2014

Angles of vision: four stories

Lai, Ying-Ju

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/14258

Boston University
ANGLES OF VISION: FOUR STORIES

by

YING-JU LAI

B.A., Wesleyan University, 2002
M.A., American University, 2006

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

2014
Approved by

First Reader

Leslie Epstein, D.F.A.
Director and Professor of Creative Writing, Creative Writing Program

Second Reader

Ha Jin, Ph.D.
Professor of English
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Seventh Floor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgin Ruins</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Minor Inconvenience</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Virtuous Friend</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Seventh Floor

The sky was still dark when Trung Ngoc woke to a tap on her shoulder. She had been dreaming. In her dream, she was riding her brother's bicycle from her village in Phu To to the nursing school in Hanoi. The endless dirt road and the heat had put her in a trance. When she felt the forceful tap, she had a momentary sensation of falling and tried to steady herself on the handlebar. Then she opened her eyes and realized she was in her room at Great Harmony Nursing Home. She was not in Phu To but in an industrial city in southern Taiwan. Someone was standing next to her bed. She reached for the bedside lamp but felt a hand grabbing her own.

“Don't wake the others up.” It was the voice of Mrs. Lin, the on-site director at Great Harmony. “Come with me. Something happened.”

By the time Trung Ngoc had pulled herself up and was fumbling for her clothes, Mrs. Lin was already waiting outside. At the other end of the small bedroom, one of her two roommates grunted in her sleep. She put on her jeans in the dark, slipped into her flip-flops, and tiptoed out. As she followed Mrs. Lin down to the first floor, she saw that the older woman’s hands were shaking.

They stopped by the doctor’s office, where Mrs. Lin picked up a stretcher with two arms. As she turned around, the metal frame knocked on the desk. The thump startled them both, and Mrs. Lin let out a tiny scream.

“What happened?” Trung Ngoc asked.

“It’s Grandma Liao. She couldn’t unlock her thoughts.”
Trung Ngoc didn’t understand, but the expression sounded vaguely sinister.

Grandma Liao, one of her charges at Great Harmony, had been in the quarantine ward on the seventh floor since Monday for a suspected case of tuberculosis.

“Should I get her ready?” In a state of confusion, Trung Ngoc assumed that the test result had come back at four in the morning and that the old lady was to be transferred to the medical center immediately.

Mrs. Lin didn't answer. She waddled out of the office holding the stretcher, but instead of heading to the elevator, she turned to the back garden.

The only source of light was the dim street lamp in a distance outside of the brick wall. Trung Ngoc squinted to make out the pebbled path that cut across the lawn, and it took a while for her to see Grandma Liao’s flower print pajamas, then she saw the blood. And only then did she realize that the old lady was sprawling on the ground, face-down, the upper half of her body on the path and the lower half on the grass.

“Dr. Wang is on his way,” Mrs. Lin said. “But we need to clean this place up before everyone wakes up.”


Mrs. Lin placed the stretcher next to the body. She knelt down by the head and gestured for Trung Ngoc to lift the old lady’s feet.

“I put her to bed at nine last night.” Trung Ngoc pulled up her t-shirt to wipe the tears from her face, almost scrubbing it. “She was coughing as usual, but everything was fine.”

“You can cry later, but we need to clean up now.”
Trung Ngoc put her hands on the old lady's exposed calves. She had massaged those legs every day for the past three years to keep the blood flowing. She knew every brown spot, every bump, and every sinew on them; but now the extra fat under the skin felt like rice flour dough left out in the kitchen for too long. She picked up the legs as Mrs. Lin lifted the shoulders. They moved forward slightly to avoid a puddle on the grass from yesterday's rain.

“Don’t look,” Mrs. Lin said as she tilted the old lady’s upper body and exposed her face in order to place her on the stretcher.

Together they brought the body back to the doctor's office. Mrs. Lin was carrying most of the weight, with Trung Ngoc only lifting the other end of the stretcher so it wouldn't drag on the ground.

“I don't think she suffered for too long,” Mrs. Lin said once they put the body down. “I ran out as soon as I heard the noise. I am glad my room is so close to the garden. She was already gone when I found her.”

“But she was fine yesterday. I told her she wouldn't have to stay on the seventh floor much longer. The test result was coming back soon.”

“With these old folks, there's nothing you can do if they can't unlock their thoughts.” Mrs. Lin sat down on the doctor's armchair, messaging her temples. She was a big-boned woman with thick arms who could lift a grown man from a bed to a wheelchair all by herself. “The doctor will be here soon. No one else needs to know about this.
Trung Ngoc went back to the garden with a mop and a bucket of hot water. The sky was brighter now. Pools of blood and bits of pink matters were splattered all over the ground, glistening under daylight. She realized she had made a mistake as soon as she poured the hot water over the pebbled path. The blood had reacted to the heat and congealed into brown stains. She ran the mop over them back and forth, but they stuck as if having been printed on the ground. Its metallic smell grew stronger and stronger, mixed with odors of copper, rotten cabbage, and muddy rain water.

Trung Ngoc went to the supply room to pick up a hard bristle brush and a jar of bleach. She poured the entire content of the jar over the grass and the pebbled path, then knelt down to scrub the stains. The noxious smell of the bleach permeated the air. After half an hour’s work and several trips back to the faucet with the bucket, the small patch of ground was soaked with water as if a tiny storm had just gone through.

***

Trung Ngoc didn't go back to bed but started her morning shift at seven after a quick shower. Other than Grandma Liao, she had three more grandmas under her charge, all on the fourth floor. She went into each room, changed them out of their pajamas, lifted them onto their wheelchairs, washed their faces, brushed their teeth or fixed their dentures into their mouths, and blew their hair dry. By eight thirty, she had comfortably installed all three old ladies in their wheelchairs and pushed them to their usual breakfast spot under a banyan tree in the back garden.

The day was sunny, though the heat in southern Taiwan had cooled down in November. The rain yesterday had damaged some of the azaleas along the brick wall, but
the remaining ones were in full bloom. Trung Ngoc glanced at the other end of the
garden and saw that the patch of pebbled path that she had scrubbed so vigorously a few
hours before was almost dry now.

She placed a bowl of breakfast – rice soup with shredded pork and kale – on the
pop-up tray in front of each grandma's wheelchair and laid out a spoon. She knelt down
in front of each, fed her three spoonfuls of soup, then moved on to the next one. Since
Grandma Liao had gone to the seventh floor, the conversation during their meals had
been quiet, and the old ladies seemed to get tired of each others' company quickly. Each
one would talk to Trung Ngoc while she fed her. The conversation would be cut off
abruptly when she moved on to the next old lady and resume again when she came back,
as if someone had pushed a “pause” button between them.

Today Grandma Meng was talking about either a soap opera or her husband. She
had speech impediment from a second stroke, and her tongue always got in the way. It
took her about a minute to pronounce each word, but she never got tired of trying.

“All right, all right.” Trung Ngoc patted her cheek. “We eat first, okay? We eat
first, then we chat.”

She sent two more spoonfuls of rice soup into the old lady’s mouth and finally
guessed correctly that she was saying “house.” Then she moved on to the next grandma.

Grandma Lee hardly ever spoke and often needed to be coaxed into eating. Trung
Ngoc dug out a chunk of shredded pork and edged it toward her mouth.

“It has no taste,” the old lady said. “I can’t eat this if it has no taste.”
“This is good for you. You don't want too much seasoning in your food. The salt and soy sauce'll shrivel up your skin and give you wrinkles.”

The old lady sighed.

“So what is going on with Old Liao?” Grandma Ding at the next wheelchair asked. Her legs were weak from kidney failure, but she could still speak eloquently like the former department store saleswoman she had been. She didn’t need to be fed except on the days before her bi-weekly dialysis. “When is she coming back? I'm tired of playing mahjong with that woman on the third floor. She's such a sore loser that we had to spend most of the game trying to let her win.”

“They transferred her to the medical center this morning,” Trung Ngoc said.

There was a collective gasp among the three grandmas.

“Bud-phpi’ing—phpi’ing?” Grandma Meng struggled to squeeze out the words.

“So the test result came back?” Grandma Ding lowered her voice.

Trung Ngoc looked down at the bowl of soup and didn't say anything.

“So it's TB, huh?” Grandma Ding said. “We call that blood-spitting plague here. But it’s not that terrible. They’ll fix her up real good in the hospital. It’s not like before.”

“How-- How-- Phu--” Grandma Meng said.

“When I was a little girl.” Grandma Ding ignored her. “My aunt – that’s an aunt by marriage, mind you, people in my family are clean and healthy – my aunt had the blood-spitting plague right after she had her first baby. She probably got it when she visited her own family in the countryside. That was right after the war, and we couldn't afford to send her to the doctors. So my uncle put her in a hut at the edge of the town.
Us kids would look at her from a distance. Even back then I had enough sense not to get too close. She was always sitting out there on the porch and doing nothing but coughing and spitting out blood. We pretty much just watched her body disappear bit by bit.”

“You should eat more,” Trung Ngoc said. Grandma Ding had been stirring the soup with her spoon.

“Did the doctor say whether the TB’s serious?”

“Oh I don’t know,” Trung Ngoc said. “Stop playing with your food. It's getting cold.”

“I’m fine,” Grandma Ding said. “I’m not hungry.”

“You're just going to eat junk food in your room if you don't have breakfast.”

“What's that smell?” Grandma Ding said. “This place smells awful.”

Grandma Meng grunted in agreement.

“It's probably the rain from yesterday,” Trung Ngoc said. She shoved more soup into Grandma Lee's mouth. “They should clean up the leaves in the gutter.”

She scooped up the third spoonful. The old lady shook her head but acquiesced after a few prodding. She smacked her lips together several times, as if trying to tease some taste out of the low-fat, low-sodium, high-fiber soup.

“This is disgusting,” Grandma Lee said. “On top of that, the stench is killing my appetite.”

“It's not the leaves,” Grandma Ding said. “It smells like rotten meat.”

“No, not rotten meat,” Grandma Lee said. “When I was a child, we lived next to a butcher shop, and it smelled just like this.”
“Did the kitchen just butcher a chicken?”

“When does the kitchen ever butcher a live chicken? The food might taste better if they had fresh meat.”

The smell of rusted metal hit Trung Ngoc for a second, then it was gone. She looked in the direction of the pebbled path. She had cleaned up the garden so well last night that now she couldn't even remember where Grandma Liao had lain. She sniffed again, and the smell came back, this time even sharper, mixed with rotten cabbage and muddy rain water. It invaded her nostrils, and then even her lungs hurt. She looked at Grandma Lee, who was in no hurry to continue eating and gazed into a distance.

Stomach acid shot up to Trung Ngoc's throat, and she lurched over to the other end of the garden before she threw up into an azalea bush. All that came out was muddy, yellow liquid.

***

She knocked on Mrs. Lin's office during lunch break. The on-site director waved her in and asked her to close the door.

“The grandmas know,” she said.

Mrs. Lin looked up from her paperwork. “What did you tell them?”

“I didn't tell them anything. They smelled it. They said they smelled the blood, and I smelled it, too.”

“Maybe you need to clean up better.”

“I cleaned up really well last night.”
“Don't be a hysterical bug. Everything is fine now. The doctor signed the death certificate, and the family was very understanding. They agreed that it's best we keep everything quiet.”

“Did they come and get her?”

“The people from the funeral home have taken her. They'll make her look nice again. The family was very kind, actually. They kept saying how sorry they were for the trouble and the shock. I told them they needn't worry. I had our best nursing attendant with me. I also told them how careful and how discreet you are. They were very grateful.”

Mrs. Lin seemed to have slept little the night before, too. Her eyes were droopy and her entire face sagged more than usual. The pause in the conversation indicated that the conversation was over. Trung Ngoc turned to leave but stopped at the door.

“Did the test result come back?”

“No, but it doesn't matter now, does it?”

“If she didn't have TB, she would have been up on the seventh floor for nothing. She really didn't want to go. She was scared of the ward. I told you I talked to her last night, but I lied. I had said I'd go up and talk to her every day, but I forgot because I was too tired.”

“It's not your fault. Why don't you take tomorrow off? I'll get someone to fill in for you. It's not anyone's fault, and it's a good thing that no one had to be disturbed.”

“I wish I had brought a TV up for her or something. I said I'd get her a TV, so she wouldn't be so bored all the time.”
“It doesn't matter anymore. Grandma Liao is at peace now, and you shouldn't glue her to your heart.”

***

Trung Ngoc slept in the next morning and spent the afternoon at the riverbank on the other side of the city. She often came here on weekends to browse through the boutiques, and then she would go to a shopping mall nearby to buy cheap knock-offs of the clothes she had seen earlier. On this weekday afternoon, however, most of the pedestrians were in suits and seemed to be in a hurry, and the outdoor cafes were empty. She walked past a group of young men sitting on the sidewalk, who looked like Thai laborers on leave from the factories outside of the city. She avoided their gaze and walked on.

The river was of a dull, gray color. Despite the clean, mosaic-tiled sidewalk and the chic storefronts that lined the river, a stale smell of polluted water and mud wafted through the air. The newly planted ylang ylang trees were still too short and too sparse to provide any real shade, and the heat soon made her dizzy. Trung Ngoc walked into a clothing shop that had air conditioning.

The salesgirl looked like a college student and approached with an awkward smile. She unfolded and folded a stack of t-shirt while eyeing Trung Ngoc. In Taiwan, she had gotten used to shop clerks following her around, watching closely whenever she picked up anything. Usually she would try to start a conversation with them, telling them how pretty she thought the shirt or the necklace was, so they knew she spoke Mandarin. Sometimes she would tell them that she worked at a nursing home so they could know
she had a real job and was not one of those mail-order brides living in the rural towns outside of the city. Today she glared at the girl.

“I'm not going to take anything from your shop,” she said and walked out.

She returned to Great Harmony before dinner time. She circled around the building and entered through the front gate to avoid the back garden, but as soon as she stepped into the lobby, the metallic smell of blood hit her again. She stopped and held her breath for a few seconds. When she inhaled again, the smell became even stronger.

“Everything okay?” the pretty receptionist asked. She was looking at herself in a compact and getting ready to leave.

Before Trung Ngoc could answer, Mrs. Lin walked into the lobby with a wide smile on her face. “Here you are.” She waved. “I was hoping you'd be back in time. Come with me.”

Trung Ngoc followed. She constricted her throat to suppress the urge to throw up. After a while, she could almost ignore the smell.

A man and a woman were waiting in the office. They looked to be in their forties, or perhaps in their fifties. She could never tell how old these Taiwanese were. The woman was dressed in a thin sweater and well-pressed trousers, and the man looked tired and hot in a crumpled suit. They both had a small piece of white gauze pinned on their sleeves.

“This is our Ah-Ngoc I've been telling you about,” Mrs. Lin said, putting one arm around Trung Ngoc's shoulders.

“You speak Mandarin?” the women asked.
Trung Ngoc nodded.

“She speaks perfect Mandarin!” Mrs. Lin said. “She understands Taiwanese, too. She watches all the Taiwanese soap operas with the grandmas and grandpas here. This is Grandma Liao’s daughter.” She introduced the woman to Trung Ngoc. “And this is her son.”

“I'm so sorry about all the trouble,” the daughter said. “Mrs. Lin told us about the disturbance our mother has caused, and we're very sorry about it.” She bowed slightly. The son also bowed.

“No sorry, no sorry.” Tears streamed down Trung Ngoc’s cheeks.

In the two years that Grandma Liao had been under her care, this was the first time she had seen the old lady’s children. She searched their faces. The son bore little resemblance to his mother, but the daughter had her square jaw and kind eyes.

“You must be the science teacher.” She wiped away the tears with the back of her hand. “Grandma told me about you. She told me you teach at the best high school in Taipei, and you have a daughter who studies in America. She was always bragging about you.”

The woman’s face crumpled up into a demure frown that was exactly the same as the old lady’s. Like her mother, she also has the habit of smiling apologetically as soon as the frown appeared.

“Thank you for taking care of everything,” the son said. The two of them bowed again. “Mrs. Lin told us you did a wonderful job. We really appreciate that you are able to handle this matter so quietly.”
The daughter took out a red envelope from her purse and handed it to Trung Ngoc. “To wash away the gray fume.”

Trung Ngoc didn’t understand her, so she stared at the envelope without taking it.

“Bad luck,” the son explained. “To get rid of the bad luck, to say thank you. Thank you so much for taking care of the troubles.”

“It was no trouble, and Grandma was not bad luck. She was a kind lady, a really, really good patient – my best one. She just got so lonely she couldn't stand it anymore.” Her eyes were brimming with tears again.

“It’s okay,” Mrs. Lin patted her back. “It’s okay. Ah-Ngoc takes care of her like her own grandmother. That’s how we treat our residents here at Great Harmony. But Ah-Ngoc, if you keep crying, Grandma Liao will be too worried about you to go to heaven.”

The daughter took Trung Ngoc’s hand and placed the red envelope in it. She felt it with her fingers. It was thick with cash. If those were hundred-yuan bills, it would be enough for perhaps only a semester’s tuition for her little sister in Phu To. But no one respectable would give small bills as present, and these people are very proper and polite. These must be thousand-yuan bills. At least thirty of them.

“Please welcome her back to your home,” Trong Ngoc said. “When you pray for you, please tell her you will look after her spirit now. Because sometimes I don’t know if she’s at peace-- On the first night, when we said good night on the seventh floor, she kept saying it was okay. I know it wasn’t okay, but Grandma didn’t want me to feel bad. Then when I visited the next day, she looked terrible because she couldn’t sleep. She told
me she saw things.” She lowered her voice. “She heard them speak, too. She was really scared and begged me let her out. I had to say no. It was the doctor’s order.”

“Old folks can get carried away with their imagination sometimes,” Mrs. Lin said, “especially when they have nothing to do all day. But that’s all over. She’s not scared now. She’s up there and happy. I think she’s having a good time in heaven playing mahjong with her old friends, and I bet she gets lots of pongs.”

“She was happy here,” Trung Ngoc said. “She was everyone’s favorite mahjong partner here.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Lin said, turning to Grandma Liao’s children. “You know how difficult some of our grandmas and grandpas can be, but your mother had something nice to say to everyone.”

“I don’t how her cough started,” Trung Ngoc said. “I always make sure my grandmas are clean and warm.”

“But of course you did,” Mrs. Lin said. “You did a great job. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

Trung Ngoc knew she should stop talking. Having been in Taiwan for only three years, she couldn’t understand everything other people said, but she could always detect the mood in the room, just as she always knew instinctively if a grandma’s or a grandpa’s diaper was wet. She could tell if someone had just told a joke or made an argument, and she would laugh or nod accordingly. From the absentminded smile on the daughter’s face and the son’s sweaty forehead, she knew she was supposed to shut up.
They both stood up and straightened their clothes. “We should go,” the daughter said.

“Grandma just couldn’t stand the seventh floor anymore.” Trung Ngoc took hold of the daughter’s arm. “She pretended she wasn’t coughing and her chest didn’t hurt and asked me to take her downstairs. But I told her she had to stay until the test result came back. Only for a few more days. The test result was supposed to come back this week, the doctor said. Then she could go to the hospital or go back to the fourth floor, I told her. I said I’d find a TV for her, so she wouldn’t be so bored during the day. I just forgot. She was hearing those voices because she had no one to talk to. I said I’d visit every day, but I forgot that night because I was so tired.”

She thrust the red envelope back into the daughter’s hand. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, you must have it.” The woman pushed it toward her again, but she drew herself away. The woman then grabbed her arm and tried to tuck the envelope into her jean pocket. She patted Trung Ngoc’s waist, almost jabbing her, as she searched for a spot to dispose of the cash. Trung Ngoc struggled to free herself, but the woman’s grip was surprisingly strong, so she shoved her with all her force. That surprised them both, and they each took a step back.

“I don’t want it,”

“Please take it,” the son said.

As Trung Ngoc turned her attention to him, the daughter grabbed her hand and put the envelope in it. Then she went to the other end of the office, almost jumped there, as if making sure she would never have to touch the money again.
“You asked me to take care of Grandma, and I forgot about her. I lost her. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” the son said. “Nothing at all.”

“It’s just a little bit of our hearts,” the daughter said. “It’s not much, really, compared to what you have done for us. We are very grateful that everything is resolved with so little fuss.”

“Yes, it’s such a relief,” the son said with a weak smile. He did resemble his mother after all, the way his thin lips were pressed tightly into a stiff upward arch. “We should go.” The daughter patted her hair and walked out without acknowledging anyone in the room. Her brother followed, and Mrs. Lin and Trung Ngoc remained a few steps behind them until they all stopped at the front gate.

“Thank you,” the daughter said. “Please send the final bill to my usual address, and of course, if there’re any damages, we’ll be happy to--”

“There’re no damages,” Mrs. Lin said. “The ground has been cleaned up completely.”

Trung Ngoc watched them turn at the end of the alley. The sun was setting and cast a purple hue behind the clouds.

“She told me he is very good-looking,” she said. “She said when he was a boy, girls would wait for him at the corner of their street so they could catch him when he walked to high school. She said he would leave from the back door in order to avoid them. She always felt bad for those girls, so after he had left, she would bring them scallion pancakes for breakfast. But he’s not good-looking, not even close.”
“Maybe that’s how she remembered him.”

“I’ve never seen them before. How come they’ve never visited?”

“I don’t know.” Mrs. Lin rubbed her temples. “Every family has its own inscrutable prayer. Ah-Ngoc, sometimes we--”

“I don’t understand what you are saying. I need to go. I need to make sure my grandmas are eating their dinner.”
Virgin Ruins

Jamie had gotten up early that morning and snapped a particularly good photo of a temple at sunrise, so that might have been an inspiration. Later on, as he and Nancy walked along the moat that surrounded Chiang Mai’s Old City, the air was cool and fresh and the streets uncharacteristically quiet, which probably motivated him to think deep thoughts. In any case, he brought up SnapHub again.

“How-- red.” Nancy stopped abruptly. The starkly bright color suddenly dominated her range of vision after long stretches of dull brick-brown (the wall of the thousand-year-old fortress) and listless green (the coconut trees, parts of their fronds scorched to a russet color by the tropical sun).

Jamie said it was the reconstructed North Gate. “Entirely too flashy.”

He placed her next to it and took a photo with his top-of-the-line Nikon. “Very smart,” he said. It was a mid-range shot, he described for her. In her blue top and white pants, Nancy presented the perfect kind of imbalance next to the Gate.

She said he was a genius, half ironically to indicate that she had little interest in the structural aspect of the image but with enough good humor to show she was just a silly woman who knew nothing about photography. Luckily, he wasn’t offended at all. He squeezed her hand, laughed, and said he would stop boring her with the pro talk. Then very casually, almost as an afterthought, he said he wasn’t even a pro, and that serious hobbyist photographers like him probably seemed a bit pretentious sometimes.

Then he dived, almost frenetically, into his startup spiel. A multimedia online platform where discerning hobbyist photographers – he preferred the term “hobbyist”
over “amateur” – could exchange their work. Part workshop, part social network.

Eventually the business opportunities would extend beyond the Internet. Cross-industry collaboration with travel agencies, galleries, and electronics retailers. The same concept could apply to filmmaking, music, painting, creative writing. Dividing the mass market into a series of niche markets.

The embankment next to the moat was wide and flat, and as far as Nancy could tell, had few obstacles, but she still leaned on Jamie and let the pressure of his hand guide her left and right, mostly just to avoid a pothole or a rock in their way. At ten in the morning, the sunlight was already exceedingly bright and seemed to have drained the colors from everything. Perhaps due to the humidity, the city had a smudged quality to it, and the outlines of the gray buildings blurred together more than usual.

Nancy wished he knew how obvious his intention was. Sometimes she would have liked to say, “Let’s get this over with so we can get on with whatever we mean to do.” But it was safer to stay with the familiar dance they always did. She tried to change the subject and wondered aloud what their plans were for the rest of the day. He said she was the one who suggested they walked around the Old City before they headed to the airport. There was an ironic emphasis on “walk around.” Jamie preferred to have a plan, a destination, even if it was only a restaurant, and got restless easily when they were simply wandering around. He had behaved himself so far, perhaps because they had a plane to catch soon and somewhere to go. She asked him what time their flight to Mandalay was. Four, he said, and laid out their timeline for the rest of the day. Then he returned to SnapHub.
All he needed, he said, was a very good Web developer, a multi-media producer, a high-capacity server, one or two ad salesmen, one admin person, and a small marketing budget. He had updated the financial proposal recently and all he needed for seed funding was $150,000. It was so straightforward and easy, he said, that it would be a waste of time to try to pitch it to potential investors. Those hacks, with their protocols and reporting requirements, would only suck the life out of a surefire project like this.

“Oh love,” Nancy said. “You are the smartest puppy I know, but that really sounds like a lot of work. Why would you want to put yourself through all that trouble?”

“It’ll be a fun project for both of us.”

“What can I do?”

“You’ll be my chief inspirational officer.”

“I like that, but Tom and his minions are going to kill me if I make an investment without consulting him, and you know what he’s like. Good luck getting a business proposal through to him.”

“He’s your financial advisor, not your boss.”

“Well, yeah—"

Jamie stopped and put his arm around her shoulders. “The steps.”

“Thanks.” At the end of the steps was a lawn raised a few inches higher. Nancy looked around and saw animated shadows dance in a distance. Those little shadows produced sounds of laughter and water splashing, causing sunlight to flicker furiously.

“Is that a fountain?” she asked.
“Tom isn’t even officially your advisor.” Jamie ignored her question. “I believe he stopped being the administrator of your trust, what, thirty years ago?”

“Thirty years! I’m not that old. Okay, maybe twenty-five. I started handling everything myself twenty-five years ago.”

“And he still scares you shitless.”

“He does scare me, inordinately. But I’m pathetic like that, okay? I let an octogenarian with a pacemaker boss me around.”

“But he has such an old-fashioned attitude toward money management.”

“We are just a pair of country bumpkins who prefer keeping our cash in a shoe box under our bed. You need a fancy investor with an Ivy League degree and good connections, someone who can introduce you to the right people. All this cyber stuff is beyond me.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“But the important thing is why you would want to be tied down to a job. Now we can hop on a plane anytime we want and go anywhere we want. Isn’t this nice? Aren’t you happy, love?”

“Of course I am.”

“Me too.”

Nancy and Jamie had arrived at Chiang Mai from Washington, DC, three days earlier. This was meant to be a restful stop before they headed north to Mandalay in Myanmar. From there, they would trek out to a vast complex of thirteenth-century temple ruins near the border to Laos. Having been neglected for centuries, the site was
situated in the middle of a tropical jungle. Jamie had described for her the giant trees that had sprouted up inside ancient palaces and burst through the roofs, the twenty-foot pillars covered in vines and moss, and exquisite statues worn out by the rain and the wind. Most importantly, the place was yet to catch the attention of the Western media or, even worse, designated as a UNESCO world heritage site. Only the locals and a few knowledgeable travelers had been there. “Virgin ruins,” Jamie had said.

He had learned of the ruins when he saw a documentary on Myanmar, in which there was an aerial shot of the site, and once they decided on the trip, it took him only a week to arrange everything: hotels, plane tickets, the expedited visas to Myanmar, the permit to enter the site, and an English-speaking Burmese historian to serve as their guide. He was at his happiest when he planned trips. Sometimes a simple weekend to her beach condo in Boca Raton, once Jamie took charge of the planning, would turn into an elaborate production of a private tour at an eco reserve, an air balloon ride, and multiple visits to restaurants on exclusive islands that required two-hour boat rides. In the past year, they had flown to a several major European cities for long weekends, vacationed in Costa Rica twice, taken a cruise on the Adriatic Sea, and traveled to Southwest China for the annual Torch Festival.

They crossed the moat, entered the Old City, and continued their walk on a cobble-stoned path that cut through a leafy park. Under the shades, the bright daylight turned soft and muted, and Nancy could discern the outlines and colors around her more clearly. There seemed to be a large building in a distance, its slanting roof in a brown-gray shade and covered with copious patches of glittering gold and silver. Over the
years, as her eyesight deteriorated, colors had taken on all kinds of different dimensions. 
What used to be just yellow or red now embodied such unique, infinite variations of 
qualities that Nancy sometimes couldn't find the words to describe them. As they walked 
a few steps closer to the building and the light shone from a different angle, the roof’s 
brown-gray color now seemed to be mixed with a layer of subtle pink, and then the pink, 
or rather lavender pink, was seeping into the glittering gold and silver as well.

“Is that a temple?” Nancy asked.

“Probably.”

“What’s it like?” She grabbed Jamie’s forearm and rested her head on it.

“I don’t know. It looks like a temple. There’s a temple at just about every corner, 
and they all look the same.”

The temperature had risen quickly in the last half hour, and the air was no longer 
fresh but humid. She pressed a handkerchief on her forehead to soak up the sweat, 
careful not to wipe away any makeup.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said. “We should go to Africa for a safari next year.”

“Sure.”

“Where do you go for safaris? Kenya? South Africa?”

Jamie didn’t respond. With a slight pressure on her palm, he steered her to avoid 
what looked like a giant tin box on her side of the path.

“What’s the right season for it?” Nancy continued. “I don’t mean the weather but 
the time of the year when you can see the most variety of animals. Also there’s this thing 
that people always want to see at safaris—”
“The migration of the wildebeest?”

“Yes, the wildebeest! Just think of all the photos you can take. This is exciting. Do you want to start planning for it once we get back home?”

“Sure.”

Once they had reached the end of the path, they left the park and soon found themselves on a busy thoroughfare. There was no sidewalk, so they moved slowly on the edge of the road. Jamie put his arms around Nancy tightly, almost wrapping himself over her, and shielded her against the other pedestrians, bicyclists, parked motorcycles, and street vendors. Some of the vendors had contraptions that made a grinding noise, while what looked like fire popped out some stalls. As she watched outlines of cars flashing past, she noticed several large boxes, or small huts, moving slowly amid the traffic.

“Isn’t there somewhere nicer we can go?” Nancy said. Her shirt was clinging to her sweaty back, and as she huddled against Jamie, she could feel moisture rising from his skin.

“You’re the one who wanted to walk around town.”

“Yes, but not on the road. Can’t we go somewhere with a proper sidewalk?”

“We could, if I can spot one.”

She asked him what those little huts sailing on the road were. He said he had no idea what she was talking about.

“Like that one.” She pointed to a boxy shape with blue and white strips that passed before her eyes.

“I didn’t catch it. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”
“It’s right there!”

Jamie ignored her and complained. It was too hot. The moat smelled. People didn’t understand the concept of personal space. The “Old City” – ironic emphasis – was just a cluster of concrete mid-rises, one of the ugliest examples of urbanization he had ever seen.

“You know what would cheer us up?” Nancy said. “Let’s go shopping. Do you want to find an interesting store around here so we can get away from the crowd? How about a gallery? Let’s visit a gallery. Would you choose a painting for the dining room in Boca? You know, so we can bring a bit of Thailand back to the States.”

But Jamie wanted to get a taxi and go back to the hotel. Nancy sighed. When he was determined to be disagreeable, it would take a long time to coax him back to his normal self. Usually Nancy would have done the coaxing without hesitation, through a little teasing, a few questions she knew he would be happy to answer, maybe poking his stomach playfully. But the heat was too strong that morning, and there was too much noise. She was tired but didn’t feel like being stuck in a hotel with Jamie and his mood. They should have gone to a beach instead of this temple ruins, she thought. The prospect of dilapidated buildings and dense forest drenched in moisture was depressing. They should have gone somewhere with very blue sky and lots of tropical fish. A resort where they could lie in lounge chairs all day and have cold drinks brought to them. Maybe Fiji.

“I’d like to walk around a bit more,” she said. “This is pleasantly chaotic.”

Still leaning against Jamie, she slowed down to look at the shops by the road. She could make out the tables in some of them, and the tone of the voices coming from inside
told her they were restaurants. Other shops seemed to be clothing stores, where the merchandise on display had soft contours. But some had indistinct smells and produced no sounds, making it impossible for her to figure out if they were retail shops or restaurants or simply someone’s home. She squinted. It had been many years since she last tried to see better by squinting. It wasn’t help now, either.

“Do you see a gallery anywhere?” she asked.

“I can’t say I have.” Jamie was still holding her hand, and both of their palms had become clammy.

She stopped in front of a display window, which was a patchwork of rich brown, beige, and something between silver and copper. She thought she saw the rectangular outlines of paintings.

“I wonder if this is a gallery.” she said.

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s find out.”

Jamie didn’t say anything but opened the door for her.

It was cool and quiet inside, and the air smelled of lemongrass and leather. Nancy could tell instantly that the place was spacious and the floor was mostly flat, but Jamie still held her hand and kept her by his side. They walked around without saying anything. At first she thought the large blocks scattered throughout were sculptures, but Jamie touched them very casually, and she realized they were in a furniture store.

“Hello!” A blurred shape of gray and white containing a female voice came over. The woman, young with her springy movement and slightly squeaky voice, talked about
the couch, which Nancy had her hands on, as if it were a painting. The inflection in her English was lopsided, and the words were stuck together like drops of molasses.

Scandinavian modernism, she said. Big in the Seventies and making a comeback now, in Thailand at least. The fluid lines. Not demanding at all and would go well with just about any other pieces.

Nancy said the couch was beautiful and told the salesgirl she was considering redecorating her place.

“We definitely want something very different,” she said.

The young woman, who introduced herself as Mari, was surprised to hear that Nancy was talking about a beach condo in Florida, but she assured Nancy that the store offered international shipping. This was the most select furniture showroom in northern Thailand, she said, and they had everything. Mari herself had a double degree in interior design and art history from one of the most prestigious universities in Bangkok. As if to prove her credentials, she herded them from one section of the store to another while practically giving them a lesson on the history of furniture design. The store was like a deconstructed mansion. In one area were half a dozen beds made of different materials and styles, and at the other end of the showroom were three or four living rooms’ worth of coffee tables, couches, and cabinets culled from various historical periods. Mari rattled off their pedigrees: traditional Thai, Japanese minimalist, art nouveau, early art deco, and late art deco.

“We should get going,” Jamie said. “We need time to pack.”
There were still five hours before their plane would take off. If they were to go back to the hotel, she would have to sit at the corner and watch Jamie drag himself around the room, placing the suitcase on the stand too loudly and opening and closing the closet too hard. She would have to remain still so as not to knock over anything or get in his way. She would have to think hard to come up with an interesting question that he’d be happy to answer. What could she possibly ask him about? Photography would only remind him of SnapHub. He hated Chiang Mai already. She had no interest to learn anything about the temple ruins or Mandalay. So she ignored him and told Mari about her condo in Boca Raton, which she never found time to decorate properly.

“It’s just that we travel so much,” she said. “We never stayed there long enough to commit to a full-scale renovation. The previous owners gave us all their furniture. They have two little kids and a dog, and I tell you, they really left their marks everywhere.”

Mari wanted to show her magazines that featured the furniture in the showroom and led them to her office. Nancy might have a better idea what she wanted when she saw the pieces in actual settings, she said.

In the office, Mari scrambled to offer Nancy something to drink. She had everything in the fridge – coke, orange juice (from concentrate), bottled water, coconut juice (not from concentrate but with sugar added) – except for the sparkling water Nancy wanted. The young woman was apologetic and said she would go to the convenience store across the street to pick up a few bottles.
“Oh don’t worry about it. I’m fine.” She looked around saw Jamie at the threshold, refusing to sit on the chair Mari had offered him. Nancy thought she could see him glare at her. Maybe he was rolling his eyes or looking at his watch with exaggerated concentration. Or worse, maybe he had retreated inside himself and wasn’t looking at her at all.

“Jamie can get water for us.” She raised her voice to his direction. “Jamie, love. Make yourself useful and get us some sparkling water, will you?”

“Do you need it now?” He sighed. “Mari already said they have coke here.”

“You know I’m trying to cut down on sugary drinks.”

“Can’t you wait ‘til we’re back at the hotel? I don’t feel like sorting through the Thai coins.”

“Give them a large bill then. I’d really like a bottle of sparkling water. Mari would like one as well.”

His outline moved and disappeared without a word.

“Make sure it’s not Perrier, please,” Nancy called out. “You know Perrier always tastes funny to me.”

Mari laid a stack of magazines in front of Nancy, but Nancy said she had already decided that she wanted the Thai-style living room set made of teak. “Remind me again what the set includes?”

A coffee table, an end table, three chairs, and a love seat, all made by the most experienced craftsman in Thailand. And the store took Visa, Master, and American Express cards.
“Sounds perfect!” Nancy said and fished out her credit card (top left slot in the outer flap of her wallet.)

While they waited for Jamie to come back, Nancy told Mari about their upcoming trip to Myanmar: the ruins, the trees bursting through the roofs, the ancient statues, and all the troubles Jamie had gone through to arrange everything.

“You can always leave it to him to find the best travel destination,” she said.

“I can tell your husband loves you very much. He is always holding your hand. So sweet!”

“Oh, he’s not my husband, but we’ve been together for over ten years. He wants to get married, you know, but I said I couldn’t be bothered with the formalities.”

“And he’s very good looking.”

“Yes, he is, isn’t he?” Nancy smiled and grabbed Mari’s hands. “But you should have seen him ten years ago. You know the actor Matt Damon? When I first met him, he looked like a skinnier Matt Damon. Well, I guess he still looks like him, just with a gut and less hair.”

A knock on the door interrupted their giggles. Jamie came in without a word and slammed a glass bottle in front of Nancy, causing bits of the condensation to splash on her face.

“Hey!”

“Sorry.”

“Darling, could you give Mari our address in Boca and fill out the customs forms for shipping? This is very exciting.”
He asked for the credit card receipt and studied it. “What the hell?”

“Mari said they can do expedited shipping. Our furniture will be waiting for us by the time we get back.”

“Why didn’t you ask me about it first?”

“Just give her the address, will you?”

***

Leaving Mari’s profuse “thank you” and “have a good trip” behind, Jamie gripped Nancy’s arm and charged out of the store. As soon as she stepped through the door, the heat made her dizzy.

“Do you realize that you just spent fifteen thousand dollars on furniture?” he said.

“What are you going to do with all those chairs and tables?”

“I thought we could redo the living room in Boca. Wouldn’t that be fun? It’ll be a big project.”

“And the shipping is going to cost a fortune!”

“Don’t take the fun out of this.”

“You’d rather waste your money on some junk than do something useful with it. They are ugly as shit, in case you don’t know.”

“What’s next door? Let’s check it out. Maybe I’ll buy the store and we can be two little shopkeeper in Thailand. That’ll keep us busy.”

“Stop it.” He put his hands on either side of her shoulders and forced her to stay still.

“You’re no fun today. What’s your— what’s your beef?”
“I hate it when you do ridiculous things like this.”

“I can do whatever I want with my money.”

“Sure, you can be as stupid as you want with it. That’s none of my business.”

“I think I’m pretty smart with it, actually. You know what would be stupid? Giving you the money would be stupid.”

“The money isn’t for me. It’s for the company.”

“Same difference. Call me old-fashioned, but I say if you want a new toy, get something you can see and touch. How about a sports car? We can get a new car. Or a studio? I’ll build a studio for you. With a dark room.”

“You can be a real bitch sometimes.” He was squeezing her shoulders so hard that they hurt.

“At least I’m not delusional about myself.” She wriggled out from under his hands and broke out in a sweat with the efforts. “That imaginary business of yours is ridiculous. We should stick to what we’re good at. I’m good at buying things, and you’re good at being cute and cuddly. Let me tell you what you’re not good at. You’re not good at being useful, and you are not good at managing a business.”

“I think you don’t want me to be successful. You’ve never done anything, never been anything in your life. You’ve lost your chance and you want to drag me down with you. I won’t do it. I won’t. God, I need to get the fuck out of here!”

“I love you.” She held his head close to hers, their noses almost touching. She stared into his irises. Their exact shapes escaped her, but blurred spots of green and gray
danced before her eyes. She caressed his cheeks while studying his clenched jaws and the furrowed eyebrows.

He peeled her hands off of his face like a stubborn scab.

“It’s not going to work out,” she said. She took his hand, and he let her. “You’ll have to start all over again. Are you going to be one of those people who sit at coffee shops all day typing into their laptops? And who’s going to pay for that? You want to wait for hours at a conference room and compete with sixteen-year-old prodigies for the chance to grovel at the feet of some venture capitalist? Is that what you want?”

“I wouldn’t know unless I try, would I?”

“And if that doesn’t work out, then what? Are you going back to selling funds at Charles Schwab? You were terrible at it ten years ago. I can just see you now. Your little rental apartment in— where can people with entry-level jobs afford these days? Centreville? You in your little rental in Centreville, getting up at six every morning just so that you can put on a cheap suit and be stuck on the Beltway for hours.”

“I’ll find something.”

“You know, with whatever hair you have left, it won’t be as easy this time to find someone to take care of you. Actually, love, keep the clothes. Take all the clothes with you. It breaks my heart thinking of you in a cheap suit.”

Nancy felt her hand being shaken away, her entire person let loose, uncoupled. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, Jamie’s familiar outline was receding, and soon it became indistinguishable from all the other pedestrians.

“Jamie?”
She held out her arms to feel for him. “Jamie?” Nothing there.

She clutched her handbag tightly and remained still. All of a sudden, she realized how near she was to everything on the road. Cars and motorcycles raced past her so quickly that their outlines blurred together, creating flashes of shadow before her eyes. The bicycles’ bells clinked, and their chains creaked persistently. What seemed like waves of people brushed past her, the heat of their strange bodies spilling onto her, shards of their alien language scattered around her. Then she saw those moving huts again, giant boxes that shuffled among the fast-moving shadows.

The furniture store. She should go back, except she couldn’t remember if they had walked any distance since they left it. She could try to look for those blocks of brown, beige, and silver in the display window, but if she looked away from the traffic, something might hit her.

A sharp honk caused her to jump and lose her balance. She stumbled backward, knocked over what seemed like a pile of machinery, and fell on top of it. She fumbled to pull herself up but her hand landed on an uneven object with sharp edges. Still lying on top of the machine, she squinted and traced its surface carefully with her fingers. Only when her hand reached a leather cushion did she realize that she was reclining on a toppled-over motorcycle. As soon as she stood up, a head rush came over, so she let herself fall again.

Several people, in a wide variety of shapes and colors, approached and hovered over her. Among the many concerned voices, she picked up the questions in English instantly.
“I’m fine,” she said. “Thank you. I’m okay, really.”

Someone’s thin arm hoisted her up, and she relinquished her weight to it.

“I was—” she said, still leaning on the flimsy body of a tiny woman. “This furniture store. You see, I can’t quite— Could you—“

The crowd was suddenly quiet. Nancy blinked and looked around. A familiar outline, not as thin and straight as it once had been but its movement still light. The pristine white of his shirt, the shade of his trousers that wasn’t quite khaki but something between beige and saturated yellow. She thought she could almost see the green of his eyes.

“What’s going on here?” The familiar voice.

They had met for the first time at an informational session for a new mutual fund his firm was launching, back when he was a junior salesman and she could still look into his eyes with perfect focus. His manager had called in sick that day, so he was responsible for the presentation. His voice quavered as he went through the PowerPoint slides, and Nancy, who was sitting near the head of the conference table, saw his long, pale fingers tremble as he typed into his laptop. When he began to analyze the risks, he stuttered. Suddenly, he giggled, and so did she.

The warm hand on her shoulder.

“Here you are,” she said. “I’ve been waiting.”

“Here I am.” He retrieved her from the tiny woman. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s-- Everything’s perfect.” She grabbed his arm with both hands.

“I found a gallery,” Jamie said.
“No, you want to go back to the hotel. Let’s go back.”

“Let’s walk around a bit more. We have plenty of time.”

“We don’t have to. We really don’t. We can go back.”

“There’s a painting I want you to see. You said I get to choose one for the dining room.”

Yes. Yes.
A Minor Inconvenience

Hand in hand, Susie and Erika enter the ground floor of Macy’s at the Rockridge Mall. Erika is a toddler of about two or three, though she could be even older, as her knowing gaze and steady walk give the impression that she is small for her age. She has a skinny body and a large head, and she is wearing a faded set of sweat suit that she seems to have slept in the night before. Susie looks to be in her late teens. Her thick, long hair is dyed unevenly in a stark red color, with patches of the original black showing through. Her eyebrows have been plucked into two thin, arched lines and make her look constantly startled.

“Choo-choo.” Erika tugs at Susie’s jeans. The little girl’s finger nails are painted meticulously in bright neon pink.

“The choo-choo train will be there all afternoon, okay? I just want to take a look at the makeup. Come on.”

They walk among dozens of gleaming counters, each with its own expensive, artificial scent. The women behind them, all with impeccable hair and vey red lips, are selling perfume, cosmetics, and bottles of skin cream that promise to make the pores disappear. Susie stops once in a while to consider her reflection in the mirrors that are everywhere.

“Would you like to try a sample?” A middle-aged woman in a lab coat hands a small packet to Susie, who eyes it suspiciously.

“Are you looking for anything special today?” the woman asks.

“Not really.” Susie shrugs.
“We have a new line of lipsticks that’ll look great on you.”

The saleswoman leads Susie to her counter. She places one silver tube after another in front of her like a row of tin soldiers. The lipsticks all have fanciful names like Pink Martini or Evening Siren that conjure up images of a summer garden party by a pond, where willow branches graze the water’s surface, or a table with pristine, white tablecloth under a gleaming chandelier. The woman smears them on the back of Susie’s hand and talks about each in vaguely scientific terms.

“This,” she says as she points to a deep purple line she had drawn Susie’s skin, “is Autumn Love. Not everyone can wear this color well, but you have a warm skin tone, and this shade really brings out its glow. This is a bit bolder and perfect for a special evening out.”

“Actually, I have a date with my boyfriend tomorrow.”

“That sounds like a special occasion to me!”

Erika has wandered away, inspecting and touching everything her hands can reach.

“Mommy!” The little girl totters toward them with a giant perfume bottle in her arms.

“Hey, you stop that!” Susie snatches the bottle from Erika and returns it to the display table. “You come back and stay next to me. Who’s going to pay for the choo-choo train if you just walk away like that, huh?”

“May I give you a suggestion?” the saleswoman says when Susie returns her attention to the lipsticks. “You really don’t need all that makeup. You have such
beautiful eyes, and the eyeliner you wear just covers up their natural sparkle. Because you’re young, all you need are a good, basic foundation and a few tubes of lipsticks. Things are pretty slow now. I can give you a makeover if you want. It’ll only take a few minutes.”

Susie nods.

“I’m going to make Mommy pretty.” The saleswoman turns to Erika, who squirms beside her. “Then you can go on the train ride.”

“Oh don’t mind her. She can be a real pest sometimes.”

The saleswoman smiles. “Now let’s clean you up!” She presses a pad over Susie’s right eye carefully for a few seconds, then wipes away the grime on the lid. She does the same thing with the other one. Without the mascara and the eyeliner, the girl’s features have lost their sharp edges, and she could be as young as sixteen.

“At last, when I said ‘boyfriend,’” she says. “I meant my fiancé. He called me this morning and popped the question.”

“Congratulations! But you’re just a baby-- Is this going to be a long engagement?” The saleswoman dabs a small amount of foundation on Susie’s cheekbones, forehead, the tip of her nose, and chin and evens it out, her long fingers tapping on the skin quickly, almost fluttering over the surface.

“No, no!” She jumps up. “He wants to start a life with me, like, right now. He’s a bit older, you know, so he can afford to do that.”

The saleswoman sits the girl back on the stool and applies bits of paint in a deeper shade on a few select spots on her face.
“He’s been in Las Vegas all week,” Susie continues. “He works for a furniture factory, so he has to go to all these furniture shows. It’s really boring for him, but he’ll be back tomorrow. He’s taking me out to dinner, and maybe he can propose properly. He has a present for me, and I think I know what that is.”

“Ah, don’t talk now.” The saleswoman cups Susie’s face with both hands, tilts it down, and curls her eyelashes with a complex contraption. “Just a teensy bit of mascara, to define the outlines of your eyes,” she says as she swipes a brush over the tip of the lashes. Then as if adding the final touch to a painting, she fills out the girl’s lips with a pink lipstick.

“What do you think?” She gives Susie a handheld mirror.

The girl studies her reflection and beams.

“Like I said, you already have beautiful eyes, so let’s put the focus on the lips. What I just used – it’s Pink Martini – is a really sweet shade—very subtle. If you just want to look a little nicer during the day--”

Susie picks up the boxes and examines the price labels. “Fifteen dollars for lipstick?”

“After a few hours, you’ll see the difference between this and the stuff you get at drugstores. The color stays on, and since the main ingredient in this new line is rose hip oil, your lips will stay moisturized all day.”

Ten minutes later, Susie and Erika leave Macy’s with Pink Martini, Autumn Love, and a jar of foundation.

***
“This place is dope, isn’t it?” Susie says. “So much better than the dump in Eastmont.” They stroll across the courtyard at the center of the mall. The afternoon sun shines through the stained glass ceiling and creates patches of muted red and green on the marble floor. The lunch crowd has left by now, and the sound of water trickling in the fountain is mixed with the shoppers’ unhurried footsteps.

Erika doesn’t seem to have heard Susie. She is focused, almost somber, as they walk along one of the corridors that radiate out of the courtyard. At the end of it is a life-sized stuffed bear in a train conductor’s uniform. It holds a sign that says, “Teddy’s Station,” behind which a line of children and their parents are waiting.

From the far corner appears a colorful, child-sized train, its whistle blowing as it approaches. Erika’s eyes widen. She flails her arms up and down like a bird and runs toward the locomotive and would have collided into it if Susie hadn’t restrained her.

“God, what’s your problem? You want to get killed?”

The train stops, and an elderly man wearing a red bowtie and a flimsy conductor’s hat emerges from the cab. As passengers begin to hop out, Erika leaves Susie and cuts to the front of the line to the children’s protest. Before her mother could pull her back, she has already climbed into an empty car and scaled up to the seat using both her hands and feet. She leans against the window with a satisfied smile.

“I see someone’s excited about Teddy’s Express!” the conductor says to Susie.

“Ten dollars for the two of you, please.”

“Five dollars per person! For a crappy train ride?” She mutters loudly as she gives him a ten-dollar bill.
“Choo-choo!” Erika shriek with delight when the train starts to move. She leans so far out of the window that Susie has to clutch her ankles to prevent her from falling off.

The train shuffles along a corridor lined with shops. At the Gap, rolled-up t-shirts in colors of earth tone were arranged in the shape of a Christmas tree. The next display window bursts with all things silver. Against a black backdrop, a silver disco ball and silver tinsel drop from the ceiling, and Mannequins in silver sequin dresses seem to have frozen in the middle of a dance party. Another store was selling swimwear. In the window, a slender plastic female body without a face is clad in a bikini and lounges on a beach chair under a fake palm tree, and two males in swim trunks stood with their legs crossed in a jaunty angle. Surfboards, snorkeling gears, towels, and a beach umbrella are scattered by their feet in pleasant, calculated disarray.

“Max and I aren’t really engaged,” Susie says. “Not yet. But he’s going to ask any minute now, I know. Sometimes guys get hung up on one or two minor details. They think it’s such a big deal, but it’s not. He just needs a little push, you know what I mean? But this is really the best for everyone.”

Erika ignores her. She jumps up and down on her seat and waves at passersby. When they wave back, she giggles and waves even more vigorously. After ten minutes, the train returns to Teddy’s Station. Susie steps out, but Erika doesn’t budge from her seat.

“Come on! Let’s go.” Susie grabs Erika’s arm, but she pulls away.

“Choo-choo,” Erika says.
“No, we can’t ride a second time. It’s five dollars per person.”

Susie tries to pick Erika up, but the little girl’s body pushes and wriggles, and she clutches the armrest tightly as if she were a drowning person holding onto a lifesaver. Susie pries her fingers away, and she starts to cry.

“What the fuck! Are you crazy? It’s five dollars per person.”

Erika continues to cry with abandon, her wail trickling out of the window and reverberating in the mall. The other cars are empty by now. The children and the parents waiting behind the teddy bear gawk at them with curiosity.

“Stop this!” Susie’s voice has risen to a scream that’s almost indistinguishable from Erika’s cry. “This is supposed to be special. Now you’re ruining it. Is this how you want to remember today? You always ruin everything.”

“There, there,” the conductor sticks his head through the window. “That was a fun ride, wasn’t it?”

Erika stops crying for less than a second as she peers at the old man, but soon the tears resume with even more determination.

“We’ll get going soon, okay?” Susie glares at him.

“I’ll give you a two-for-one deal for the second ride.”

“Alright.” She lets go of Erika and fumbles for her wallet in her bag.

Erika, not realizing that Susie has sat down next to her again, continues to cry and tries to pull herself away from her mother.

“Stop bitching around,” Susie says. “We’re going on another ride. You happy now?”
The train starts to move again, and only after about a minute does Erika realize they are staying. Her body relaxes, and she leans back on the bench and snuggles against Susie.

“Mommy,” she says.

“Why are you such a crybaby, huh?” Susie puts Erika on her lap and wraps her arms around the child, as if holding a giant doll. She takes out a paper napkin and wipes the tears from Erika’s face. Together, they look out of the window and the little girl waves at a small crowd outside of Victoria’s Secret, where there is an end-of-the-season sale.

After the second ride, Erika hops off the train without making any noise.

“That was real fun,” Susie says. “You won’t forget about it, will you?”

They go to the upper level, where Susie browses the shops absentmindedly. At an accessories store, the little girl knocks over a rack of silk scarves, but Susie only sighs and pulls her away.

They walk around more and finally stop at a quiet corner of the mall in front of an empty storefront. Susie leans against the wall with her arms folded. Erika does the same. After a few minutes of silence, Susie picks Erika up from under her arms and swings her left and right. The little girl giggles, and they continue to do so for a long time until Susie complains of sore arms.

She takes Erika to the restroom, which is empty, and they go into the larger stall for the handicapped. Susie takes down the toilet cover and sits Erika down.

“You want to go to Chuck E Cheese later?”
“Yeah, yeah.” Erika jumps off the toilet and shuffles her feet in a little dance.

Susie kneels down. She opens up a small backpack and rifles through its contents: a few shirts, a pair of jeans, a dress, a Sippy cup, and a strand of plastic carnival beads in neon pink. She helps Erika put on the backpack, picks her up and plopped her down on the toilet again.

“Stay here,” Susie says.

“Mommy!” The little girl struggles to get off, but Sue pushes her back.

“I said stay here! You have to be very quiet. There’s something really important that I need to do, and I can’t do it when I have to lug you around. I’ll be right back, and we’ll go to Chuck E Cheese. You can’t go if you keep bitching around like you did before. You want to go, don’t you?”

Erika nods.

“Be very, very quiet.” Susie takes out one of the two tubes of lipsticks she has bought earlier and places it in the little girl’s hand. “Look, this is for you. Now we both have new lipsticks.”

While Erika tries to take the cap off the tube, Susie shuts the door. She pulls at the handle a few times to make sure it is closed properly.

She turns to the sink and looks at her reflection in the mirror, combing her hair while listening for sounds from the bathroom stall. She examines her skin and smoothes her eyebrows with a dab of water. Then she applies the other tube of lipstick.

Her trembling hand slipped and drew a red line down her chin. “Shit!” She pulls out a stack of paper towels and wipes away the smear.
After powdering her face and painting her lips again, Susie walks out of the restroom on tiptoes and closes the door carefully. She walks faster and faster past rows of shops, then she starts to run, almost knocking over a middle-aged woman in a purple peasant skirt. Once she exits the mall through Macy’s, she stands there for a few seconds, as if lost. Then she runs toward the bus stop and jumps on the first bus she sees.

***

Susie had the bathroom all to herself that morning because her mother had already gone to the factory and her father was on an early shift at Hunan Café. She was taking her time blow-drying her hair when the unexpected phone call came. As soon as she heard Max’s voice on the phone, she started screaming, “Ohmygod, ohmygod.”

“Hi there, it’s nice to hear your voice, too.” Max spoke in a croaky drawl that made him sound tired even when he wasn’t. “Greetings from sin city!”

“Are you calling long-distance?”

“I most certainly am.”

“This is sick!”

When she finally calmed down, Max did most of the talking because she couldn’t think of much to say that was special enough for a long-distance call. He said he was tired of looking at and talking about furniture. After he came back, he would get rid of everything in his house and live in an empty box.

Erika tottered out of the bathroom, saying “Mommy” and making unintelligible noises. When Susie ignored her, she hugged Susie’s legs and whimpered. Max was saying that he had gotten a present for her, but Susie could barely hear him, because by
then Erika’s whimper had turned into an unbearable screech. In those days, Erika never 
simply said anything. Whatever meaningful words that came out of her mouth – she had 
about three words at the time: “mommy,” “no,” and “yeah” – were usually followed by 
fake cries or peels of giddy laughter. Susie covered the handset, so Max wouldn’t hear 
the child, who was now crouching at her feet and scratching and biting her calves.

After a while, she had to put Max on hold in order to shake Erika off her legs.

“Stop this, I beg you. Please, please, please-- just this time. Let me talk to him now, and 
then we’ll do whatever you want.”

Erika started to cry. She stamped her feet and extended her arms, wanting to be 
held. Many years later, when Susie became a mother again, she would read parenting 
books and learn to distinguish the different kinds of crying babies made. When her son 
was in real distress, the tears would be accompanied by hiccups and urgent gasps, but 
when he simply wanted to manipulate her or express a vague sense of confusion about 
the world, the fake cry would lack conviction and have a monotonous rhythm. In that 
case, Sue – she would go by Sue later on in her life – would try to distract him by taking 
him out for a walk or telling him, in a soothing voice, that in this house people used 
words, not tears, when they wanted to say something. But that morning Erika’s scream 
was like needles pricking her skin and her body hurt all over and Max was waiting at the 
other end of the line, on a long-distance call.

“Fuck this!” She hauled Erika to their bedroom, all the time feeling those chubby 
legs kicking her thighs. As soon as she tossed her on the bed, the child sat up and 
climbed down with what seemed like supernatural swiftness. Seeing her coming, Susie
leapt out of the room and slammed the door shut. With one hand on the door knob in a
tug of war with Erika, she leaned toward a dresser by the wall and, with her other hand,
fished a key out from a small tin box. Having locked Erika’s screaming and crying and
banging safely behind the door, Susie ran back to the living room.

“Is everything okay?” Max was still on the phone. He sounded genuinely
concerned, and that made Susie ashamed.

“Erika was mean to me. She kicked me and it really hurt.” She regretted it as
soon as she mentioned the baby, so she added, “But I’m okay now. I’ll be even more
okay when I see you. Tell me about my present.”

“It wouldn’t be a surprise if I tell you now, but you may want to know that I got it
at a place called Sweet-N-Nasty.”

“Gross!”

Max told her he had wandered off the Strip – “That’s where all the casinos are,”
he explained – one evening after a business dinner and found a cluster of sex shops
tucked in the corner of an alleyway. The stores were all brightly lit and the windows
decorated in candy-colored themes. In a state of exhaustion, he thought those were toy
stores and went in to buy a present for his son. Then he started laughing at the sight of
velvet handcuffs and lingerie made of strings rather than fabric.

“Take me to Vegas,” Susie said. “We should get married there. It has always
been my dream to get married in Vegas.”

“Well… there’s that thing about polygamy being illegal in this country.”
Erika’s muffled cry and banging behind the bedroom door had stopped. The living room, usually dark even during the day because it faced south, had a small patch of bright light on the floor coming in from the kitchen window farther down the hall.

“Why can’t we get married? Why can’t you divorce Harriet the hag? I want to be with you all the time.”

“You’ll get sick of me soon. Isn’t it better that we see each other only sometimes and not all the time? Once people get married, all that’s special between them becomes boring and-- not special. Trust me, I know all about it.”

“How about this? We get married, and I’ll live in your closet. You only have to see me once in a while, but you won’t have to drive all the way to Oakland. When you want to see me, just open the door.”

“And what will you do there the rest of the time?”

“I’ll organize your shirts and ties, and I’ll brush the lint off your jackets.”

“Well, there is a lot of lint on my suit jackets.”

“So it’s a deal? I can move into your closet?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“There’s a lot to think about. And we’re not the only people involved. There’s also-- you know.”

“You don’t have to worry about Erika. I’ll take care of her. She’ll be really quiet and won’t bother you at all. She’ll live in your kitchen cabinet. I’ll teach her to dry your dishes.”
“I have a dishwasher and dryer already.”

“But you’re—old. If we don’t do this now, you’ll be really old soon.”

This conversation had gone wrong. At some point, she had lost control of it, and it was now stumbling off course. She should have stopped talking about going to Vegas or anything that would remind Max that he was married and had a little boy at home. But on that day, she was disoriented by the silence in the apartment, the adrenaline from the struggle with Erika earlier, and the excitement surrounding the long-distance call, so she didn’t stop.

“You’re not old,” Susie said. “Guys are, like, younger than girls mentally, so literally you’re just my age.”

“Literally? You mean theoretically?”

“No, I meant literally and really!”

“When I was your age—” Max finally said.

“I bet you were a dick when you were at my age. You’d be one of those guys who wanted a blowjob but didn’t even bother to ask nicely.”

“You’re crazy. I’d be so nice to you, you won’t even see it coming.”

Max went on to talk about his high school days, which was one of his favorite subjects, so Susie listened. He was on the track team and used to get up at six in the morning to run his daily five miles. He and his friends often drove to the top of Marlborough Hill, where they’d stay up all night listening to The Cure. Once he sneaked into his parents’ liquor cabinet and got drunk on peach liquor, feeling very worldly. Susie couldn’t contribute much to the conversation, even though it had been less than three
years since she was last in high school. She could never tell Max, but her memories from
that time consisted mostly of evenings with those boys at the parking lot of the Great
Fortune Plaza. They usually ignored her the next day at school, but at least they paid
attention to her some of the time. Then everybody paid attention when the bump began
to show. It was actually a relief when her parents pulled her out of school.

Max was coming back the next day, and his plane would land at noon. Susie
repeated her question about the arrival time because she liked the expression, “landing,”
and thought it sounded sophisticated. He said he’d have go home first, but he’d get in
touch soon. She said no, no, she wanted to be the first person he saw after he landed in
San Francisco. He protested that he needed to clean up after his trip. It went on like that
for a while, with Susie pouting and begging him to come see her because she knew he
enjoyed hearing her say silly things and he acting put upon but not really. At last, when
he said, “What the heck, let’s meet at Super 8 at two tomorrow,” she was so surprised at
her victory that all she said was, “Okay.” The conversation ended abruptly, with Max
saying people were waiting for him downstairs.

***

When Susie unlocked the bedroom door, Erika was sitting in bed and playing with
a stuffed penguin. She wrapped and unwrapped a tattered scarf around the toy repeatedly
while humming a tuneless song. As soon as she saw Susie, however, she burst into tears.

“No, no, no.” Susie jumped into bed and held her, but the attention only
encouraged her to cry even harder. Susie cradled her like a baby, but Erika was no longer
a baby, and her arms and legs spilled out of the embrace in various awkward directions.
Susie kissed her little belly, which was soft and white like the steamed buns Susie’s father sometimes brought home from the restaurant, then she tickled and licked it until the little steamed bun was giggling and squirming and both of them were rolling in bed.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” Susie said later. They were watching TV in the living room, which doubled as her parents’ bedroom at night. They never bothered to fold up the futon, so there was no space to walk, and every time someone needed to get to the front door, she had to climb over the mattress.

“It was a long-distance call, you know,” Susie continued. “Max got up early in the morning just so that he could call me.”

Erika stared at the TV screen and didn’t respond.

“Hey!” Susie pushed her. “I said Max got up early just so that he could call me. We’re going on a date tomorrow, as soon as his plane lands.”

On TV, some teenagers were pouring buckets of green goo on each other. Erika laughed and chunks of cookie crumbs spilled out of her mouth.

“You can be so out of it sometimes.” Susie flicked the crumbs off the mattress with her fingers.

She wished she could tell someone about Max. All this happiness seemed like such a waste when it was pent up inside her, with nowhere to go. She played over their conversation in her head, and this time it took a different direction. In this version, he didn’t want to put the phone down and said he could listen to her voice forever. “Just keep talking to me, please,” he said. When he finally had to go – “because those furniture whores are waiting for me at the showroom” – he practically, no, literally, fell
apart with desire and love, saying that he couldn’t possibly go through life without her. Then he asked her to marry him, promising her a big diamond ring when he came back. She said, “Yes,” of course, but she was very cool and proper.

After they got married, they would live in a two-story home on the Peninsula, in which the master suite would occupy the entire top floor, like the one he shared with Harriet. Susie had been to their house once, when Harriet and their little boy were visiting her parents in Oregon. It was a spacious rambler at the end of a cul-de-sac on the top of a hill. The living room was the size of Susie’s entire apartment, and the dining room window opened up to a panoramic view of the East Bay. But what surprised her was the disorder in that place, for she had thought chaos was something that belonged only to subsidized apartments in Chinatown. Several strollers were stacked in the hallway, stuffed animal and toy cars were scattered on the floor and tucked into unlikely places, like the medicine cabinet and kitchen pots, and everything was childproofed so the furniture looked as if bulky foam tumors were growing out of their corners.

“And she wants a second one,” Max said when Susie tripped over a toy engine. She rolled her eyes and told him to shut up and take her to the bedroom.

Their new house would be bigger and more expensive, and everything would be in its rightful place. She could see it clearly. In her mind, Max’s proposal on the phone segued smoothly into their date, not at Super 8 but at a nice restaurant, and then into their two-story home on the Peninsula. It was as if they were already her memories. Under the shadow of such immediate joy, everything else was a minor inconvenience, such as
Harriet and their son and the fact that when Max said, “She wants a second one,” he also meant that he didn’t want a second one, his own or anyone else’s.

Susie left Erika in front of the TV and went to the bedroom to pack the child’s things. There were the basic items: pull-on diapers, baby wipes, underwear, a Sippy cup, a wide-brimmed foam hat Erika wore when her hair was being washed so the suds wouldn’t get into her eyes. Then there were the not so basic but equally essential things on which Erika’s happiness depended: her favorite pink dress that was already too small, a necklace made of plastic beads, the stuffed penguin, and a bottle of half-empty nail polish. The sheer volume of a toddler’s accoutrement struck Susie like a shock of reality. She brushed the thought aside and focused on the work of selecting instead, and the effort seemed to validate her plan. When she finally condensed Erika’s life into the small pink backpack, everything was back on track again.

Years later, when Susie thought of that day, she never failed to cringe at the pointlessness of the little backpack. Did she think Erika was going on a trip by herself? Or perhaps, like the parents in fairy tales who cast their children off to the woods with only a loaf of bread, as if that could help them survive, she was trying to keep a semblance of continuity and not think of the great chasm ahead.

Soon there would be an arrest, and a brief period of media frenzy would follow, as well as a very impersonal statement from Max’s lawyer that denied any knowledge of Susie’s action. She would sign the adoption papers in a few months, and life would be unbearable for a long time, then it would get a little better. In less than a decade, she would have a baby again, with a husband by her side, a man so kind and so respectable
and with no apparent physical or mental disability that her parents were sure she must have somehow tricked him into marrying her. The family would move to a spacious two-story home, not on the Peninsula but farther down in San Jose, in a very desirable school district. She would be more often happy than not.

On that morning, when Susie told Erika they were going to the mall for a ride on Teddy’s Express, the child exploded with fits of laughter. She ran around the living room, bumped into the wall, the futon, the TV, fell down, picked herself up, then her little body ricocheted throughout the room again. Susie turned the radio on and danced to a song by some boy band. Her body felt so light that she staggered all over the place until she and Erika both collapsed on the futon.

By the time they were sitting on the bus going to the mall, everything felt completely right, and Susie didn’t think she would ever have to settle for being happy only part of the time.
As soon as Hannah turned onto Smith Island Avenue, there they were, the Bradshaw kids. And a few others as well. It was clear that they had seen her before she saw them, for their walk was purposeful and their exaggerated silence suggested they were in on something. All five of them – Sarah, Ben, and Johnny Bradshaw, a boy and a girl who were about Sarah’s age – stopped in front of her, standing side by side and blocking the entire road.

“Hello!” Sarah said in a singsong voice.

Hannah didn’t respond. At that time in the late afternoon, the crabbers had all gone home, and the last ferry had left the island. Her father was at home, most likely still in bed, and Geshe Jamyang Trungpa, his friend, had gone to Crisfield for groceries. The Avenue, which was just a two-lane road, was empty of traffic and pedestrians. She decided to wait this one out. Those kids were stupid. They would probably say, “had a good time at the Bay? Oh wait, you can’t operate a skiff. Had a good time in the kiddie pool?” Then they’d make a few comments about her pale skin and her stringy hair, then they’d let her pass. Yet as Hannah stared into Sarah’s eyes, she regretted not having turned around earlier and run away.

“Want some blue crabs?” Ben said. “Three dollars each.”

Hannah noticed that they were all carrying buckets overflowing with crabs, which wriggled under the lids. “No, thanks. Now please excuse me?”
“I’ll give you two-fifty. Neighbors’ discount.” It sounded like *Nai-bah’s discaint.*

People on the island spoke the way they did, Lawrence had explained, because they had been isolated from the mainland for so long that they still talked like their seventeenth-century ancestors from England. To Hannah, everyone seemed to speak in a funny accent just to mock her.

“Smith Island blue crabs are the best,” Johnny said. He was only ten, two years younger than Hannah and Ben. He had the thick body of an overweight teenager, but his voice was still high-pitched like a little boy’s. He picked one from his bucket and pushed it toward Hannah’s face. Its claws twitched before her eyes. She shrieked and took a step back.

“Come on,” the non-Bradshaw boys said. “We just caught them. These are the best shellfish in the Chesapeake.”

“I believe crabs are crustacean,” Hannah said.

“I believe you’re a crustacean,” the non-Bradshaw girl shot back.

“What does that even mean?”

“Oh dear, I believeeeve Her Royal Hiiiiighness is a crustaaaaacean.” Sarah enunciated each syllable with exaggerated crispness. Her face contorted a little every time she emphasized the *R*’s.

“I don’t want your crabs, okay? I need to go.”

“Chuffie Smithers at the diner said she only orders ice cream for lunch, nothing else,” the non-Bradshaw girl said. She turned to Hannah. “That’s not good for you. You
know that, right? *I believe* you need some crustaceans.” She picked another one from her bucket and shoved it in Hannah’s face, and soon all the kids were hurling crabs at her.

Cold, clammy shells, pointy claws, wet sand, and sea water rained down on her. She screamed when a crab landed on her shoulder and tried to attach itself to her shirt. She shook it off, but more crabs, sand, and water flew in her direction, and an empty bucket narrowly grazed past her hair. She continued shaking her body and flailing her arms in the air to fend off the attack, and soon even the grains of sand and the water dripping off her body felt like little creatures clinging on to her.

“Hello, everyone! You children are having fun?”

The crab-hurling stopped.

Hannah turned around and saw Geshe Jamyang Trungpa and his red monk’s robe approach from a distance. He waved his arms vigorously, his long red shawl fluttering in the wind. With a broad smile he started to run toward them, faster and faster, as if he couldn’t wait to join the fun.

“Let’s go.” Hannah grabbed the old man’s bare upper arm, readying herself to charge through the five-person blockade.

“You want some crabs?” Ben said, shoving one in his face.

“Beautiful!” The Geshe took it in his hand, patted its shell, and put it down on the ground. “A large catch for you children today, eh?”

About a dozen crabs crawled around their feet. A few seemed dead, and one lay on its shell, its legs twitching in the air and yellow liquid oozing out of the grooves on its front side.
“Five dollars each,” Ben said. “Nai-bah’s discaint.”

“Oh no no, we are vegetarian. We don’t eat living beings.” The Geshe knelt down to turn the upside-down creature on its legs, but it didn’t move.

“What’s wrong with crabs?”

“We just prefer not to kill them for our nourishment. There are lots of other substitutes. Beans are a great source of protein. You visit us, and I make you curry bean soup.”

The kids nodded. The non-Bradshaw boy made a farting sound, and they all burst out laughing.

“Yes, that happens sometimes.” The Geshe laughed, too. “When I was a boy in a monastery in Tibet, we meditated together every morning. For two hours, from six to eight. It was so quiet that you could hear everything – people’s breathing, the wind, a bird outside, but most of the time you heard the little monks, like me, passing gas.

Whenever that happened, my teacher would whack the head of the person closest to him.

“I was the tallest, so I always sat at the back of the prayer hall, and my head was always right in front of my teacher.” The Geshe chuckled. “And it got whacked all the time. I would beg my friends, ‘my head is getting really flat because it gets hit so often. Please, everyone, control yourself.’” He turned around and showed them the back of his shaved head. “Very flat, no?”

The kids stared at him.

“Okay—“ Sarah shook her head in a way someone would at a hopeless cause.

She turned to Hannah. “Your dad a vegetarian, too?”
“I don’t know.”

“All hippies are,” Ben said.

“Her dad’s a hippie?” the non-Bradshaw boy said. “I thought they’ve all died from drug overdose by now.” Averr-dase, it sounded like.

“Her old man didn’t,” Sarah said. “Or just about almost. That’s why he’s holed up in that dump they live. My mom said her mom ran away with some old hippie to California,”

The other two Bradshaws smiled and nodded, almost proudly, as if they were presenting their own personal freak.

“That’s whacked,” the non-Bradshaw girl said. “Chuffie Smithers said her mom’s a Kennedy, the retarded one, of course.”

“My mother is working on the nuclear program in New Mexico. She designs nuclear heads.” Hannah’s cheeks were burning. It must have been the sun.

The older kids giggled and nudged each other.

“What about your dad? What’s he doing here?”

“It might not be in your interest to know,” Hannah said, putting on her snobby expression, curling her lips into a “W.” “My father works for the government. I can only divulge the details of his project if you have at least top secret clearance. I don’t suppose any of you do?”

The kids giggled again and walked past them unceremoniously toward the harbor, ignoring the Geshe’s wave of goodbye.

“Let’s go home,” he said. “Your father is making dinner.”
Hannah was suddenly shy, so she remained a few steps behind him. His shaved head was shaped like a large potato, and the back of it was indeed very flat. He carried a large, floppy canvas bag on one shoulder and held a bundle of groceries in his arms, but as he moved briskly up the road, his head and body looked almost supernaturally poised.

“Very interesting children,” he said, without turning around.

“No, they’re not. They’re dumb, and they all smell like crabs.”

“They walk like crabs, too, don’t they?” He scuttled sideways, his short legs skipping and his upper body straining to hold on to the groceries.

Hannah smiled a little. The Geshe continued to scuttle, and for the first time that day she felt her footsteps becoming light. She hurried to catch up with him. He tousled her hair with his free hand, his fingers grazing past her nape, which was red with sunburn and stung from the touch.

“Forgot your hat again?” he said.

“Whatever.”

“I make a turmeric paste for you. It’ll heal your skin.”

“No turmeric anything, please. It smells like vomit.”

He pressed his palm on her nape carefully. It was surprisingly cold and provided a temporary respite.

“Don’t tell Lawrence what I said about him and my mom.”

“Because you almost divulged the top secret? Divulge means going many different ways, no?”

“I didn’t mean to say those things, but Ben and Sarah were pretty unbearable.”
“I know. Next time you see them, you say, ‘Why are you so unhappy that you
need to make fun of other people to laugh?’”

“I don’t think so. They’re so dumb they won’t understand what I’m talking
about. Just don’t’ tell Lawrence, okay? He’ll think I was making fun of his job or
something.”

Even though the Geshe was only half a head taller than Hannah, he stroked her
hair as if she were a small child. “You’re a good girl,” he said. “Not all children have
such compassion for their parents.”

Usually when people said someone was good, they meant she was not much else
but good. When Lawrence said, “Hannah is a good sort,” he usually followed the
statement with “but.” But she had very limited imagination. But he had never seen a
twelve-year-old as serious and fussy as Hannah. She could probably make a good
bookkeeper, or an office manager, like her mother, not that there was anything wrong
with that. When the girls at school said, “I’m so bad” or “Don’t mind me, I’m crazy,”
they actually meant they were too interesting to bother being good. But when Geshe
Trungpa said Hannah was a good girl, it seemed to her that being good was very
important and very right.

***

That was the summer of 1976. Hannah, Lawrence, and Geshe Jamyang Trungpa
had been on Smith Island for almost a month. Lawrence, Hannah’s father, had rented a
cottage at the southern tip of the island so he could be away from the noise in
Washington, DC, and focus on his poetry. The Geshe had accepted Lawrence’s
invitation to join him because he loved the ocean and needed a place to write his book, a 
beginner’s guide on Tibetan Buddhism. Hannah had no choice but to come along 
because her mother had moved to New Mexico two months before and so far shown no 
signs of returning home.

The Bradshaws were their closest neighbor, and their house was a five-minute 
walk up a muddy path from Hannah’s cottage. Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw were both 
crabbers. He was a burly man with a bushy beard, just like a fisherman in movies. She 
was a petit, ruddy-faced woman who was always dressed in denim overalls. She 
brought a basket of pastry and all four of her children to visit on the day Hannah, Lawrence, and 
the Geshe moved in. “If you ever need a nice, home-cooked meal, feel free to come over 
to my house,” she said.

How Hannah managed to get in trouble with those kids in less than a month was 
a mystery, though it might have something to do with the time when Sarah and Ben 
invited her to go “trekking.” Once they arrived at the edge of the marshland, Hannah 
refused to continue, saying she didn’t like to get her shoes dirty. Before she knew it, kids 
she didn’t know would shout at her on the street, “Hey, be careful don’t get dust on your 
shoes!”

So Hannah took a lot of walks by herself every day. Lawrence and the Geshe 
needed to focus on their work, and according to her father, she was always stomping on 
the floor or dropping things or chewing too loudly or turning the volume of her record 
player too high. Lawrence never complained but would sigh and say that children should 
spend more time outdoors. “Go to the beach,” he would say. “Take a dip in the ocean.”
But there were no beaches. The east side of the island dropped off abruptly to the sea, and the rest of the shoreline was separated from the Chesapeake Bay by acres and acres of swampy marshland, where yellow, dead-looking grass shot up obstinately and brown leaves from the previous fall floated on the surface in clumps. From a distance, Hannah watched the local children wade among the dead tree trunks and felt mildly disgusted. Like little plumbers trying to clean up clogged sewage drains, they buried their arms in the muck and hauled out crayfish and turtles.

Careful not to run into any of the Bradshaw kids, she spent her day discovering short cuts and long detours between Lawrence’s cottage in the south and the town of Ewell in the north. The trip usually took about half an hour on foot on Smith Island Avenue, but Hannah threaded through dirt paths in the meagerly wooded area, which was dotted with houses and sheds with no apparent organization. Every day she took at least one unfamiliar turn and hoped to lose her way and come across an unexpected part of the island. She had in mind a stalactite cavern, like the ones in Virginia where her parents had taken her years ago, or a horse farm which, in an odd twist of her fantasy, would also have a petting zoo with ferrets and lambs. But the island was so small that getting lost was impossible. No matter how many new turns she took, the paths always led to some marsh near the shore, then the only thing for her to do was head north to Ewell.

Hanna and Lawrence were not themselves that summer. She had grown two inches in the last month, and her legs and arms had become spindly things that dangled on her clunky joints. Even her face looked like a distorted version of what it had once been. Depending on the days, sometimes her eyes and nose and mouth seemed too big
for her face, and sometimes her face seemed to have gotten so big that her features were mere specks on a large pile of dough. It seemed to Hannah that her entire person was constantly spreading out in all directions, without a fixed form, and soon her mother would no longer be able to recognize her when she came back.

Her grandmother said that once Hannah started getting her monthlies, the growth spurt would slow down. She hoped so and prayed for it to happen before she became freakishly big. But then there was always the danger that it would happen while she was on the Island, since there was no one to tell her what to do.

Lawrence had also become a pallid, shapeless version of what he had once been. As far as Hannah could tell, he wasn’t working on his poems at all. He slept all the time, and there were days when he never got out of bed. When he was up, he was always meditating in the sun porch or talking with Geshe Trungpa. He had become a Buddhist a few months before and now often said things like, “The external world has no effect on us,” which meant he couldn’t be bothered with Hannah’s complaints, of which she had many. On their first day in the cottage, when Hannah inspected the place and pointed out its many problems – the creaky floor, the lumpy mattresses, the unfinished basement covered in sawdust – Lawrence only sighed and said she needed to learn to be with herself, which meant she should leave him alone.

The only one who seemed to have always been the same person and would continue to be so forever was Geshe Jamyang Trungpa. He was a high-ranking Buddhist scholar and Lawrence’s spiritual guide, his geshe, which meant “a virtuous friend” in Tibetan.
He crossed the Himalayas from Tibet to India almost twenty years before, he told Hannah. He and his friends had to leave because the Chinese burnt down their monastery. They walked on their feet for four weeks, eating only dried wheat cakes and melting the snow for drinking water. It snowed so much that if they took the wrong path, they couldn’t trace their way back. They climbed over one hill after another, and it seemed that there was nothing left in the world but endless hilltops covered in snow. It wasn’t all bad, he said. He had the chance to witness the beautiful sunrise in the mountains, and those four weeks taught him to understand the blessing of impermanence. Still, after that journey he grew to dislike snow.

He liked the ocean. He couldn’t swim but he liked to watch other people float and bob up and down in the water. It looked like magic, he said. He saw the ocean for the first time when he boarded a ship in Mumbai going to Manchester, England, in 1969. Manchester was a noisy, gray city, and the people there had much fear and worry in their hearts. Then he came to Washington, DC, at the request of his teacher, to teach Buddhism to Americans. This time he traveled on an airplane. Another miracle, he said.

He spoke of those cities as if they were just different rooms in a house, and none seemed to have left a mark on him. Hannah could not imagine him not following the same routine since he was a baby. He always got up at four in the morning and meditated for two hours. Then he prayed for another two hours after breakfast. After a brief callisthenic exercise, he would huddle at the corner of the living room with an old typewriter and pound the keys with his index fingers.
Sometimes Hannah would be woken up in the morning by his prayer, a persistent, guttural chant, an endless repetition of two or three syllables punctured by the soft clink of his bell. Listening to those sounds lingering in the air, sometimes she couldn’t tell if she was awake or still in a dream.

***

Hannah watched Lawrence from the corner of her eye. She had cleared a small patch of space for herself on the kitchen table, but otherwise the surface was stacked with books, magazines, unwashed plates, bags of opened and unopened rice and dry beans. Pots and pans piled on the one other chair, and potato peels, pieces of lettuce, and breadcrumb were all over the linoleum floor.

Lawrence was tossing a salad in a big plastic bowl, and his arms were bent in an awkward position as he maneuvered a wooden spatula and a small plastic fork. This was one of his good days. He was not in his pajamas but wearing a clean shirt and brown slacks. The only sign that not all might be right was the way he breathed. He inhaled and exhaled purposefully, each breath a heroic effort.

He stooped in a way very tall people did, though he was not particularly tall. Hannah had always thought his face looked embarrassingly girlish because he had big and watery eyes, but as he was getting very thin that summer, it had become angular and masculine, with sunken eye sockets and blue veins protruding from his temples almost. Those were not the kind of things children would usually notice about their parents, but around that time Hannah had started to think of Lawrence as an independent person, not just Hannah Freeman’s dad. It felt strange that she could make a judgment of him as she
did any other people. Later on, she would recognize that feeling as loneliness, but at
back then, as she weighed her father’s various qualities and considered his appearance, a
vague sense of dread accompanied her thoughts.

“Are you happy, dear?” He turned to her.

She looked up. He cocked his head a little and looked at her with genuine
curiosity.

“Yes,” she said.

“Good.”

When Lawrence was in a certain mood, he asked her questions like that.
Sometimes he would ask, “What inspires you?” or “If you were to think of this day in ten
years, what would you remember?” Sometimes she would have an interesting answer,
but most times she had nothing to say. Sometimes by the end of the day, she couldn’t
think of a thing that she would want to remember in ten years. She would make up
something and say, “We read a poem by Robert Frost at school today, and I really liked it.
I’ll always remember the first time I read *The Road not Taken.*” But then Lawrence
could always tell if she didn’t mean what she said. He would ask her how she liked the
poem and they would talk about it, but his smile would seem a little absent and he would
sound a little too nice, as if he were waiting for the right moment to excuse himself. In
those days on Smith Island, it seemed to Hannah it was very important that she had
something interesting to say when Lawrence had something to ask. At one point, the
necessity of having an interesting answer carried so much weight that she became
anxious as soon as Lawrence started talking.
Hannah opened the oven and saw three brown patties sizzling on a baking sheet.

“The burgers aren’t ready, yet,” Lawrence said. “Five more minutes.”

The “burgers” were patties made of crushed walnuts and cashews mixed with brown rice. Lawrence seasoned them with turmeric, which turned them into a dull, rusty color. Hannah lived on oranges and pop rocks that summer.

“No,” she said after a few minutes of silence.

“What?”

“No. Not really.”

He looked up from the salad bowl, reluctantly.

“Those Bradshaw kids are driving me crazy. They’re the dumbest kids I know, and there are four of them. I can’t go anywhere without seeing them.”

“That is not a kind thing to say, Hannah.” Lawrence sighed. “Let’s leave the judgment outside of this house, okay?”

“They tried to kill me today.”

“They did? How?”

“With crabs.”

“I’m sure they couldn’t possibly have killed you with a few crustaceans.”

“There were bushels of those!”

“You had to eat them all?”

“It’s not funny! I would have died if Geshe Trungpa hadn’t found me. We got to do something about this!”
“Perhaps you need to let go of your ego. Why not open up your heart a little?”

He had put the salad bowl down and leaned on the kitchen table, looking at her as if she were one of those crazy people who talked to themselves on buses.

“How would that stop those morons from attacking me?”

“We don’t call people morons in this house.”

“Okay. How would that stop those intellectually deficient individuals from attacking me?”

“Couldn’t you try to talk to them? Once you get to know those kids, you can probably learn a lot from them.”

“They were saying awful things about you and mom!”

“Since when do others’ words touch us?”

“It’s not just the kids. Do you know what they said about you at Chuffie Smither’s diner? They said you’re a pot dealer and we’re here because the police are after you.”

"Hannah." Lawrence sighed. "Aren't there more important things in this world for you to get worked up about?"

"I will find something if I don't have to stay here for another two months. They're right down the street, and I see them all the time. I see those clowns at the diner all the time. That fat bitch is the worst"

"Don't spend so much time at Chuffie’s then. Why bother with what people say when we have the vast sea around us. Go to the beach. Swim in the ocean. Somewhere far from the shore, far from the trembling throng."
Hannah swept a pile of walnut shells off the table. "I wish Mom had taken me with her. Anything is better than this dump."

“You know why your mother left, and I would be surprised at your naïveté if you think she’d take you with her. Don’t look at me like that. I say this because I respect you as I would any intelligent adult, and I think you deserve the truth.”

Hannah hated Lawrence. She stood up and flipped the chair over with a loud bang. Then she stomped over to the oven, took out the baking sheet, and tossed the burger patties into the sink. The rice and nuts disintegrated instantly. Lawrence didn’t seem to have heard anything but studied the content in his salad bowl and exhaled slowly through the back of his throat. Hannah threw the baking sheet on the floor. It hit the wall, then fell by his feet.

“I don’t believe you.” She kicked the baking sheet toward the corner.

Lawrence walked over to the other end of the kitchen and bent down to pick it up, but getting his body back up seemed like an enormous effort. Very slowly, he placed it in the sink and ran the hot water. He squirted dish detergents on a sponge, then his hands froze.

Hannah felt an odd sense of satisfaction as she watched Lawrence slip the sponge into the sink and drag himself out of the kitchen. Then she wished she could burn down the whole place and all the disorder and filth in it. She picked up the sponge and began scrubbing the dishes. The burger patties had become a pile of soggy mush and clogged up the drain protector. Muddy water accumulated, and specks of rice swirled in it as the tap kept running.
Buddy Holly was singing “That’ll be the Day” for the third time on the record player and Hannah was eating her fifth pack of Pop Rock when the Geshe came down to the basement. She gave him a curt nod and continued to study the candy on her palm. She spit into them and felt the tingle on her skin. He sat down on a yellowing cushion and extended his hand toward her. She opened a new pack and poured half of its content on his palm. He swallowed all of it. Hannah could hear the candy burst in his mouth and for a while she expected to see bubbles floating over his head, as if he were a cartoon character.

“All this candy isn’t so good for you,” he said.

“Who’s here to say that? I can do anything I want.”

“I’m telling you. Do you not trust what an old man like me says?”

“I’m sorry I ruined dinner. But that rice and nuts burger-- yuck!”

“Vegetarian diet doesn’t suit you so well,” he said.

“Whatever.”

“I take you to Crisfield tomorrow and buy you a big steak lunch, okay?”

“Dead cows. Yuck!”

“You have to eat something, and you don’t have to eat veggies just because Lawrence and I do.”

“Food is disgusting anyway. I hate it. I hate eating. My mom used to make this pork chop with peach sauce. It was the worst. Dead pig with peach. It was probably even worse than the nut burger. People who cook like that shouldn’t have kids.”
“We buy crabs from the Bradshaw children then, and we ask Mrs. Bradshaw to make you boiled crabs.”

“Never! I hate those people.”

“You can’t hate everything.”

“I do.”

“That’s okay. That happens sometimes.”

Only half of the basement was finished with hardwood floor and wood panels on the wall. The other half had uneven concrete floor, where stacks of firewood was piled against the washer and dryer. Hannah usually tried to keep the good side, which was how she thought of the finished half, clean and tossed the trash freely to the concrete floor. The Geshe pulled himself up, staggered slightly over to the bad side, and picked up all the discarded candy wrappers.

“I hate Lawrence.”

“I don’t think you do.”

“He said my mom didn’t want to take me with her. He’s right, you know. She’s in New Mexico. With Mr. Morris.”

“Yes. Your father told me.”

“Her paramour,” Hannah said as an afterthought. That was what Lawrence had said, and this was the first time she used the word. “I just don’t understand. My mom can’t stand Mr. Morris. He made her do all the work and he got the credit. He’s so unprofessional it’s ridiculous. My mom used to have to book his family vacation for him.”
Federal employee like him is a waste of our tax dollars. She hates him. Why would she run away with a person she hates?

“Sometimes people say they hate someone when they don’t know how to feel about them.”

“There were others before him. Lawrence told me all about them.”

“He told me, too.”

“I didn’t notice anything at all! I thought everything was just great. She was sleeping with the guy who did our floor. And Uncle George, too. Lawrence told me everything.”

“Parents—they—“ The Geshe doesn’t attempt to finish the sentence.

“Uncle George isn’t really my uncle.”

The Geshe got up again and flipped the record over. Now Buddy Holly was singing “Every Day.”

“But there will be no more secrets,” Hannah said. “Lawrence said we will be honest about everything now. So I’m being honest when I say he is a pathetic sap.”

The Geshe stroked her hair, and she started to cry.

“I am also honest,” he said. “When I became a monk, I promised the Buddha that I would never tell a lie, so I am telling you the truth when I say that you will be happy one day. I’m also telling you the truth when I say you are a good person. When people have goodness in their heart, they will find a way to be happy.”

“It’s just my luck to get stuck with a sap.”

“Like a big bag? What is Lawrence made of? Paper or plastic?”
“Not a sack. A sap, you old silliness!” She pushed him slightly.

He pushed her back, and she giggled. Then there was silence. Then Hannah felt the hand on her shoulder suddenly loaded with significance. It had remained there for a moment too long and didn’t have the usual lightness his touch usually had.

The hand continued to stay there. Then it slid down her collar bone, reached inside her T-shirt, and rested on an area she would have called breasts if it had more curves. She became fiercely conscious of the smoothness of her skin, the tiny hair that she hadn’t known existed, the two fragile circles with such awkward bumps and stark protrusions that they could be made of a different, alien material, the hardness and softness of herself. The calloused hand stroked her. It was hesitant, exploratory. Sometimes the fingers only flickered over her skin, as if unsure of its durability; sometimes they seemed surprised, perhaps at a rough patch or a spot on which her heartbeat was especially strong, and they remained still to savor the new discovery.

Hannah tried to turn around to face him, but he pushed her head back with his free hand and held her neck in place with a firm grip. Everything that happened in our life served to teach us a lesson, the Geshe had once said. Sometimes we might not know what it was right away, but we must be patient. We must continue to focus on the present – for was there any other way to live peacefully in this impermanent world? – and the light would come to us one day. It seemed to Hannah that there must be a lesson in the large, rough hand inside her shirt. If she waited long enough, she would find an explanation for her longing to stay at that moment and run away as quickly as she could at the same time.
He pulled himself up from the cushion and knelt down before her. His face was slightly flushed and his heavy eyelid even heavier than usual. He kissed her on the mouth. His body smelled of incense and curry.

“Now we have a secret.” He released her.

“I need to go.” She stood up. “Good night.”

As she stomped up the stairs, she was frightened for the first time since the Geshe had come into the basement. Too scared to look back and see if he was following, she ran into her room, locked the door, and pushed her desk against it.

When she woke up the next morning, she found herself in the outfit from the night before. There was a funky taste in her mouth and her face was greasy. She pulled the desk away from the door and opened only a small crack. The house was very quiet. She cross the hallway and knocked on Lawrence’s door. When she heard no response, she opened it.

“Daddy?” She remained by the doorstep.

His bedroom was stiflingly hot. The windows were closed, and the heavy curtains kept the sun out almost completely. Lawrence was buried under a mound of white sheets that had turned yellow. The mound stirred, and after what seemed like a silent, epic struggle, he emerged from under it. Hannah walked over, careful not to trip over clothes, books, and pieces of torn paper strewn all over the floors.

“Yes?” he said in a barely audible whisper.

“Are you up?”
“No.” His voice was so soft that even the one-syllabic “no” drifted to nothing before it was fully enunciated.

“When will you be up?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“About what?” He seemed to have spent all of his energy by producing the two words and covered himself up with the sheets again.

“I’m sorry for trashing your dinner last night.”

Hannah remained in the room for several minutes until it became clear Lawrence was not going to respond. As she tiptoed out of the room, she stepped on a binder clip.

“Ouch!”

The mound stirred. “Please,” he whispered, almost whimpered.

“Sorry.” Hannah treaded on the floor very lightly, but it seemed that the harder she tried to keep quiet, the more the floor creaked, and each creak seemed to hurt her muscles so much that she wished she could disappear.

II

Will, the man Hannah is seeing, is on a month-long business trip in Southeast Asia. When he reached Thailand, he took an overnight train to the north to visit her father. Lawrence and his wife, Chaleek, own an inn and a school of herbal medicine at the edge of a small town called Pai. Her stepmother is a shaman who heals people with herbs she finds in the mountains and summons spirits with music and chants.

Will calls Hannah from the inn, “Hello, hello, hello!”
“Will?”

He has never been a particularly graceful conversationalist, and a typical phone call between them usually includes period of awkward silence followed by abrupt changes in subject matter, as if he had a check list of topics in front of him that he must go through.

“How are you?” he says. “How is my beloved?”

“Taffy is fine.” She tells him the she has dropped by his place earlier that morning to take Taffy for a walk. The dog, a terrier-bull mix, had a slight limp in one of its hind legs. She will wait for another day and take it to the vet’s if the limp doesn’t go away, she says. Will thanks her profusely.

“I owe you a big one,” he says. “So does Taffy.”

“Don’t worry about it. He’s a great boy.”

“He called me the other day.”

“Okay—“

“It’s a special phone for dogs. He said he loved your company. Or should I say— he ruffed it.” He chuckled.

“Are you drunk?”

“Just a little. I only had a few beers though, nothing else.”

“Okay.”

“Am I being obnoxious? Am I opening myself up too quickly? The disregard of implicit social boundaries is sign of sociopathic tendency, isn’t it?”

“Don’t worry about it.”
“I’m not a sociopath.”

“I know.”

“You dad says hi.”

“That’s nice. How is he?”

“He’s wonderful. He’s a glorious human being.”

Will tells her that he and Lawrence had many long conversations when they sorted herbs for Chaleek’s dispensary every morning. He recounts the older man’s second life in Asia and marvels at his willingness to experience.

“Do you know that he restored all the cabins at the inn by himself?”

“Yes.”

“Marvelous, aren’t they? Did you know that he singlehandedly preserved half of the traditional houses from this village at the Laotian border? He’s probably one of the few people who’re familiar with the architectural style in this area.”

“I know. I’ve been to his place.”

But it turns out there are things about Lawrence that Hannah didn’t know. She didn’t know that between his brief stay in India and the eventual permanent relocation to Thailand, he had a two-year stint in Singapore in the early Eighties writing for a newspaper. She also didn’t know that he had met Chaleek, his wife, in Bangkok, where she was a lecturer at a medical school. Somehow Hannah assumes that her stepmother has always been the prematurely wizened shaman with long gray hair. Lawrence was at a low point, Will says, but Chaleek saved his life.

“Now they’ve been together for fifteen years,”
“I know. He’s my father.”

“He just got me wondering what I’ve missed in my life.”

Will owns a company that produces test prep books and software. A prevailing tenet in all the publications is that it does not matter how much you know about a subject. The only thing that counts is getting the answers right. Accompanying the tenet is a series of strategies to choose the right answer – leave your creativity at home, use the process of elimination, and avoid the predictable. Will explained all that painstakingly to Hannah on their first date about four months ago.

Those strategies appear to have served his company well. It is a five-person enterprise that operated out of a cramped suite in an office park in suburban Washington, DC, but the books are sold all over the world and are seeing an increasing demand from Asia – the GMAT series is especially popular in South Korea, where they were hailed as the GMAT Bibles. The company was doing so well that Will has just bought a new Mustang and paid off his mortgage for his spacious split-level in a gated community nestled among horse farms in Northern Virginia.

“You can’t have everything,” Hannah tells him. “You always miss something with every choice you make.” Will must be calling her from an Internet phone. She keeps hearing echoes of her own voice, which sounds humorless, like that of a didactic school girl reading from a book of aphorism.

Will doesn’t seem to have heard her but continues to talk about a poetry class Lawrence conducts for teenagers at a children’s home. Lawrence has gotten to know those kids because some of them work part-time at his inn. He gives them English
lessons on the weekends, and one day he recited an Ogden Nash poem on a whim. The children didn’t understand it, but somehow they started chanting “candy is dandy.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a line from Ogden Nash’s poem.”

“I didn’t know you read poetry.”

“I do sometimes.”

“How can those kids write poetry when they don’t even understand English?”

“Larry teaches them a set of words each class, and they string those words together.”

“Like those poetry magnets you put on the fridge?”

“It’s more than that. Larry teaches them about the meaning and the sound of each word, and they talk about the relationship between them. He made everything fun.”

“Hmm—”

“You’ll have to see those kids to understand. Their visceral reaction to sounds transcends language.”

Visceral. Transcend. Marvelous. Will has never used those words in front of her.

“Is that what Lawrence said?” Hannah asks.

The kids all had hard lives, Will explains. Many have lost their parents to AIDS, and some were simply abandoned. There is so much poverty in the area that it is not uncommon for the girls from the home to end up in brothels in big cities and the boys
joining the gangs or even the militia from Laos. But poetry lifts them up from their troubles momentarily, and who knows what impact it could have on their future.

“It sounds to me that computer skills would be a lot more useful for them,” Hannah says.

***

Hannah visited Lawrence and Chaleek in Pai ten years ago. Their inn, a collection of restored teak cabins with names like Cassiopeia, Perseus, and Hydra, was situated at the edge of the town near a lush forest. On the day of her arrival, a tour of the compound lasted almost a whole afternoon because Lawrence had to introduce her to every guest they saw. He seemed to know all of them by name. Once or twice someone would say, “I’ve heard so much about you,” and Hannah had to wonder what he had told them. At that point she hadn’t seen Lawrence for over five years and their contact had been limited to holiday and birthday cards.

Hannah stayed at the guestroom in the main house, which was next to Chaleek’s studio. Every morning she would wake up to the sound of the people outside of her window, who were waiting in a long line to see her stepmother. Some came to see Chaleek for their illnesses, some to seek advice on relationship problems, and some wanted to be reconnected to the dead. Throughout the day, Hannah could hear chants or loud arguments or the sound of someone’s bones being reset. In the afternoon, Chaleek and her students, most of them ruddy-cheeked European girls dressed in designer jeans and exquisite linen shirts, pick herbs in her garden or go out to the woods to forage for rare plants.
Lawrence was a surprisingly efficient manager. He was authoritative, almost persnickety with the staff, all of whom seemed to be related to Chaleek in one way or another. Every evening after dinner, he would put on his reading glasses and spend at least an hour reconciling shopping receipts with entries in the accounting book.

The guests, almost all middle-aged westerners, seemed to regard him as the expat don in Pai. Every morning during breakfast, he moved from one table to the next in his usual uniform of a thin t-shirt and an embroidered linen pants made by the tribal people in the north, a checkered scarf tied around his waist. His manner was charmingly gossipy and confiding. He would give new guests colorful accounts of local history, which often included the “real story” behind a gated mansion nearby. A mistress of Thailand’s crown prince disappeared three years before, and local people have reported seeing the woman being pushed in a wheelchair on the mansion’s ground. With the old-timers, he speculated on the purpose of a new construction site a mile away. “Dirty money,” he would say. “There’s no better way to launder money than putting them in real estate.”

On the second week of her stay, Lawrence took Hannah to the nearby forest for a hiking trip. He wanted to show her a waterfall because for one reason or another they had been talking about the Blue Ridge Mountains. Hannah asked him if he remembered a camping trip they and her mother had taken in West Virginia when she was little, during which they picnicked by a waterfall. He did, then he told her about the one near the inn. Vachiratharn it was called, and it was much more magnificent than the one they saw in West Virginia, he said.
They set out at eight in the morning with a large picnic basket the inn’s cook had prepared. The trail, winding among the lush trees and their gnarly roots, was not well-marked, and stretches of it were overrun by low bushes and tall grass, but Lawrence seemed to know every part of the forest. He carried a tall wooden cane, which he sometimes used to probe into the grass to scare away snakes and other small critters. Most of the time, as they hiked, it just created a regular, muffled thud that echoed faintly among the trees.

“Good thing I followed Chaleek’s advice and wore my jeans,” Hannah said as they waded through an area tall grass that was up to her waist.

“I’ve never regretted following that woman’s advice.”

But was Hannah uncomfortable? He wanted to know. Was it too humid? Did she need any bug spray? He apologized for the monotonous view of the dense forest but promised it would be more interesting soon, once they reached an overlook, and of course, the waterfall would be the big reward at the end of their hike.

Even after Hannah assured him that she was having the best adventure, he still seemed anxious, so she tried to change the subject by telling him about her visit to her mother’s house the previous Christmas. Her mother still lived in Albuquerque with Chad Morris, the man she had run away with more than twenty years before. Christmas at their house was always a noisy affair, full of laughter and presents and food. For a week, the place was overflowing with her husband’s children and grandchildren and sometimes his ex-wife and her current husband and his children, who often slept in a row of sleeping bags on the hallway. Her mother was now a portly woman who doted on those step-
grandchildren. She always kept at least five kinds of fancy Italian soda in her fridge and could whip up a whole plate of colorful “nibbles” for the kids in ten minutes. She still couldn’t cook. Chad was the one who obsessively glazed his ham and rolled the dough for the pie crusts.

Hanna was getting breathless as she spoke. Lawrence was a fast walker, and she did her best to keep up with him so he wouldn’t think she was bored and dawdling behind.

“Who knew Chad Morris would be the one?” he said.

Before Hannah could think of a good reply, she heard a purr from a distance. “Did you hear that?” She stopped.

The sound wasn’t exactly a purr, but something fuller, more ferocious, a continuous strand that either came in waves or echoed throughout the forest.

“What is it?”

“Something’s behind us,” she whispered.

Lawrence looked around, then at Hannah.

“Tiger?” she said.

Lawrence laughed. Then he kept laughing, his booming voice edging out any purr or growl Hannah might have heard. “If there were tigers in this area, it would be a cause for celebration. I’ve been here for ten years, and the only animals you’ll find in this forest are wild civets and spoilt house monkeys who steal from the hikers.”

Hannah laughed, too, and they continued to wade through the grass and climb over dead tree trunks. Then she heard the sound again. This time it was clear that the
guttural noise was a growl. She stopped and looked around but saw no movement among
the trees, not even the rustle of the leaves. Yet the growl persisted, soft but distinct, its
exact origin remaining ambiguous.

“Dad.”

He hadn’t heard her and continued with his walk. Only when he was several
yards ahead did he return.

“I can still hear it,” she said.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

The growl subsided, but she remained still, listening for it while gesturing for
Lawrence to lower his voice.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Hannah.” He chuckled. “Even if there were
really tigers, do you think we’d be able to outrun them? Come on, we’re almost halfway
to the waterfall. You’ll love it.”

“I feel uncomfortable.”

Lawrence said the only thing they needed to worry about were tree poachers and
workers in the underground meth labs high on crystal.

“People are scary. This is not.” He swept his cane in the air several times for
emphasis. Even the tree poachers and the meth addicts had gone, he said, after the
government’s crackdown. When he first moved to Pai ten years before, everyone had
known to avoid the burly men carrying big tool cases and the dream-walking fools in the
woods. American agents from the DEA used to visit the area every year. They thought
they were very discrete, in their polo shirts and jeans, but everyone knew who they were.
Not anymore though. Now Pai was populated with eager developers from Bangkok and old codgers like himself.

“No less scary, just in a different way.” He smiled at Hannah benevolently, as if he were gossiping with one of the guests at the inn.

Hannah thought she could still hear it, which was sometimes only a hint of a sound and other times as distinct as if the source were next to her. She became more and more convinced that there was a tiger in the forest and could even see the animal in her mind. After a while, she stopped paying attention to Lawrence and could focus only on the pulsation of the growl.

“Would you like to go back?” He sighed.

“Yes.”

The return trip seemed much shorter. Hannah remained a few steps behind Lawrence so he would not see how jumpy she was. He continued to talk about the odd people he had seen in the forest, but she was too distracted by the sound of the wind, the tree leaves rustling, and the remaining echoes of the growl to listen. Soon he stopped talking, and the silence between them only made any noise even more startling.

“Our safe return to civilization,” Lawrence said with a flourish when they reached a small settlement, where there were a few bamboo huts and one shop that rented out mountain bikes.

Hannah apologized. Lawrence joked that it might have been the perfect way to go, being mauled by a tiger on a hiking trip with his only daughter.
Hannah had been ten years old when Lawrence and her mother took her camping in West Virginia. She hadn’t enjoyed the hike up the mountain in particular and complained the whole way. But what she remembered most vividly was the picnic, which she had described in detail for Lawrence and Chaleek the day before: the peanut butter and jelly sandwich that her mother had put together haphazardly, the thermos of cold lemonade that Hannah was allowed to have all to herself, while her mother and Lawrence drank lukewarm water, the pleasantly dry and cool rock they had sat on, and the mist from the waterfall that drifted in the air and slowly soaked their clothes and hair wet.

It had been then that Lawrence jumped up from his wicker chair and exclaimed, “And we have Vachiratharn here!” West Virginia had nothing on Vachiratharn Waterfall, he said. They must go there the next day, he insisted, and this time they would have more than PB and J sandwich for lunch. He asked the cook at the inn to prepare a barbeque picnic and spent the rest of the day monitoring her progress in the kitchen, making more and more extravagant demands. They must have good bread. They must have chicken and steak and grilled tofu, each with a different kind of dipping sauce. Then there was the drama about the lemonade. There were only limes in the garden and no one else in the area had lemon trees, but Lawrence must have fresh lemonade. The cook said no one had the time to drive an hour to the supermarket just for lemons, which was 150 baht a kilo. Sheer robbery, she said. Limeade would be just the same. Then the two of them got into an argument. Lawrence said he thought a professional cook would have more common sense than saying lime and lemon were the same. The cook was insulted and
said perhaps Khun Freeman would like to pack his own picnic. She worked at the inn as a favor for Khun Chaleek, she said, not as his personal chef. Then Chaleek charged into the kitchen, yelled at them both, and dragged Lawrence out.

Everything in the picnic basket was indeed beautiful. When Lawrence and Hannah returned to the inn, they took out its contents and had an early lunch with Chaleek, who couldn’t stop boasting about the cook’s skills and resourcefulness. The barbequed chicken and beef were cut in cubes and strung together on thin sticks and packed carefully in tinfoil, with the sauce bottles tightly sealed to prevent spilling. Lawrence had somehow secured two loaves of fresh baguette that were better than any bread Hannah had ever had. The cook had baked little cups of custard topped with sliced mango, and the fresh limeade had hints of mint. Even the lettuce remained cold and crisp in the heat.

***

It turned out they might very well have heard a tiger growl while in the forest. When Hannah told Chaleek about what she had heard, Chaleek said there was a private zoo in Mae Sa, which was roughly halfway between the inn and the waterfall. The owner had recently imported two tigers from Myanmar.

“Fifty thousand baht those cats cost,” she scoffed.

If Lawrence and Hannah had gone off the path for about half a mile, they could have been near the zoo and heard those tigers, those two unwilling immigrants locked up in a cage, growling for the entertainment of school children and bored tourists. Everyone
thought what had happened was hilarious, and Lawrence still tells the story every time he leads his guests on a hiking tour.

***

Will calls Hannah again three days later. He is back in Bangkok and speaking from his hotel room. The meetings with distributors and publishers have been fruitful, but he sounds tired. The heat and the traffic fumes are making him dizzy, he says. He misses the fresh air in Pai. He describes for Hannah a big dinner Lawrence gave in his honor in his last evening there.

“Your dad was sloshed.” Will laughed. “I wasn’t, though. I’m sorry if I sounded weird last time.”

They are at this phase of relationships that Hannah enjoys the most. They feel familiar enough to be naked together, talk about their income, and let the other person have charge of their pets. At a same time, a sense of decorum still compels them to tiptoe around each other from time to time and apologize for minor breaches of etiquette. She finds Will’s apology a pleasing gesture, though not particularly sincere, so she tells him he sounds cute when he’s weird.

“He kept saying how happy he was,” Will says. “He might have got the wrong idea because he introduced me to everyone as your fiancé.”

“What did you say?”

“I didn’t correct him. That would be awkward. Sorry, I hope you don’t mind.”

“It doesn’t matter what he thinks.”
“Then he kept talking about this place called Smith Island, a Tibetan monk, and something about Buddy Holly. Where’s Smith Island? It sounds like something from a pirate movie.”

“It’s in the Chesapeake Bay. We spent a summer there when I was a kid.”

“He said he regretted that summer.”

“What did he mean?”

“I thought he was going to cry. He said he was doing the best he could. No, he kept saying he was doing the best he could not. I was just really confused and flustered. He said he worried about you all those years. But you’ve turned out so well. You have. You have really turned out well.”

“Is that him or you?”

“Huh?”

“Who said that?”

“We both did. You did turn out to be a lovely human being, and apparently much more so because you have met a wonderful man like me. And we both said that. You can put it on the record. Lawrence and I both said that.”

“You sure you haven’t been raiding the mini bar?”

***

One afternoon toward the end of that summer in 1976, Lawrence sat down next to Hannah on the porch. She had been reading a magazine and peered at him from behind the pages. He seemed to be admiring the view in front of the cottage, which was
only a dirt road next to an unattended field of wild grass. After a few minutes, he asked her if everything was all right.

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad you and the Geshe are getting along so well.”

“He’s okay.”

“It’s not usual for kids your age to spend so much time with an old man.”

She shrugged.

“What do you guys do together?”

“Nothing.”

“You happy?”

“Yeah.”

It has been many years since Hannah thought about Smith Island, and yet the first image that comes to her is Lawrence in his normal self. He must have shaved that morning. His face was thinner than it had been a few years before and looked comically long, but his eyes were bright and he was smiling. It was one of the hottest days of that summer, but he wore a well-pressed white button-down shirt tucked in a pair of light gray trousers. Even his hair had been greased neatly. If people had seen them, they would think it was a normal day for a normal father and daughter: he was soft-spoken but authoritative, if somewhat awkward with his gangly limbs; she was a typical teenager, aloof and smug, and completely secure in her disdain for her parents.

Lawrence asked her about the upcoming school year, her friends back at home, and if she planned to keep taking flute lessons after the summer.
“I don’t know,” she said, and went back to her magazine.

“Everything’s fine?” he asked again.

“Yeah.”

At that time, she could have told him about those many evenings in the basement with the Geshe, but she didn’t. There were other occasions, too, when she could have said something to him or her mother, who called a few times over the summer. Even on that morning when she barged into Lawrence’s room, she could have pulled the sheets off of him, pushed him, and shaken him into presence. She could have yelled and thrown a few things on the floor. But she just went away.

Memories work in strange ways. Compared to the vivid image of a clean-shaven Lawrence, there is something veiled, almost false about the idea of Hannah tiptoeing out of his room. Now that she thinks about it, she can’t say for sure how she ended her conversation with him that morning. She must have been there, because the creak on the floor and the mound of yellowing sheets on his bed all seem so clear in her mind, but perhaps she never spoke to him. It is possible that Lawrence couldn’t even bring himself to stir at that time of the day. Morning was always the worst for him. But it is also possible that she never went in the room when he hadn’t responded to her knock. Perhaps she is thinking about another house with creaking floors and another man whom she knew much later in life and who often buried himself under his sheets. Or she might not even have knocked on his door at all.

When she grew older and learned, through books and movies and conversations with her friends, what was acceptable and what was not when it came to relationships
between adults and children, the memories of those evenings in the basement made her appropriately outraged, ashamed, and disgusted. She felt all the usual emotions that were appropriate to victims – no, survivors. But little by little, she forgot to feel those things, and by the time she told her first boyfriend that she wasn’t a virgin, she was only slightly wistful that she, unlike the other girls, had a secret. And even then it didn’t take her long to realize that everyone had secrets.

Hannah is of the opinion that childhood is only a small part of a person’s life and that the role of parents are in general overestimated. Yet it still surprises her how a secret that once seemed so tremendous, memories that she once tended, dressed, and picked like delicate wounds, can become barely recognizable after all those years, nothing but an old sweater full of moth-holes.

What she does remember now is standing on the second-floor landing outside of her and Lawrence’s rooms that morning. She remembers feeling hot and nervous. Place your fear on your palms, open your heart to them, and you’ll learn something about yourself, the Geshe had told her once. She studied her own hands and placed one of them on the opposite shoulder, where the old man had touched fewer than ten hours before. Then she placed her palm on her chest and suddenly couldn’t locate her fear anymore.

She remembers feeling hungry and then a sense of the greatest relief when she heard pots clanking downstairs in the kitchen and the slow, weighty treads of a pair of rubber-soled slippers. She straightened her t-shirt, which had become wrinkly from the night’s sleep, then went downstairs.

“Good morning, Hannah.” The Geshe turned around. “Rice soup?”
“Yes, thank you.” She remembers feeling at home.

***

In the evening, Hannah drives past her childhood home in a suburb outside of Washington. When she lived there, it was a red brick rambler in a community of similar red brick ramblers. In the past thirty years, the identical houses have taken on individual personalities. Extensions have been added; the exterior walls have been repainted in different colors; and a few of them have been knocked down. In their places are McMansions that stick out like shiny warts.

Lawrence and her mother sold the house in 1978, shortly before he left for India, but the last time Hannah called this neighborhood home was two summers before. A few weeks after they returned home from Smith Island, Lawrence drove her to her grandmother’s house and checked himself into the psychiatric unit at Sibley Memorial, and soon after that Hannah was sent to a boarding school in Virginia.

But Lawrence said specifically he regretted that summer, not what happened before or after. She is probably getting carried away with the re-remembering now, but it is possible that she caught Lawrence watching her a few times when she and the Geshe went down into the basement after dinner. She remembers wondering if he would come in and find her and her virtuous friend, but he never did.

Even if he had any suspicion, he was most likely too depressed, in too bad a shape, to inquire further. But that was all for the best, for what else would there be left if he knew and was forced to initiate a series of events that normally followed such circumstances? Lawrence and his vegetarian burgers, the Bradshaw children and their
blue crabs, her mother and the weekly phone calls, more and more marshland. Perhaps without meaning to, he was doing his best.

Or perhaps he knew, and he meant to do his best. Perhaps he knew he had nothing to give her and realized she was telling the truth when she said she was happy and that everything was fine. Parents may not always understand, appreciate, or even like their children, but some of them have a kind of love that is big enough to give their children what they need. Lawrence was only honoring his resolve to respect her as he would with any adults. Hannah would like to think so.