Marcus, smacking him on the chest. “That’s your type, all prissy and stuck up?”

“Nah, I’m just messin,” he says.

Rachel doesn’t believe him. She saw that look in his eyes, like he was imagining her, picturing another girl while they lay naked in bed together. But then again, she asked.

“C’mon girl, you know she ain’t got nothing on you. You already beat her ass.” Marcus laughs as he gets out of bed and pulls his pants on. He’s at the bedroom door, Rachel still naked under the blanket, when he stops and turns back. “Yo Rach, if it was gonna be anybody, it’d be you.” He opens the door to go.
“Wait,” she calls, her voice sounding a little desperate, and he looks back again, impatient now, rolling his eyes. That was his exit line.

“I gotta go. Big game…” He’s already halfway gone.

“I know,” she says, sitting up and giving him her most seductive look, letting the sheet fall to reveal her right breast. “I just wanted to tell you one more thing before you leave.” She sees she’s at least partially got his attention back. “Don’t forget your jacket.” And she points with her chin toward the chair by the wall, smiles, falls back on the bed. His football coat hangs over the back of the chair.

“You keep it here for me,” he says with a smirk and a wink.

Rachel hears him talking to her mom on the way out. “Hey Evelyn, you coming to the big game tonight? …Rachel said she’ll be there with Simone …All right, see you later then …Sure, let me get that for you …”

Her mom doesn’t mind Rachel having boys around as long as they take out the garbage.

She loves going to football games. This is the big one against Central High to see who advances to the state finals. And it’s a home game. Everyone is there, the whole city, it seems. Definitely the whole school, even the stoners and nerds who would normally be at home with either a bong or a book, respectively.

Rachel and Simone buy two large coffees and take them into the bathroom by the concession stand. In side-by-side stalls, they each pour out half the hot liquid and fill it back up with whiskey; Simone stole the bottle, which she passes to Rachel under the divider, from her parents’ liquor cabinet. Back at concessions they top them off with cream and sugar.

It’s a cold night, near freezing temperatures, but with all the people, the noise, the lights, the coffee and the booze, Rachel feels energized. Not to mention the fact that she and Simone both fixed their hair and dressed in new clothes. She has a good feeling about tonight. We’re gonna win, she thinks.

Rachel loves to scream her head off at the game. Simone usually gets embarrassed, but she’ll just have to deal with it tonight. It’s the big game.

“Where do you want to sit?” Simone asks, sipping her special coffee.
“Right in the middle—fifty yard line. Woohoo!” Rachel screams.

Simone looks at her and laughs. Her face says, oh my god who are you and can you please send my friend Rachel back. But Rachel doesn’t worry about what Simone thinks in these matters. She’s a ballet dancer and knows absolutely nothing about sports involving balls.

They make their way to the bleachers and find a spot a few rows up from the field. Even this crowded, it’s not hard to squeeze in two girls. Basically, they muscle their way between different crowds, all adults much older than they are. Rachel knows Simone would rather find a group of friends way up in the stands, but she doesn’t care. She’s here to watch the game.

Marcus is on the field. He’s a team captain. She left his jacket at home, deciding that her new sweater and scarf look much cuter. She almost wore it, but she doesn’t want him to think she’s all smitten just because he left a jacket with her. It takes more than a jacket at this point. He knows what it takes.

Central wins the coin toss and they choose to receive. Kick-off excites Rachel, that long line of strong, uniformed boys, all starting off down the field together. Once the game begins, she sees nothing else, becoming a part of the crowd, absorbed by the energy.

Central returns the ball to their forty-seven yard line. Ouch.

The quarterback drops back in the pocket, takes his time, well protected, and completes a pass to the outside for a fifteen-yard gain. First down.

They run for a gain of seven.

They pass again for twelve more yards. Another first down.

The cheerleaders below chant “defense” with their pompoms in the air. The crowd joins in; stomping feet resound throughout the metal bleachers.

Sack! For a loss of five. The first big cheer erupts from Rachel’s side of the field. She’s on her feet screaming. Simone sips her coffee, and Rachel notices her for a moment, pretty and oblivious, smiling up at her friend. Second and fifteen.

They run for a gain of only three. Third down.

Pass…Incomplete! Everyone’s up and screaming again. One of the cheerleaders does a backflip.
They bring on the kicking team and complete a field goal from the twenty-one yard line for the first score of the game. Three-nothing Central. Now to see what the offense can do, and Marcus, star receiver.

They win the game and advance. For the players and students, it’s a night of celebration, mad crazy partying, starting in the parking lot. The cops break that up just as Simone and Rachel finish off the bottle of whiskey—it had been a little over half full—and toss it in the garbage can. They’re both less than sober, but they blend in, avoiding trouble.

The crowd makes its way to the woods, where some guys bring a keg. The girls float from group to group, sipping beer and socializing. Rachel is eager to talk to Marcus about the game, but he’s busy with all his boys.

Simone drifts away eventually to talk to Kyle, the guy she’s been seeing for a few months. Rachel keeps an eye on her, worried that they’ll start fighting. There’re rumors all over school that Kyle spent the entire night with his ex-girlfriend at a party last weekend. A party to which Rachel and Simone were not invited. An M&M crew member party. Kyle’s ex is one of M&M’s good friends. At one point, from the way Simone is standing, her arms crossed and her head cocked to the side, Rachel thinks she’s probably crying. She can see Kyle looking around, not wanting to be embarrassed in front of everyone, but still trying to convince Simone that he didn’t do anything. Rachel knows from experience that gossip is pretty much always based in truth. Besides, he looks guilty. Don’t be that girl, Simone, Rachel thinks, hoping for telepathy.

She’s about to go over and rescue her friend when someone calls her name. Looking back, she sees one of the boys she used to hang out with during freshman year, before Simone had gotten to high school to join her. Andy, her history study buddy. He’s kind of a dork. They kissed once, but Rachel told him that she didn’t want to jeopardize their friendship.

“What’s up, Andy?” she says, joining his little circle. “It’s been a while.” They had stopped talking over the summer, the way people do.

“Hey, do you guys know Rachel?”

She says “hi” to the girl next to him, Sarah, whom she recognizes from some class. Sarah wraps her arm through Andy’s, staking her claim. Rachel smiles at Sarah,
who gives her a distrustful look. A look that says, are you after my boyfriend? A look she’s starting to get used to.

But she doesn’t know the other guy with them, though she’s seen him around school. He always looks stoned.

“Hi Rachel,” he says, smiling with his eyes squinted, confirming that he is in fact stoned. “I’m Philly.”

“Philly?” she asks, “Like the city?”

“Yeah, kind of like the city. That’s what everybody calls me, I guess cause I always carry Philly blunts.”

“Okay. Philly. That’s cool. You can just call me Rachel, I guess cause that’s my name.”

He laughs. “Okay. You guys wanna smoke some weed?” he asks, pulling out a rolled blunt.

Andy and Sarah look at each other and Rachel almost laughs in their faces at the power struggle in the brief exchange. “Nah, man,” Andy says. “We’re cool.”

“Sure,” Rachel says, not wanting to spend any more time with the pathetically codependent couple. “Spark it.”

“Let’s go over here,”—Philly indicates the trees nearby—“so everyone doesn’t come looking for a hit.”

Rachel waves “bye” to Andy, ignoring Sarah, and follows Philly through the darkness. It gets colder and quieter away from all the other people and she remembers Simone all of a sudden, looks around. She spots her alone near the center of the crowd, also looking around. They meet eyes and Rachel motions for Simone to join. She catches up and Rachel introduces her to Philly. Up close, she can tell now that Simone has definitely been crying.

Philly lights the blunt and the three of them pass it around in the darkness, isolated from everyone, hearing the party as far-off background noise. First Simone and then Rachel can’t smoke anymore. He clips it and puts it in his cigarette pack, pulling one out. The girls already have theirs lit.

“Rachel, I don’t feel so good,” Simone says, leaning into her. She looks like she might be sick at any moment.
“Shit.” They’re on foot, with no ride lined up.

Before Rachel says anything or even starts to formulate a plan, Philly says, “I can give you guys a ride home. Haven’t even been drinking. Not good to mix too much, you know.”

They leave together through the woods without saying goodbye to anyone. Philly’s car is back in the parking lot and Rachel and he each take one of Simone’s arms over their shoulders, practically carrying her along the five-minute walk. Halfway to Rachel’s house, he has to pull over so Simone can vomit out the door. Rachel holds her hair.

“This is where I live,” Rachel says as he reaches her house. “I’m pretty much always down to smoke, so stop by if you ever wanna blaze. I usually buy a bag every couple of weeks.” She doesn’t know why she’s offering this information, but it seems natural, like the right thing to say.

“Can I get your number?” he asks. “So I don’t come unannounced.”

She has a pen and paper in her purse, so she gives it to him. Says goodnight. Drags Simone inside to bed. Sees the jacket on her chair.

The next morning, sitting at the kitchen table eating Fruity Pebbles, Simone says, “Rachel, I like him.”

“Who?”

“That boy we smoked with. He was cute. What was his name?”

“I’m surprised you remember him.”

“I was fine till after I smoked. Then everything got fuzzy…and dizzy. How’d we get home?”

“Philly.”

“What?”

“The one you like. That’s what people call him. Philly.”

“Oh. What’s his real name?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, I like him. Oh no, did he see me throw up?”

“Just a little.”
“Do you like him?”
“No.” Rachel says. “I mean, he was cool, but he’s totally not my type. You should go for it. He seems a lot better than Kyle.”

Simone drops her spoon into the pink milk at the mention of Kyle, her face crumpling. She looks like she might vomit again.

Within a few short weeks, it’s Rachel, Simone, and Philly. A trio. They enjoy their new status among school gossip mongers, because everyone’s trying to figure out which one is having sex with Philly—Rachel or Simone. Some people just figure both. In truth, it’s neither.

The best part of the new trio, in the girls’ minds, is that Philly has a car, so they no longer have to freeze their butts off walking to and from school every day. He picks them up in the morning and they all get a little stoned on the way—just a little. Then after school, they hang out at Rachel’s house. They smoke in her room with the window open and her mom pretends not to notice. She likes Philly. She doesn’t even have to ask him to take out the trash. He just does it.

Simone still tells Rachel that she thinks Philly’s cute—she even tells Philly sometimes, in a friendly, playful way—but they’ve all become such good pals that maybe no one wants to disturb the chemistry. Or maybe Philly’s really interested in Rachel. Either way, nothing romantic happens in any direction.

The night of the big game, after Rachel left the woods, Marcus kissed a freshman girl with very big breasts. He still calls Rachel, every once in a while, usually late at night. She puts his jacket in the closet and tries not to remember it’s there. There are a couple other boys on her radar. She sees them, kisses them, has sex with one of them. Disappointing sex. Humiliating, but for him more than her.

And then, as spring approaches, she feels it. That familiar sensation. It creeps up so slowly that she almost doesn’t recognize it, so different from all the other times.

She and Philly are at her house. Rachel’s making grilled cheese sandwiches. Simone’s at her ballet class.

“Don’t burn it like last time,” he says behind her at the table where he’s rolling a blunt.
“For that comment, I just might.” That’s the exact moment she notices that something has changed. Maybe not for him, but for her. She plates the sandwiches, brings them to the table. He’s just finished rolling and tucks the blunt behind his ear.

He takes a bite and smiles at her while he chews. A big smile.

“Is it good?” she asks, smiling back in spite of herself, almost shaking her head. He just nods, swallows. Takes another bite. Still looking at her. Still smiling.

That night, after Philly leaves, Rachel calls Simone. “I think something’s gonna happen,” she tells her. “With Brian—” Rachel uses his real name now: Brian, not Philly—“I think we like each other. Are you still interested in him…like that?”

“No,” Simone says right away. “No, no, I’m totally over it. You should go for it. Really.”

“Really?” Rachel wants to be sure.

“Really.”

It happens two days later. The first kiss. In no time, they end up in her bed together, naked. They meet up between classes at school, after lunch, kiss in the hallways. Rachel and Philly, the gossip mongers surely state, are a couple. A couple within a trio. But Simone seems fine, not jealous or weird at all.

Philly wakes up early in the morning, hours before school starts, and drives to Rachel’s house to sleep beside her. He stays over late into the night and they spend hours together in her bedroom, naked, making love, smoking, getting dressed only to go to the kitchen for food, until his mother calls, threatening to take his car away. Rachel realizes that life is different than it’s ever been before. She’s really, really happy.

One night, Marcus shows up at her house. Philly’s at home for his mother’s birthday. Rachel wasn’t invited because his mother never misses a chance to tell him that that Rachel girl is bad news and that he’s thinking with his penis and not his brain and that he’ll regret it someday and that didn’t she hear from his sister’s friend that that Rachel girl is one of the biggest sluts in school and what does he want to be mixed up with a girl like that for?

So Marcus shows up and somehow knows Brian’s not around—maybe because that large-breasted freshman of his is best friends with Brian’s sister, and so she told him
about the party. Maybe the large-breasted freshman is at the party and so that’s why Marcus has come to see Rachel. He’s had a few beers, she can tell, and he wants to come in. So she lets him and they go up to her room. But she tells him, when he tries to kiss her, “No, I’m with Brian now.”

“But Rachel,” he says, slurring slightly, then burping, “fuck that guy, that fuckin hippy. You were with me before him. You’re my girl.”

And she says, “I am not your girl. I was one of your girls.” Just like he was one of her guys, her favorite, for a long time. “But now I’m with Brian, and he’s my boyfriend, not just one of my guys. I don’t have guys anymore. You can still be my friend, but Brian’s my boyfriend.”

The way he looks at her, she knows he can’t believe what he’s hearing. Because isn’t he Mr. All Star Athlete, Mr. I Can Get ANY Girl I Want, Mr. Gorgeous with a Big Dick?

Rachel goes to her closet and gets his football jacket, gives it back to him.

For a second she thinks he’s going to cry. She sits next to him on the bed, takes his hand, tries to explain. “Brian’s not interested in being with other girls and I’m not interested in being with other guys. We like spending all our time together.”

He pulls his hand back, jerks it, his face changed, almost pitying. “Rachel, you’re an idiot,” he says. “The whole school’s talking about it and you don’t even know, do you?”

“What?” A sickle up the spine.

“Philly and Simone, they’ve been sneaking around behind your back this whole time, laughing about it, playing you for a fool.”

“I don’t believe you,” she says. But deep down somewhere, she does, because didn’t she feel it these past few weeks, something prickly always creeping up behind that she chose to ignore because she was so damn happy? “Just go,” she says, as the tears start to well.

“Fine.” He leaves. Without his jacket.

Alone in her room, she thinks it out, holding back the emotion, remembering moments from the previous weeks. Then she picks up the phone, dials the number for Philly’s house.
His sister answers. “Brian,” she calls out, “it’s Rachel.”

His mother in the background, “Do you have to talk to her now? We’re just about to do the cake.”

“Hello.” He sounds so cheerful she can’t say anything at first. “Rachel? Are you there?”

“Brian.” It comes out as a hiccup.


“Just tell me if it’s true. Just answer me yes or no, don’t say anything else, just yes or no. Have you been hooking up with Simone all this time behind my back?”

He sighs on the other end of the line. Then, “Yes.”

“Okay, that’s all I needed to know. Don’t you dare come over here tonight.” She hangs up near convulsing into sobs. How did it happen, how did she become one of them, so pathetic, a girl in denial?

She forgives them both. They don’t discuss it together, not at the same time. Not as a trio. Brian writes her a long letter and passes it to her at school the next day. He explains that they kissed—he and Simone—a week before he and Rachel had first kissed. Before Rachel had asked Simone if she was still interested in Brian. Rachel replays the phone conversation in her mind. Did she give Simone a chance to tell her about it? Why hadn’t she told her right from the beginning? Why the secrecy? He writes that they didn’t have sex, just kissed, made out, and stuff, but that it didn’t mean anything, that he wants to be with Rachel, that they have something special and unique. Rachel wonders why he would bother if he doesn’t mean it, and she can still remember how happy she was, it’s there, just below the ripples. So she stays with him, pushing the questions and the doubt down into the dark depths.

The trio remains intact, if less innocent than the early days. She makes jokes about it with Simone. Sometimes Rachel even believes that nothing has changed.

At other times, she holds him in bed and something like panic flutters in her chest. A feeling she’s never known before.
Simone starts to date Kyle again. She tells Rachel and Philly how he’s constantly pressuring her about sex. She’s still a virgin. And she thinks Kyle’s still fucking his ex-girlfriend.

“What do you think she should do?” Philly lights a cigarette, takes a drag, and hands it off to Rachel who’s lying next to him in her bed.

“She might as well just go ahead and get it over with,” Rachel replies. They’ve just finished having sex, she and Philly, and this is the first topic he brings up. “Then they can start to enjoy it already. It’s just sex. The first time’s always awkward…” Rachel’s head twitches to the side, clearing away an unwanted image, creating ripples. “But then she’ll be fine.” She takes a long drag of the cigarette and passes it back to Philly.

“But Rachel, she doesn’t want him to leave her after. She thinks that’s all he cares about.”

“Well, if he leaves her, she’ll find someone else. It’s not the end of the world.”

“Not everyone’s like you, Rachel.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? What am I like, Brian?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

“No, I won’t fucking forget it,” she says, and lights a cigarette of her own, sitting up and away from him so she can look down at his face. They’re both naked, skin hair finger and toenails, mouths sucking smoke, blowing smoke, sweat and cum drying. “Are you saying I’m, oh I don’t know, a slut, isn’t that what your mother likes to call me? Just because I fucked three guys before I fucked you, does that make me a slut? Would you rather have a nice virgin like Simone, hun? A good little Catholic school girl. Right here in my bed? Or, wait, maybe you have already, maybe she’s not a virgin anymore, maybe you’re jealous that she might fuck someone else, is that it? Did you already have her right here in my bed, hun?”

“You’re being a bitch,” he says, and just lies there, looking up at her.

It’s their first fight since she found out about him and Simone.

The more they fight, which steadily increases as the school year ticks toward a close, the more time Rachel spends with Simone and their other girlfriend, Keily. A new trio. Keily’s a perfect replacement for Philly, in that she has a car and an unhealthy passion for
weed, cigarettes and creamy, sugary coffee. Keily drives, Rachel rides shotgun and rolls the blunts, Simone chatters from the back.

Brian goes off to the beach for the week with his classmates after graduation, while Rachel, Simone, and Keily finish off their coursework for the year. He cheats on her with one of the girls on the trip. He never admits it, but she knows he fucked her. They don’t break up, but she knows. Even the girl denies it when Rachel asks her at a party, but she knows. She’s losing him.

He comes over after work in the afternoon, a couple of weeks into summer break.

“Are you hungry?” Rachel asks him.

“Nah, I’m good. I ate lunch with the guys.” He sits on the couch, turns on the TV, flicks through the channels.

Rachel sits beside him, puts her hand on his leg, kisses his neck.

He continues to look at the TV.

Her hand wanders, opens his pants—her mother’s at work. She fondles him with her tongue in his ear, sucks on his earlobe. As she turns her face to kiss his mouth, she feels his hand on the back of her head, pushing down. She gives him what he wants, doing it better than she ever has before so that he moans and cries out at the end.

“Let’s go upstairs,” she says.

He stands up, zips his pants. “You wanna go see a movie? I feel like getting out of the house.”

“Sure,” she answers, though she really wants to go upstairs and get naked with him like they used to every day. After the movie, he drops her off. She invites him in, but he says he needs to get home. In her bedroom, she masturbates. As she reaches for a climax, her muscles contract all over, her face contorted. With the orgasm comes release, and the release lasts for hours into the night.

“We need a girl trip,” Rachel says to Keily and Simone the next day. They plan a weekend at the beach, pooling their money to get a suite at a place right on the water. There’s a large living room area and a private bedroom with a king-sized bed. They bring a big bottle of vodka and drink most of it the second night after dinner in the room. Vodka mixed with coke. The three girls get pretty slushy.
“So, Keily,” Simone asks, “how many guys have you fucked?”
Keily does a spit take with her vodka coke. “Me?”
“Yeah, come on, you can tell us. We all know Rachel’s had her share, a handful at least, so how about you?”
“Just one, well, two if you count Jeff, but he came so fast that I don’t bother.”
After a moment of confirmation, they all start rolling on the ground laughing, because they all know about Jeff’s reckless trigger. They all know firsthand. After Simone finally had sex with Kyle, she broke up with him. And decided she wanted to explore other options. Jeff was one of them. Rachel had tried him out just before starting up with Brian.
“So we all fell victim to the two-second man, cheers,” Rachel says, and they toast and drink up.
“And just what is your magic number, Simone?” Keily asks. “How many notches on your bedpost?”
“Two,” she says. “Same as you, I guess.”
Rachel thinks she knows about four, but she’s not going to contradict her.
“And you?” Keily aims her cup at Rachel now.
“I’m holding steady at four, though I’m sure there’ll be a surge once Brian and I finally fight our last battle.” She says it like it’s a big joke. It even seems like one under the influence of the alcohol.
“And who was your favorite?” Simone gives her a devilish look.
“Hard to say. Brian’s the only one I’ve had real intimacy with. None of the other’s were actually my boyfriends.”
“So that means you didn’t have good sex?” Simone’s eyes light up.
Rachel’s eyebrows jump of their own accord.
“Who was the best besides Brian?” Keily interjects.
“Well, I guess that’s easy enough. I mean I still have his jacket in my closet.”
Simone’s face opens, eyes and mouth round. “You still have it!”
“Wait, whose jacket?”
“It doesn’t matter, Simone, I just never had a chance to return it.” And so Rachel tells Keily whose jacket it is, Mr. All Star with the Big Dick. The guy who still calls to
say he loves her and that she’s an idiot for staying with that punk-ass hippie. That everyone knows he cheated on her after graduation, and that he was probably fucking her best friend Simone right under her nose since day one. Not that Marcus doesn’t still have a collection of girls to keep him busy. Rachel knows that he just hates losing to Brian.

“I didn’t know you and him had a thing,” Keily says.

They talk a little more but the booze and the sex spilling have dampened everyone’s spirits a little.

“She should we share the bed,” Rachel asks. Simone and Rachel have shared her bed plenty of times.

“No, I’m good out here,” Keily says. “You two go ahead.”

So the two girlfriends go into the room together and close the door. They strip down to their tanktops and underwear in the dark. It’s a big bed and they jump in, laughing as they dive under the soft, cool comforter.

They both lie in silence, for a while, listening to the other’s breath. They aren’t touching or even close, at first, the bed’s so big. But then, a desire starts to pull at each of them, to connect them, little by little, tiny tugs, minute adjustments on both sides. Wordlessly, in total darkness, they find each other, so slowly and softly, initially only a whisper of skin on skin, they can hear the blood, feel the pulse, quicken, but they stay slow, touching lengths of limbs, brushing thighs and forearms, leaving hands docile, mouths askew, until smooth legs start to cross, chests meet, brushing nipples under cotton shirts, pelvis to pelvis, pressing, breath heavy in the other’s ear, cheeks, then fingertips under cotton over backs, soft moans, holding together, shuddering together, bodies taut for a moment floating hard together, and then, calm.

Breathing.
And then, soft giggles. Whispers…

“Oh my god.”

“That was crazy.”

“In my head I was like, are we gonna kiss?”

Laughter.

“Shhhh—Keily.”

Giggles.
Near the end of the summer, Brian and Rachel break up for good. Philly and Simone are together every day afterwards. Rachel has Keily, but no more trio.

“What happened?” her mom asks one day, a few days before the start of junior year, when she finds Rachel in the living room watching TV. “How come I never see Philly or Simone anymore?”

“We broke up. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But what about Simone? You don’t break up with your friends?”

Rachel turns off the TV. “Sometimes you do, Mom.” She goes up to her room, looks at the bed. Looks toward the closet. Her own bedroom feels like enemy territory. But there’s nowhere else to go.

She wonders, smoking a cigarette out the window, if there ever really was a trio. Maybe not. Maybe there should have been.

After the cigarette, she goes down to the kitchen, pours a bowl of cereal, calls Keily.

“Hey, wanna go to the mall?”

“Sure. I’ll be right over. I’m broke though.”

“Me too. But I have some weed…”

They walk around the mall together, stoned, just window shopping. Rachel sees Marcus exit the Gap. He’s with Michelle Miller. They’re holding hands. He’s carrying her bags. She finally broke up with Pete, apparently. Marcus finally got the one he wanted—the prize.

“Ugh, Michelle Miller. I can’t stand that bitch,” Keily says.

“Me neither.”

Marcus sees Rachel from across the divider in the center of the mall, almost stops, then looks away and keeps walking. It’s not like he can say anything. That would be against the rules. Besides, what would he say?

She can’t stop the memories from rising to the surface. Lying on the trampoline, the stars. Walking home without socks, bruised between her legs. A grilled cheese grin, chewing, nodding. Cotton tanktops, nipples, soft skin. A jacket in her closet. And ski boots that she never used.
“Do you ski?” Rachel asks Keily.
“I love to ski. I didn’t go at all last season.”
“We should go this year. Every day. The hell with all this high school bullshit.”
“We could get jobs at the mountain,” Keily says. “My uncle runs the lodge. Then we ski for free.”

Keily promises to call her uncle as soon as she gets home. They’re both excited, looking forward to the coming season, to something new. A familiar sensation, almost unrecognizable at first.
The Lighthouse

It’s so nice just to be here, walking in the sand, the smell of the salt air, the peaceful monotony of these old cottages, with their weathered grey shingles, each house a different shade from the next. And the waves, watching them form and crash—their soothing rhythm. There’s the lighthouse, tall and white with black railings around the top, just like the salt and pepper shakers we bought in town. It doesn’t feel the same, though. The season’s different, maybe that’s why. The sand is damp and cold under my feet and the salty wind has a harsh wet chill.

There’s no one else around. No boats, no people, nothing happening on the beach today—it’s all for me alone. I wonder if anyone’s living there now, in that cottage? It doesn’t look like it. They must leave once it starts to get cold. Even the lighthouse looks deserted. There must be boats to guide even with winter coming on. The sea doesn’t freeze. People can always sail.

I’ve never been sailing. I’ve been on boats—on cruise ships. You and I went on that cruise, with Carol and Joe: Key West and the Bahamas, wasn’t it? We flew down to Florida and sailed out of Miami. Cruise ships don’t actually sail, do they, just a figure of speech.

You were so lively then, drinking cocktails with paper umbrellas out of coconuts, dancing with me on deck under the moonlight. We made love to the rhythm of the sea. Yes, it was different on the water than it was on land. Here’s to our fabulous forties, we all kept saying, really believing it. How long was that before the last time we came here? How many weekends at the beach after we cruised the Caribbean? It seems like a different life, but it’s only been three years.

We must have walked out to this lighthouse a hundred times. We were so habitual, always coming back to the same beach, the same cottage, going for the same long walks. We always got into the same fights, too. You’d stay away, drinking yourself stupid with the guys, with Patty and Dave. Then you’d show up on the front porch with flowers (like I didn’t have enough of flowers) saying, “I’m sorry Sil, can you forgive me?” And I’d tell you to go to hell, or at least make you put yourself through it—waxing the floors or fixing the gate, or painting the garage, or even retiling the bathroom, once. Always a price for acting like a child, as if there was no need for responsibility in a man
your age. You would have thought, after everything we’d both been through, divorces, and everything with the kids…but we were habitual. It’s amazing, really, that two people meeting so late in life, already set in so many ways, could figure out how to live together as well as we did.

You came into my life when I least expected it. Bobby had just left for college and Emma was in her second year of high school. Since Bobby got a full scholarship, I decided to dip into the kids’ college fund and go on a small vacation. Alone. Something I’d never done before. It was the week of my fortieth birthday and I didn’t want any surprise parties or pathetic hallmark cards. I told Emma if she had any of her friends over drinking at the house, I’d ground her for the rest of her life, and then I packed up my bags, loaded the car, and drove to the beach.

I decided to stay at The Breakers, since it was right across from the ocean and had a “vacancy” sign. Not that there weren’t plenty of other hotels to choose from. It was just chance, really. I had never stayed there before.

Checking in, I felt the most amazing sensation. When the man at the desk asked, “How many will be staying in the room?” and I said, “Just one,” he gave me this quizzical look.

“How many will be staying in the room?” he asked.

“That’s right,” I said, smiling. I wasn’t offended. I was in control, throwing off people’s expectations. An independent woman.

When I gave him my ID with my credit card to pay for the room, he looked up and said, “Oh, it’s your birthday tomorrow.” That look was priceless. From quizzical to downright confused. “Happy early birthday,” he said, handing me back my cards and my room key. The way I was beaming at him, serene and content, I think that’s what really threw him off. He probably thought I was loony.

What a week that was. I had dinner the next night at the hotel restaurant, all by myself, and ordered lobster and expensive wine. I sat at the bar and the bartender was charming and attentive. I offered him a glass of wine from my bottle, which he graciously accepted. He was young, maybe twenty-five, but a real sweet boy, good manners. Must
have good parents, I thought. I had a chocolate soufflé for dessert, no candle. It was perfect—the best birthday I’d had in years.

I spent the rest of the week reading and going for walks on the beach, eating whenever and wherever I wanted. I had some pot and I smoked at night, before bed. I called the kids a couple times—they were fine. By the second to last day, I was a woman reborn.

For dinner, I decided to go back to the hotel restaurant. Like on my birthday, I sat down at the bar.

“Welcome back,” said the same bartender as before. “What’ll it be tonight?”

“Well, it’s my last night,” I said, “so I guess I’ll celebrate. The same as last time—the boiled lobster and that lovely chardonnay.”

“Sounds good,” he said. “And what were you celebrating last time?”

“Since you asked, it was my birthday.” Now that it was over, I didn’t mind telling.

“Happy birthday,” he said, pouring me a glass of champagne. “This one’s on me.”

By the time the wine arrived, there you were, a few seats away. You ordered a beer, something on tap. “Cheers,” you said, and we each held up our glasses.

You asked my name.

“Silvia, and yours?”

“Freddie. So’s your date in the bathroom? How much time do I have?”

That made me laugh. The way you said it, with your goofy smile.

“Actually, I’m here alone.”

You whistled.

I laughed again.

You got up and moved one seat closer, still two seats between us.

“Every time you laugh, I get to move a seat closer. What do you say?”

I laughed. You moved.

“You’ll be on my lap before long.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves now.”

I laughed again and you sat next to me. We had dinner together.

When I ordered dessert, the bartender brought it out with a candle.
“It’s your birthday? Why didn’t you tell me?” You were flabbergasted.
“It was a few days ago. It’s really not a big deal…”
You stood up and started singing “Happy Birthday,” loud enough for the whole restaurant to stop and listen. You had the sweetest voice. It was the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for me.

After dinner we left the bar, went to my hotel room, sat out on the balcony, and smoked a little pot. We stayed up almost the whole night, talking, sharing our pasts—children, exes, careers—I felt so comfortable with you, so safe, right from the start.

I couldn’t believe our good fortune when I found out you only lived a half-hour drive from me. You were just at the beach on business overnight, checking on your accounts. You installed and maintained air-conditioning units in stores and restaurants—your own business, just like me. I told you about my flower shop. Near sunrise, we made love and it was wonderful.

We slept for a few hours, comfortable in each other’s arms. After breakfast, we went to the beach and walked all the way to the lighthouse. That was the first time.

It’s going to be dark soon; the sun is setting and the clouds are stretched like cotton balls on the horizon, tinted pink and purple, so pretty next to the deepening blue.

_I can’t leave already…_
_I haven’t settled anything yet…_

We used to sit here for hours, just like I am now, and watch the waves together. Now I’m alone here, thinking of you Freddie, picturing your generous smile, your intense loving stare—you made me feel so beautiful, so special and loved. You would run your fingers through my hair, telling me how soft it was, long and straight and blacker than a cat’s, you always said, even though it was already streaked with silver strands. You used to kiss my whole body, from my forehead to my toes, and say, “Thank you, Silvia, for letting me love you,” sincere as a schoolboy.

I should have known it couldn’t last, but let me tell you, I wasn’t ready, not prepared at all. I was carefree, Freddie—foolish.

We came here once late in the season, almost like today—maybe not quite November, but late October, for your birthday it must’ve been. I remember, we walked
out here and stayed late until we could hardly see anything. But the waves were huge, at least ten feet high, and they were perfect long barrels, about a mile long: dark blue, navy and midnight colors, with streaks of silver-yellow moonlight swirling in the barrels and rolling along the tops. We had the blanket wrapped tight around us, holding the edges together in front, just staring out with my head resting against your shoulder—sometimes kissing—and we smoked a joint. Remember me ducking down under the blanket with my head in your lap to light it. The wind was powerful, like it is today—tonight. You had to tuck your head down inside the blanket, too, and I held the joint up to your mouth: it was like we had our own little tent. Like we were camping.

We never did go camping together, though—too old for sleeping in tents. We used to go when Emma and Bobby were little, with their father. Now that really seems like a lifetime ago. You should see Emma now, driving me down here this morning in her nice car that she bought, now that she’s an engineer. She even let me light a joint on the way—you remember how she used to get whenever I smoked around her, screaming at me that I was the worst mother in the world, that none of her friends’ parents were potheads. You would get so mad at her when she yelled at me like that. I think it bothered you more than me.

Emma was used to having things her own way. I guess I spoiled her a little. She never had to do chores, she never had a curfew, and she never got in trouble. I always saw our relationship as positive, despite the outbursts. Bobby knew how to keep her in line, in his quiet way. After he left for college, she got a little brattier. But her grades were always good and she never came home drunk.

When you started staying over on the weekends—that was a big adjustment for her. And for you. I’ll never forget the look on your face the first time you heard her talk to me the way she did sometimes. Like you were about to have a heart attack…

We were smoking a joint in the living room when we heard someone stomp up onto the porch. I put it out in the ashtray and put the whole tray under the end table just before she walked in the front door. The room was full of smoke.

“Hey Emma,” you called out, being friendly as always. “How was the movie?”
“I didn’t watch a movie,” she said, her arms crossed, a scowl on her face, standing in the living room doorway. “Don’t you think I would have been gone longer than an hour if I had watched a whole movie?”

“Oh, sure, that makes sense. So what happened? I thought you and your friend were off to watch a movie.”

She wasn’t even looking at you. All of her anger was directed at me from the moment she saw us. It was like watching a child try to play with a pit bull—a pit bull about to attack its mother. You were the child. Innocent, unsuspecting.

“What happened is that Jillian’s car broke down and she had to get it towed, so her mother picked us up from the side of the goddamned road and drove me home. Just in time to interrupt your little date here. I’m glad I didn’t invite Jillian over. What a delight it would have been to suffer the embarrassment of having a mother that’s so…pathetic.”

Your mouth fell open. You just looked at her. If it had been me alone, I would have told her to lighten up. Go to bed. It would have passed right by me.

“Emma,” I said, “there’s no reason to get—”

“No reason? How do you think it makes me feel to have to come home and look at you like this. You’re a forty-year-old lady and you act like juvenile delinquent—smoking your pot, hiding it before I come in. It’s disgusting. You should be ashamed—”

And that’s when you lost it. While she went on her tirade, I watched in anguish as your face changed from confused disbelief to suppressed rage.

“Enough,” you bellowed. “This is your mother you’re speaking to, not one of your little friends from school.” You stood up and took a step closer to her. “You are absolutely right—she is a forty-year-old woman—a lady, and you need to learn some goddamned respect, little girl.”

“You have no right to talk to me like this. Who the hell do you think you are? You’re not my father.” There were tears in her eyes.

“No, I’m not. If I was your father, I’d slap your filthy mouth right now.”

“Well you’re not. So fuck you, asshole.”

“Emma!” I screamed. “Shut your mouth and go to your room right this second. Go.”
You had turned purple. I could see the fear and the determination in her face, but she turned and ran up the stairs.

“Silvia, what the fuck was that?”

“She just gets a little stressed out when I smoke pot. It’s really not a big deal. She’s just an uptight kid…She should probably smoke a little pot…”

The way you looked at me then turned my stomach.

“No big deal? You think that was funny?”

“Freddie, I was just trying to lighten the atmosphere in here. She’s a teenager. They’re all crazy.”

“You think one of my kids would ever talk to me like that?”

You were still standing.

“Why don’t you sit down and we can just forget about it. Everything’ll be fine tomorrow.”

“Silvia, that girl has a discipline problem. I’m not going to listen to her talk to you like that.” You were so upset, so adamant. I wasn’t sure what to say. But you weren’t finished. “She should be grounded, at the least.”

“All right, I’ll think about it. Now can we just relax? I’ve got wine in the fridge.”

You looked at me for a second, and I could tell you weren’t satisfied. It was actually starting to irritate me. She’s my kid, I thought, so my problem. My concern, not yours. I know you meant well, that you were upset mostly because of how much you cared about me, but it went a little deeper than that. It had to do with the fundamentals. The stuff that’s the hardest to mesh in any relationship.

“I think I’m gonna go,” you finally said.

“What?”

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Freddie, wait…” I would have said more but you were already in the hall getting your coat from the closet. When you put your hand on the doorknob, I said, “You’re actually going to leave? Seriously? It was just a teenage girl mouthing off to her mother.”

“Right,” you said, looking at me over your shoulder. “That’s all. No big deal.” Then you sighed and shook your head. I couldn’t quite believe what was happening. A moment later, you were gone.
You didn’t call for two days. I was so upset. It was the first time we’d had anything like a fight.

When I tried to blame Emma, she said, “If he’s going to run away because of me, then he doesn’t deserve you.” And that made sense.

You came into the flower shop Monday morning with chocolates and a gold bracelet.

“What were you all weekend?” I asked.

“Nowhere. I just needed some time. I’m sorry.”

“But where were you? You didn’t answer the phone and you didn’t call. So what were you doing?”

“Silvia, I just needed some time.”

“Were you with another woman?”

“No,” you howled, like the mere suggestion had stung you.

“So…?” I knew you didn’t just go and sit home in your apartment all weekend. Not your style. And you looked guilty, like a puppy that’s shit where he’s not supposed to.

“I got drunk. I went to the bar and drank.”

“All weekend?”

“Pretty much.”

That’s when I found out about your problem. Your crutch. When things got bad, you got drunk. But not just a simple, quick drunk, when you binge, pass out, wake up with a hangover and move on—nope. You got drunk for days, mixing in a little cocaine to keep it going. You spilled it all out there in the shop that morning, and in the end, I thought, hey, nobody’s perfect. We were in love.

That was when we decided to come back to the beach. A couple weekends after the fight. You found us the perfect cottage on the edge of town. And we walked out to this lighthouse every day. We sat right here and had long talks about what we wanted from life, what we didn’t want anymore, and how we were going to move forward. Everything always became clear and manageable after those walks, those talks. It was never as easy
once we got back to real life, though. Emma was still a brat. You still couldn’t stand it. There were still bars.

It got better for us when she went off to college. There was no fighting, no drama in the house. That’s when things finally started to settle down. And then, you asked me to marry you.

A bride at forty-three, I joked, is like a teacher that can’t read; a vegetarian in a hotdog eating contest; an atheist at church; a teetotaler in a bar. I had a whole string of them, didn’t I? That was why we came here the last time—to celebrate our engagement. To have peace and quiet to plan our future together. I was so fucking happy, Freddie. For the first time in my life I thought, yes, now I can finally just enjoy it—finally—no kids at home to worry about, no more fighting, no one to get in our way, and a million more walks on the beach ahead of us. If you hadn’t died, how many nights would we have spent here together over the last three years, sheltering each other from the wind? But instead, I haven’t been back since, until now.

Your soul left your body right here on this beach, while I held you in my arms, in shock. I must have cried and screamed; she said I was screaming when they found us—the wife. You fell to the sand just about here, in front of their cottage.

The afternoon was perfect. The sun shone, clouds drifted in long tracks arching across the sky—bursts of white against the vast bright blue, and a gentle breeze played off the water. Seagulls criss-crossed over our heads. We were happy, laughing. Walking and then jogging, dancing around even, kicking up sand everywhere. We were getting married.

“Soon,” I said, as we got closer to our destination. “Why wait?”

“The end of September,” you decided. “That gives us two months to plan. We’ll do it right over there, in front of the lighthouse, our anchor, so we never get lost.”

“Emma can be my maid of honor.”

“It’s gonna be beautiful, Sil. Come on, I’ll race you.” You kissed me quick on the lips and took off.
I chased you, passed you by, then turned and ran backwards so I could see you. We smiled at each other. And then moments, mere footsteps later, your face changed, you grabbed your chest, and fell…and I dropped down over you.

“Freddie…” You reached out to me, your eyes wide, and then fell back. You didn’t say anything. You were just gone. I remember how I was holding you, trying to find you. You weren’t there. Your face, your body…you weren’t there. I couldn’t get that image of your face out of my mind for so long. Your dead face.

The next thing I remember is that family showing up. The woman pulled me away while her husband crouched down over your body. She hugged me. I cried on her bony, cardigan-wrapped shoulder, unable to believe.

That’s how it was, Freddie. No warning, no premonition. I could be next, any minute, and then, hopefully, that means we’d be together. But I don’t want to die yet, not even for you. I’m sorry but I want to live and feel love again. Can you understand? You know me better than anyone ever did—you always will—and so you of all people know that I can’t live like a cold, mourning widow till I die. I’ll go insane.

I cried for months, every day. No one wanted to be around me. It wasn’t like when I lost my parents. They had both been sick. They were better off by the end. But you were young and healthy, and I loved you so much. I went to therapy, me, who always said shrinks were for wimps, people who needed to learn to get over it, deal with their own shit, grow up. But Emma and Bobby and my sisters made me go, and really, I was in such bad shape, so weak and pathetic—I had to do something. I didn’t even have the strength to argue.

Emma’s the one who told me I should come here. She’s back at the hotel. We didn’t rent our cottage, no, just a simple room at The Breakers. We’re only staying the night, just so I could come talk to you, to find out if you’d be okay with this; if I’m okay.

I’m cold now Fred, but the waves are beautiful tonight: fast and powerful, they’re crashing down just in front of me, pounding onto the shore in an explosion of white foam. The moon is up, not full, but more than half, and bright, surrounded by stars. I’ve got a sweatshirt on with a hood and heavy jeans, but the wind is still biting through all the fabric, whipping strands of my hair out across my face. I wish you were here to wrap
your arms around me, or our blanket, to keep me warm. But you’re a long while gone now, Freddie sweetie, and I don’t want to be alone.

Can you forgive me? Do you understand that it’s not the same, but I need it, and it’s good, he’s a good man, and he makes me feel better?

He came into the flower shop, to buy an arrangement for his daughter’s college graduation. We’ve been dating for two months now, and I’ve been struggling. I feel so guilty, like I’m being unfaithful to you. I came home from a date last week and went to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I opened the closet to get a fresh tube of toothpaste, and there was your old roll of deodorant, just sitting there on the shelf, the red plastic covered in dust, accusing me of forgetting you, and I broke down, Freddie, slumped against the closet doorway.

I still have our pictures up around the house, and all of your stuff—clothes, shoes, tools…Will you understand, my dear, if I put most of it away, or donate your things to charity? I really don’t want to be alone and you left me here, just when we were supposed to be perfect.

I’m sorry I’ve stayed away so long. I couldn’t come back—I wasn’t ready. But now that I’m here, I remember why we always returned to this point at the end of our world, the farthest place we could walk to escape from everyone: just you, me, and the ocean, moon and stars. The lighthouse, you said, so we’d never get lost.
Notes and Bibliography

Note on “Absent Brushstrokes”

Of the five poems in this story, the ones appearing second, third, and fourth (on pages 16, 17, and 19) are slightly altered versions of translations of poems actually written by Guan Daosheng. The first and last poems (on pages 14 and 21), like the rest of the story, are my own words completely. Also, Guan Daosheng, Zhao Mengfu, Zhao Yong, and Ni Zan are all recorded in history. Wang Ping and Xinran are characters of my own creation.

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