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The Good Daughters: A Novel

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The Good Daughters: A Novel

by Kristan Liu Hoffman

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Prologue

When our mother and father came to this country, they brought more than just their suitcases full of silk clothes and jade jewelry, more than just their own honey-colored bodies. Along with the photographs and our family seal, they packed a language of four tones and picture-words. With their bare hands they held on to a culture that values honor, discipline, and obedience above all else. In their hearts they carried the determination to succeed no matter what.

All of that and more, they brought with them, and they gave it to us. As their children, we were expected to forge our own paths while following in their footsteps; to fit seamlessly into the American landscape while maintaining our Chinese heritage; to learn and to grow into mature, independent adults without ever disrespecting or dissenting with our elders.

Impossible? Of course. But that wasn't the point. Those irreconcilable differences never entered into our parents' minds. We could accomplish anything, and we would, because it was expected. Because we were the good daughters.

One

Madeline Chen parked her black SUV, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. She leaned back against the headrest and wrestled with the fact that, after three years, she was finally back in Houston, and after three years, she still really didn't want to be.

But Grace had asked her to come back. Grace, the successful therapist, wife, and mother. Grace, the former Student Body President, peer tutor, and track star. Grace, the doting big sister who'd taught Madeline how to tie her shoelaces. Grace, who never asked anyone for anything, and never needed to, had asked her to come back and help take care of Ma. How could Madeline have said no?

Reluctantly, Madeline opened her eyes again. She took in the emerald lawn and old-fashioned mailbox outside her car window. Four giant oak trees cast their monstrous shadows over the freshly clipped grass, and a tire swing hung from a branch on the left. The house sat back on the property, facing the southeast to keep demons from blowing in. Madeline remembered mocking Grace for adhering to such a silly Chinese superstition, but when the time had come for her and Charles to purchase their first home, Madeline had rejected the first three houses for the very same reason. Secretly, of course. Rather than admitting, "My mother warned us that bad spirits fly in with the northern winds," Madeline had given her husband a number of more logical reasons instead.

Hardly a week had passed since the turn of the new year, and already the sun was trying to melt away Houston's weak attempt at winter. It shone brightly over Grace's Victorian house, boasting its power, its heat. The world seemed drenched in a cheerful glow, but Madeline felt no warmth. Unlike hometown, her heart refused to be thawed.

She sighed and realized that she had to stop stalling. “Pull the handle, push the door. It’s that simple,” she told herself. She turned to face the passenger seat. “Isn’t it?” she asked the phantom in the passenger seat.

A silent, faithful companion, the phantom didn’t answer her question, but he joined her as she got out of the car, and she took his small, clammy hand, fisting her own around it. The first time she’d touched him, nearly three years ago, her stomach had been filled with nervous crawling ants. Now she was accustomed to his airiness, to the way his physical presence somehow echoed her emotional absence.

Together they followed the smooth snake of cobbled stones up to Grace’s elegant white dream house. They stepped up to the wraparound porch where Madeline had spent so many hours carving and painting, sculpting and sketching. Specks of colored acrylics still marred the cedar deck where her easel had stood, and she allowed a measure of gratitude for the fact that they’d chosen not to erase her from that spot. Her spot. The Maestro’s Corner, they’d jokingly called it.

For her, there had always been something there, some magic that rose with the sun and lingered until the stars were blinking happily in their skies. Even almost a decade later, she could still feel that. The time between then and now disappeared, and she saw herself—a college freshman, sophomore, junior—painting outside her big sister’s new home. Ma and Ba had gone back to Taiwan, back to live with their brothers and sisters. They had waited until Grace and Madeline were adults, able to take care of themselves. But they could only resist for so long. And when they’d finally answered the call, the beacon summoning them home, Madeline had moved in with Grace and her arrogant but sociable new husband Jack.

Those three summers between her college years had been some of the happiest months of Madeline's life. With Grace occupied by her new endeavors—the private practice, the husband, the baby—Madeline was able to get away with the semi-bohemian lifestyle she'd always craved but been denied. Finally free of her parents' overzealous, overprotective reign, she slept late and woke early, ate erratically, basically let her creativity take priority over her humanity. At five in the morning she'd borrow Grace's car and drive down to Clear Lake to photograph the sun rising over the shipyard, or at midnight she'd walk the few blocks to River Oaks Elementary to play violin in the middle of the playground. She reveled in this independence, the sickly sweetness of which she'd never tasted. Grace sometimes pretended to admonish her, perhaps because their parents were trusting her to watch over her younger sister, or perhaps because she would soon be a mother herself. Either way, Madeline knew Grace didn't really mind. She'd survived their parents' tyrannical rule as well, and she knew what it meant to soar above the radar.

For that reason, Grace only ever told their parents about one thing: Charles. And even that had been an accident, an oversight on both their parts.

A sunbeam flitted across the porch, and she watched as the shadows of the leaves overhead cut it into nonsensical shapes. Entranced by the light and the dark dancing with one another, she remembered the first time she met Charles.

It's the fall semester of her junior year, and Pittsburgh is afire with the oranges, reds, and yellows of aging leaves. Madeline takes a bus downtown, gets off at the McDonald's on Liberty, and walks two blocks to Penn Avenue. There, pressed between a coffeeshop and a Vietnamese nail salon, a small art gallery has her name in the window.

She's late, and people are already flitting back and forth between storefronts, chatting excitedly about this collage or that oil painting. Their words mix with the live music that wafts out from open doors, and Madeline weaves through the frenzy, unable to stop smiling.

Once every couple of months, this small section of downtown buzzes with the electricity of young artists and their potential patrons. Madeline often participates in these Gallery Crawls with her fellow Carnegie Mellon art students, but this time, she has managed to secure her own solo showcase. Her sketches, watercolors, and sculptures fill the little brick studio, and she's pleased with the turnout. The people seem to like her work, and she begins to think she might even sell a few pieces. The gallery owner winks at her from across the room, and she gives a friendly wave in return.

Because Madeline knows that selling her art involves selling herself, and because she is excited, she has taken uncharacteristic care with her appearance that day. Jeweled barrettes sweep the black waterfall of her hair away from her face, giving her a fresh and friendly aura. Vanilla gloss accents her dainty pink lips, and black eyeliner bestows a dramatic charm to her eyes. A silky red blouse, borrowed from her roommate, flatters her figure and draws attention from passersby. In truth, she has never put so much effort into looking nice, and never succeeded so exceptionally.

Energy humming through her veins, she grabs a glass of punch from the refreshments table and prepares for another round of smalltalk with patrons. She is about to approach a matronly woman eyeing one of her landscapes when suddenly someone bumps into her from behind.

"Pardon," says a deep and pleasant voice. His apology is sincere.

Madeline looks up, and her first thought is that she would love to sketch this man. His tall, dark body is sharply dressed in a green polo, whiskered jeans, and white beret. His jaw is square and strong. The way he holds himself shows confidence and a certain athletic grace.

"Let me get you some paper towels," he says, and Madeline realizes the punch has stained her lily-white slacks.

She pats the wet spots with the cocktail napkins he hands her, then chuckles and shakes her head. "It's no use. But don't worry about it. I don't think anyone will notice."

He cocks his head, impressed by her nonchalance. "Well, can I offer to pay for the pants?"

"I'd rather you buy my art."

"Your art?" He looks around the room, putting two and two together. "You're Madeline Chen?"

She nods. "One day people won't have to ask that, though."

He laughs, his teeth gleaming like pearls. "You're that good, huh?"

"If I'm not now, I will be." She tosses the soiled napkins into a trashcan nearby and sets her empty glass back on the table. "If you'll excuse me."

He nods, tips his hat. She's charmed by the chivalrous gesture, and slightly amused. But her pants dry, and a few of her pieces sell, and she does not think of the incident again. She does not remember the good-looking young man with perfect teeth and impeccable manners. She recalls only the euphoria of showing her art and being praised, of tasting success outside of the academic world for the first time, and of wanting more.

Then he bumps into her again. Literally. They're at a popular breakfast place called Pamela's, and it's packed. He smiles when he recognizes her, but she's wary. "What are you doing here?"

"Can't a guy have breakfast?" Her eyes narrow ever so slightly, and he laughs. "Don't worry, I'm not stalking you. You're not famous yet."

Her jaw drops, but she's more amused than anything else.

His name is Charles, and he's a law student at the University of Pennsylvania. He's visiting a cousin who works at the medical center in Pittsburgh, and in fact, his cousin was supposed to join him for breakfast but was paged on an emergency. He asks if she'd like to take his cousin's place. After a moment's deliberation, she thinks, why not? It's a decision she's never regretted.

Six months later, Madeline invites him to come home with her for Spring Break. She hasn't told her parents about him yet, since they're back in Taiwan and she hasn't asked them for anything--money, advice, approval--in years. She wants Grace to meet him first. Grace's support could make a difference in the battle she knows she'll have to fight sooner or later.

They're giddy in love as they stand on the porch and wait. Grace comes to the door with the phone in her hand. "Hold on, Ma. *Ta men zai zhi li.*" *They're here.*

"You're talking to Ma?" Madeline asks with surprise as Grace pulls her into a quick hug.

Grace smiles at her, then at Charles. "Yes, she's very excited about—*Hao, hao, deng yi xia, Ma!*" *Okay, okay, wait a minute!* "Charles, yes? Hi, I'm Grace, Maddy's older sister. Please, come in!"

He grabs their suitcases and shuffles past Madeline into the foyer. She follows, but turns to face Grace, who closes the door behind them. “Hey, what did you tell Ma?”

“Nothing,” Grace whispers as she covers the receiver with her free hand. “Just that you were bringing a guy back home for break.” She laughs, removes her hand. “Yes, Ma, *ta hen hao kan le.*” *He’s very good-looking.* She gives Charles a friendly wink. “*Shi hei ren—*”

“Grace, no!”

“*Ta shi hei ren, ah?*” Ma’s exclamation is so loud that even Madeline can hear it through the phone.

Grace looks genuinely surprised, but Madeline just closed her eyes and shakes her head. “Yes, Ma, he’s black, but—”

Madeline grabs the phone from her.

“*Hei ren,*” their mother repeats softly. “*Hei ren.*”

Madeline’s face crumples in anguish.

Suddenly the phantom boy tugged gently at the hem of her skirt, and the soft cotton rippled as if caught in the wind. Startled, Madeline pulled herself back from the reverie, from the past she only allowed herself to visit in bits and pieces. Memory was like an ocean for her: she could dip her toe in the water, but if she went for a swim, she was sure to drown. It was safer—much, much safer—to stay on the shore.

Madeline rolled her shoulders, trying to shake the uneasy feeling that had accompanied her recollection. She was in fact on Grace’s front porch, but, she reminded herself, many years had passed since she had brought Charles to this place. Firmly rooted in the present once more, she nodded at the phantom, and together they stepped onto the

doormat. “Come in” it said. The phantom glanced nervously up at her.

With her free hand, Madeline reached for the doorbell. Her palm was damp with sweat, but she reminded herself that there was nothing to worry about, because there was nothing left to lose. There hadn’t been for quite some time.

She’s haunted. That was Grace’s first thought when she opened the door and saw her sister standing there. *She is a thinly veiled lie.* The soft smile Madeline wore contradicted the tragedy she carried in her eyes. Once confident and proud, she now trembled like a blade of grass in the breeze. Her knuckles were white, clenched tightly at her sides.

Grace moved forward to embrace her sister, but something in Madeline’s eyes warned her against it. She cleared her throat instead. “Hey, Maddy,” she said warmly, hoping to ease both their nerves.

“Hey,” Madeline replied. She entered without Grace’s asking, and Grace was glad. It had been over three years since her sister had last set foot in her home, so they may not have been as familiar as they once were, but they were still sisters.

Grace closed the door and turned to face her sister. As Madeline did a quick revolution, taking in the large foyer and marble staircase, Grace couldn’t help noticing the sharp angles of her sister’s shoulder blades through her shirt, the faint purple shadows under her eyes.

Grace realized her sister was more than haunted. She was becoming a ghost herself.

“Where’s Jack?” Madeline asked.

“Working late,” Grace answered quickly. “A senior partner at the firm passed away a couple months ago, and Jack’s in the race to replace him.” She tried to keep her voice neutral, devoid of emotion, matter-of-fact. Madeline didn’t need to hear about her problems; she had enough to deal with as it was. “He’ll be back in time for dinner, though.”

Madeline didn’t respond, but continued to move slowly, deliberately down the hall. Grace followed.

She watched as her sister reached out to trail a finger along the apricot-colored wall. Above Madeline’s small, sinewy hand was a constellation of framed photographs, photographs she had taken. Ma had given her an old Nikon SLR on her tenth birthday, and from that day on their whole family had been subjected to the whim of her shutter.

The first picture was of an eighteen-year-old Grace among the famous redwoods of Palo Alto. She’d been even slimmer then, with longer hair and the smooth, untroubled face of someone who believed the world was beautiful. Ma, Ba and Madeline had accompanied her on that first visit to Stanford, the only one she’d needed before accepting the full scholarship they’d offered. The four of them had walked all over those eight thousand acres, forgoing the traditional campus tour for their own, more personal exploration. The sunny California weather, the beautiful Spanish architecture, the sprawl of the university meeting the periphery of nature; everything conspired to make Grace fall in love with that place, and she did. She’d fallen hard for all the things she knew she would have there, there and nowhere else, possibly ever again. Even that day she’d sensed something different, in herself and in the air, and she ran with it. She ran all the

way into the forests that enclosed Stanford in their safe obscurity, and Madeline followed, camera in hand.

In the second photograph, Ba and Grace were dancing the traditional father-daughter dance at her wedding. Her first wedding, the American one. Even though Jack was a bad Catholic, he was Catholic nonetheless, and his family had been insistent that they have, as his father put it, “a good Christian ceremony.” Ba, in his quiet but equally insistent way, arranged for an additional ceremony at the family’s ancestral temple in Taiwan.

Just a few years before Grace’s wedding there, the temple had been the site of their grandfather’s funeral. He’d died suddenly, of a heart attack, and it destroyed their mother. Grace and Madeline had never seen Ma cry before—and they did not again—but the night they got the phone call, she sat numbly on the chair in the study and stared, stared straight ahead as tears rolled down her elegant face.

Grace couldn’t remember why anymore, but her mother hadn’t been able to return to Taiwan for the funeral. Instead, she’d held her own ceremonies, placing her father’s photograph above the fireplace in their living room and lighting incense for him every morning and night. She left bowls of fruit for his spirit to take to the other world, and she whispered prayers to recommend him to the family’s ancestors.

A few weeks later, Ma took Grace and Madeline back to Taiwan, to the temple where her father’s ashes lay. Ba had to stay and work, but the three women—Grace and Madeline were just teenagers at the time—represented the family as best they could. Still dressed in their respectfully muted colors, they made it to the family shrine just before the forty-nine day mourning period ended, and they paid their respects.

That was what they were doing in the third picture, the one Madeline had taken when Ma wasn't looking. She would have been furious to know Madeline was not devoting full attention to her filial duties. By the time she did actually see the photograph, however, enough time had passed that she'd merely scowled.

Madeline paused near the end of the line, at the fourth and final photograph, and Grace craned her long neck to see past her sister's head. It was a snapshot of Grace and Evan at the duck pond by the Galleria. Grace had started taking him there shortly after he was born, each night when Jack was still at work and before she had to begin preparing dinner. Those hours were some of the most precious in her mind. As at Stanford, she had felt something there, alone with her son, that she had not been able to find again. In the particular moment captured on film, she was kissing Evan's stomach and tickling him, and he was laughing merrily, his tiny teeth poking out from pink gums.

"How..." Maddy coughed to cover the choke in her voice. "How old was Evan in this?"

"One," Grace answered without hesitation, her mind still swimming in the memories that her wall evoked, the ones she passed every day without really seeing.

Grace immediately wanted to take it back. She wanted to snatch the word right out of the still air between them and shove it back into her mouth, swallow it before it could reach Madeline and do any more damage. But she knew it was too late. One was what she'd said, and one was what he'd been. The age of first steps and first words. The age of toilet-training and solid foods. The age of Madeline's poor baby Ben when the accident occurred.

Madeline's pale pink lips twitched, and the hollows of her cheeks shifted as she

clenched her jaw. There was a moment of silence, pregnant and painful, and Grace felt desperate to save them both. She reached out to touch her sister, but when she made contact, Madeline rolled her shoulders. Then she merely nodded and moved on.

It was then that Grace remembered of one of Madeline's greatest flaws.

She liked to pretend the bad things never happened.

The phantom clung to Madeline's side, his little fingers digging into her hipbone as he followed her around. He had never been there before, in Grace's home, so Madeline was not surprised by his fear. She told him it was okay to be scared, because she was too.

In the kitchen, she sat on a stool at the island counter and watched as Grace shifted from oven to stove to fridge and back to oven again. The black and chrome surfaces of the appliances shone under the florescent lights. They had remodeled, she realized. Strangely she hadn't expected anything to change.

The rhythm of Grace's movements as she stirred small red potatoes in a frying pan, and checked on the filet mignon slowly roasting, soothed something inside of Madeline. The domesticity of it, the love. Grace had always been good at stuff like that. She used to help Ma by preparing their lunches when Madeline started kindergarten and she herself graduated to middle school. Then after she turned sixteen, Ma had insisted that Grace learn how to keep house. It was an investment for her future, their mother had said solemnly. Madeline remembered rolling her eyes.

But Grace had obeyed Ma and patiently endured all of her lessons: how to iron a man's shirt, how to serve tea to guests, how to make scallion pancakes from scratch.

Grace became master of all things domestic, and it certainly suited her. Even as Madeline scorned her mother's devotion to the traditional Asian female role, she found herself admiring Grace's skill and poise. Unfortunately, she'd never been much of a homemaker, and now—well, now it didn't really matter.

“How was the drive?” Grace asked over her shoulder. Her hair swung as she spoke, and Madeline watched it catch and deflect the light. She'd grown it out since Madeline had last seen her, a good seven or eight inches at least, but the discordant waves were still as familiar to Madeline as her own ruler-straight strands.

“Maddy?”

She jerked. “Sorry.” What had Grace asked? “Oh, the drive. Yeah, it was fine. Long, but fine.” Long and lonely. She hadn't made a trip that long by herself in quite some time.

“No issues on the road?”

“No,” Madeline replied shortly. The phantom's small hand had gone icy on her skin, and she reached down to place her own over it. Instead of warming him, however, she began to feel cold all over.

“Good, good.” Grace's tone feigned innocence as she transferred potatoes from the pan to a porcelain serving dish. “There are just so many big cars on the roads nowadays. It's intimidating—for me, I mean—to be in my little Mercedes, menaced by these giant trucks and SUVs hovering over me. It's like—”

“Driving was fine,” Madeline repeated with measured control. She knew what Grace was doing. Grace was trying to get her to talk about it—*it*—and she didn't want to. She couldn't.

Sensing her sadness, the phantom wrapped his arms around Madeline's waist and hugged her, and she repressed a shiver. Suddenly feeling antsy, she got up to look for silverware. "I'll set the table."

Grace paused, knowing she'd lost her. "Alright," she said softly.

Madeline moved to the cabinets, still stewing over Grace's attempt to slip from sister to counselor. She pulled six spoons, forks, and knives from the drawer and began to arrange them around the plates on the table. But there were only three plates.

Quickly Madeline looked up to see if Grace had noticed her mistake, but her sister was still facing the other way, focused on preparing the meal. Madeline sighed quietly with relief, and with a mournful look, she replaced the extra silverware in the drawer.

Three years later and she still couldn't get it right.

Madeline was back sitting at the island counter when the side door opened, letting a cool gust of air into the kitchen. The phantom, like a little shadow, hid behind her, peeking his head around her side. He stared, wide-eyed, as Jack came in.

Madeline hadn't seen her sister's husband in a long time, and she took a moment to study him. His hair was darker than it used to be, back when he spent every afternoon out under the glaring Houston sun, but he still had that baseball player physique: broad shoulders, strong legs, big arms. He was dressed in a tailored pinstriped suit that reminded Madeline of some of the pretentious gallery owners she used to deal with, but on Jack, the ensemble seemed dignified and professional. Seeing him now—so comfortable in these clothes, in this home, in his skin—she couldn't help thinking, not for the first time, that he had indeed made the right decision when he chose law over baseball, Grace over a life on the road.

“Maddy!” Jack flashed his dentistry-ad grin. He sounded happy to see her, but she was never quite sure with Jack. “You...” His excitement, but not his expression, faltered. “You look tired,” he finished frankly.

“And you look old,” she lied, trying to shrug off his statement like a joke. “But I wasn’t going to say anything.”

There was a pause, and they watched each other across the distance. He was waiting for her to get up, to greet him with her usual, we’re-civil-in-laws hug, but she couldn’t. She was frozen. She couldn’t move, she couldn’t abandon the phantom. Where would he hide? He clutched her sides and she thought to him, *Don’t worry, little one. I won’t leave you.*

Since Madeline remained seated, Jack stepped forward and leaned over the counter to kiss her on the cheek. Confused and a little threatened, the phantom jerked her back—they’d been alone so long, just the two of them, that he wasn’t accustomed to this friendliness, to this familiarity—but to Jack it just seemed she’d pulled away. He looked at her, and she smiled, and they both let it pass.

“Welcome back, *Mei mei.*” She’d asked him once not to call her Little Sister, but he did anyway sometimes.

“Okay, I was kidding about you looking old, but I’m dead serious now,” she said, trying to mimic his friendly tone. “Your Chinese still sucks.”

He laughed, and they were back on familiar footing, both hiding behind their banter. “So does your art, but I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Jack!” Grace protested, coming to her sister’s defense. She’d never been too good with sarcasm. “Maddy’s art is wonderful. Everyone thinks so—MoMA, the *New*

York Times, and obviously the Carnegie, since they asked her to be a curator. Even you raved about her last sculpture exhibit.”

“Yeah, but Grace, that was five years ago. Maddy hasn’t done a show since—” He cut himself off, and the three glanced at each other nervously. The phantom glared angrily at Jack.

This won’t be the last time, Maddy told the phantom—and herself—as she gave a weak smile to convince Jack that no harm as been done. *They can’t tiptoe around me forever.*

“Dinner’s almost ready,” Grace said to break the silence.

Jack didn’t respond but, his offence forgotten, his eyes shone as they met hers. He pulled her towards him, and with quick reflexes she shifted the pot she was holding out of the way so that Jack could kiss her without getting scalded. Steam rose up between them.

“I have to finish.” Grace’s voice had gone soft, tempered by some nameless thing that Madeline recognized instinctively but couldn’t quite remember, like the smell of the ocean, or the heat of someone’s mouth on hers. Suddenly she felt like more than just a visitor—she was an outsider, a voyeur. She and the phantom looked away.

A few seconds later, Jack was already in his study calling out, “I’m going upstairs to change. Y’all don’t have to wait, if you’re hungry.”

With that, the awkward moments passed. Madeline swiveled back to face Grace and couldn’t help chuckling a bit.

“What’s so funny?” Grace asked.

“‘Y’all.’”

Grace seemed confused for a moment, then broke into a smile. “Oh, that. You

haven't picked up that godawful Pittsburgh term, have you? What was it—yous? Yuns?"

"Yinz," Madeline supplied. "And no, I still say 'y'all.'" She stood to help her sister carry dishes into the dining room. "I stick by my roots."

She hadn't meant anything by that, really, but Grace stopped and stared at her. Madeline felt her sister's eyes searching hers, looking for a deeper meaning. Madeline didn't know how to tell her there wasn't any.

The phantom had stopped too, behind Madeline like always. But now he moved to stand in the narrow space between her and Grace. He peered up at Grace, like a child at the stars, with awe and longing and a certain amount of envy. He reached out to touch her, and Madeline wanted to cry out, to stop him, but she didn't. What would Grace have thought? So she only watched as he very, very delicately traced one of his fingers from Grace's elbow to her wrist.

Grace's arm quivered. She looked at it, then at her sister. "Maddy..."

She swallowed the lump in her throat and forced herself to smile. "Hmm?"

Grace frowned. "Nothing." She turned back around and they continued to the dining room. "Nothing," she said.

At about a quarter to eight, dinner was almost over. The three of them somehow managed to have a fairly normal evening, considering they hadn't seen each other in so long. Conversation wasn't particularly interesting, but it was there. In fact, Grace was beginning to think they might actually make it all the way through without incident, when suddenly Madeline asked, "Where's Ma?"

“Didn’t I tell you? She’s playing *mah jong* with *Li tai tai*, *Liang tai tai*, and *Wu tai tai*,” Grace replied. “They started up their old club again just as soon as she came back from Taiwan. Every Wednesday and Sunday night, just like before.”

Madeline’s brows arched. “Already? She’s only been back for three weeks.”

Jack chuckled. “Well, I guess after ten years without, they were pretty eager to make up for lost time.”

“I’m surprised anybody missed her,” Madeline muttered.

“Mads!” Grace exclaimed reproachfully. She knew Madeline and Ma had a lot of issues—they always had, and it had only gotten worse after Madeline started dating Charles—but Madeline knew that Grace insisted upon a certain amount of respect.

“Just kidding,” she said obligingly. But there was nothing in her tone to convince Grace of its sincerity. “Anyways, I’m surprised she can handle it. I thought she was...” Madeline trailed off and started making circles around her head with her finger.

Grace frowned at her. “That’s not funny.”

Jack intervened on his wife’s behalf. “Your mother has certainly seen better days, but she’s not totally gone yet.”

“Yes,” Grace chimed in. “She forgets a lot, but she’s not crazy. It’s very natural for a person’s memory to deteriorate as they grow older. Age is a sign of wisdom, not weakness.”

Those were the exact words she’d said to Jack when she’d first learned of her mother’s condition. They’d been in their bedroom, and she’d sat on the edge of the bed, hands in her lap, eyes staring straight ahead. He knelt in front of her and tenderly cupped her chin with his fingers. He hadn’t said anything, hadn’t tried to comfort her with

meaningless assurances. He'd merely listened to her, to her words. He'd understood her need to believe them.

Now at the dinner table, Madeline just shrugged. "Alright, whatever. I'm sorry."

Grace resigned herself to accepting her sister's half-hearted apology. She didn't feel like picking a fight; she was starting to get a headache.

The mood became sour, like cucumbers left too long. The air felt stale and the silence was awkward, although Jack kept on eating heartily. Madeline and Grace, on the other hand, both picked at their food. Grace nibbled on her steak while Madeline pushed potatoes around on her plate. Grace was about to ask her sister if everything tasted alright—it didn't seem like she'd eaten much—when Jack got up to go to the bathroom. He stuck his fork into his bowl of rice and excused himself. Madeline stared, wide-eyed, as he walked away.

"Grace!"

Confused, she asked, "What?"

Madeline shot her one last look of incredulity before lunging across the table and grabbing her husband's utensil. "Careless," she muttered, not quite under her breath.

Grace would have laughed if she hadn't known that her sister was dead serious. And "dead" was such an ironic way of putting it—the problem with Jack's fork was that it was sticking up out of the bowl of rice like a tombstone out of a grave. At least, according to Chinese superstition. When Ma first taught each of them to use chopsticks, she'd also drilled into them that they must never, ever stick them vertically into anything. Or else.

Grace took the fork from her sister and set it next to Jack's plate. She figured that

ought to solve the problem, but Madeline was still frowning. Her anger spread to Grace like an airborne disease: if she was going to be that ridiculous, maybe Grace did feel like picking a fight after all.

“Since when did you start caring about that stuff anyway?” she asked in as provocative a tone as she could muster. Confrontation had never been her strong point, but goodness knows she’d seen enough of it—from her patients, and from Madeline and Ma—to at least imitate the attitude.

Madeline scowled and ignored her.

Grace really didn’t want to let her off the hook so easily, but Jack returned. He saw Madeline’s expression and then glanced at his wife. “Did I miss something?”

Neither of them replied. After an awkward moment, he sat, clearly still confused. He decided to let it pass, but when he reached for his fork, which was no longer in his bowl, he realized what had happened.

He looked up to meet Madeline’s glare. “You’re mad about *that*?” he asked in disbelief. “Are you joking? You’ve got to be joking.”

She made no reply.

“Maddy, it’s a silly superstition—one of the silliest! Look, her bowl’s half empty. It doesn’t even look like a grave.”

“You try burying your whole family,” Madeline said with a barely subdued venom in her voice. “Then we’ll see how silly you think it is.”

With that, she mumbled a quick “excuse me” in Grace’s direction and rose from the table. They heard her scraping the uneaten food from her plate into the trash can. Grace listened to the clatter of her dishes as she put them in the sink, and the murmur of

water as she rinsed them. Then came the soft padding of her feet as she retired upstairs, presumably for the night.

Suddenly Grace was overcome with guilt, and the throbbing in her head went from a dull ache to a full out jackhammer. There it was, Madeline's first night in her home in over three years, and they'd upset her. Grace sighed and turned to Jack. "You didn't have to do that."

He gaped at her. "This is *my* fault?"

"You know that she's in a very delicate place right now."

"So, what? I shouldn't stick my fork in my rice? I should have, what, carried it to the bathroom with me?" His voice was rising. It had been doing that more often lately. "Would that have been better? Less sanitary, perhaps, but that doesn't really matter to you people, does it?"

Grace allowed the "you people" to slide. "That's not what I'm talking about and you know it."

"Grace, it's a goddamn—"

"Jack! Language!"

"—stupid superstition, and I don't recall her ever caring about them before. *You* were always the one making the fuss. I figured Madeline, being born in America, had more sense."

Grace closed her eyes and counted to five, letting the carefully crafted insult roll over her. It was a very basic technique, one she taught in therapy because, as she told all her patients, losing one's temper never solved anything.

"She lost a husband and a son, Jack."

“Yes, she did,” he said, not unkindly. “But that was three years ago. How long does she expect us all to tiptoe around that, around her?”

Fed up, Jack pushed back from the table and left.

Grace pressed her fingers to her temples and massaged them in repetitive circles. It didn’t help. She started kneading her shoulders instead, trying to relieve some of the tension that had built up inside her. That didn’t work either. So she stood and, taking Jack’s plate and the offending fork, began to clear the table.

“I guess no one wants dessert.”

Soft notes soared out of a black baby grand Yamaha, and Grace’s tension along with them. Her lips were pressed in a tight line of emotion and concentration, but she was finally beginning to relax. Then the door opened, and the third movement of Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* came to a halt. Ma and Evan had returned. Grace wanted to finish the piece—desperately wanted to—but she heard Ma start to gripe about something in the kitchen. Wistfully she pulled the protective cover over the beautiful black and white keys, and then she went in to see what was wrong.

“How are you?” Grace greeted in Mandarin.

Ma didn’t reply. She was too busy inspecting the dishes in the sink and the pots on the counter. “What is this? You all ate what?”

“Filet mignon and scalloped potatoes.”

Ma snorted in derision. “American food.”

Grace sighed. They had this fight often, but her mother never remembered. “Ma, Jack *is* American. Of course we’re going to eat American food sometimes. But we had *ji*

rou and *dofu* last night—your favorites.”

Ma continued to scowl. “Dishes still dirty,” she complained, switching to her broken English.

“I know, Ma. I’ll wash them tonight before I go to bed.” Gently she took her mother’s elbow and led her into the living room.

Evan had already turned on the television and put in a tape of Pokémon. Ma grumbled about his choice—she hated pretty much all things Japanese, like many in her generation—but settled down on the sofa anyway. She’d brought back some Chinese language newspapers from her friend’s house. Grace knew she would read them front to back, line by line, but she would forget every character by morning, if not sooner. The dementia was advancing quickly.

Ma had been diagnosed back in Taiwan three weeks ago. Her two younger sisters, who she moved in with after Ba died, noticed that she’d begun taking three or four baths a day. When Grace’s *ahyis* asked their sister why she was taking her personal hygiene to such an extreme, her mother had no idea what they were talking about. She started yelling at them for being nosy and making things up and trying to tell her what to do. She threw a book at them and told them to get the hell out of her house. They took her to the hospital the next day.

Grace sighed and caressed Evan lovingly on the head. He beamed up at her. He had Jack’s eyes, vivid and blue, and Grace’s dark hair and honey skin. Her heart swelled every time she looked at him; he was the perfect mix of Jack and herself. The living synthesis of their love.

When she sat on the couch, he crawled up into her lap and then turned back to

continue watching his cartoons. She smoothed his hair behind his ears and then gave him a kiss. He smelled like shampoo and chocolate.

It occurred to Grace that she couldn't recall ever just sitting like that with her own parents. They'd loved her, certainly, but Ba had always been busy with work and Ma had an entire household to run. Mostly Madeline and Grace had been left to entertain themselves—or each other. That was one benefit to having a sibling.

Sometimes Grace wondered if she was doing Evan an injustice by keeping him an only child. Even before he'd been born, she and Jack had decided that one was enough. They figured he'd have friends from school and from the neighborhood. Plus they'd just learned that Madeline was pregnant; Evan would have a boy cousin near enough to his age to play with. And for a while, he did.

It still broke Grace's heart to think about Ben. He'd been such a beautiful boy, like Evan, a perfect mix of his parents. He'd had Charles's big round eyes, curly lashes, and black ringlets. He'd had Madeline's straight nose and delicate lips. Grace could tell, even before his first birthday, that Ben was going to be handsome. And he would have been.

But, as she told her patients, dwelling in the past creates more problems than it solves. With a quick shake of her head, Grace brought herself back to the present. Evan was still watching television and Ma had already grown tired of the first paper. She switched to an entertainment rag, and Grace figured then was as good a time as any to try to talk to her. The doctors had said that conversation was good for her. It brought her out of her own, degenerating mind and into the real world.

“Hey, Ma. How was *mah jong*?”

Ma nodded, clearly not paying any attention to Grace. She was trying to focus on her paper, and Grace supposed that was a good thing. Focusing was hard for Ma now, so she kind of wanted to leave her to it, but there were things Ma needed to know. Things they needed to take care of.

“Ma,” she said softly. “Madeline’s here.”

Her head jerked up. “*Mei-di?*”

“Yeah, Maddy.” Concerned, Grace watched her mother’s eyes. She was looking for recognition, and for emotion. Given Ma’s condition, Grace wasn’t sure what kind to expect. “I told you she was coming. She’s come to help me.”

“*Bang ni? Wei shenme? Gen shenme?*” *Help you? Why? With what?*

Grace stopped herself from saying, “With you.” She couldn’t tell her mother that. She couldn’t let Ma know that she had become a problem, a problem that needed solving, a burden that needed sharing. There were some things a daughter must never say to her parents. Parents spent their whole lives sheltering their children; it was only right that once the children were old enough, they did the same in return.

Not waiting for her answer, Ma asked sharply, “*Ta zai na li?*” *Where is she?*

“Upstairs,” Grace answered, suddenly very weary. Her headache had come back in full force, the magic of piano and her son wearing off in the face of this new predicament. She was tired—so, so tired. Too tired to protect Madeline that night.

Ma hurried, as much as a woman her age and in her condition could, to the stairwell.

Grace called out weakly, “Ma, don’t.”

But her mother didn’t listen. Grace couldn’t decide whether or not to follow. She

would have preferred to stay, to sit there with her beautiful, brown-haired son and watch TV. But she knew she shouldn't.

"Excuse me, baby," Grace said, kissing him again. He shifted off her lap and onto the sofa.

"Mom follows mom," he said.

She nodded.

"Come here!"

From the bed in Grace's guest room, Madeline could hear Ma's voice floating—no, spearing up the stairway. She stared up at the ceiling with her head resting on her hands and her elbows jutting out, and she just listened.

"Come down here right now!"

Grace's soft-spoken plea followed. "Ma, don't. Maddy just got here. Why don't you let her rest?"

Madeline wasn't surprised that Ma ignored the suggestion. "*Mei-di!*"

She hadn't heard her Chinese name in years. The sound of it, the rising and falling tones of those two simple words—*beautiful emperor*—struck her. Like the names of so many American-born Chinese, hers had not been chosen for its meaning. Grace's had.

"*Chen Mei-di!*"

Reluctantly, Madeline forced herself out of bed to find out what Ma wanted before her shrieking woke the whole neighborhood. When she saw Ma standing at the foot of the stairs, angry eyes fixed on hers, Madeline was shocked by how much her

mother had aged. Ma's smooth, tan skin had become thin and wrinkled, stretched tautly over her bony frame, and her veins ran underneath like rivers on a map. She hunched a bit now, making her small frame look even smaller. And Ma's hair, once a shiny black waterfall like her own, reminded Madeline of will-o'-the-wisps.

"Hi, Ma," she said as she descended. "*Ni hao.*" She figured she could at least start out friendly.

Furious, Ma snapped, "*Ni wei shenme hai mei you xi dishes?*" *Why haven't you washed dishes?*

Madeline raised her brows and shot a skeptical glance at Grace before responding. "Excuse me?"

"*Ni wei shenme hai mei you xi dishes?*" Ma grew more agitated by her daughter's silence—frankly Maddy was just too confused to answer—and slammed her feeble fist on the banister. "What? You need English? Fine! Why you not wash the dishes?"

"Ma, I put my plate in the sink," Madeline told her, trying to be reasonable. "If Grace wanted me to—"

"Grace wash dishes last night! Tonight your turn!"

Madeline looked at her sister, who stood behind Ma, clearly puzzled. Taking her cue, Grace put a hand on their mother's shoulder. "Ma, Maddy doesn't have to do the dishes. I can—"

"No!" Ma whirled on Grace. "*Bu yao defend ta!*" *Don't defend her.* "*Mei-di yao take responsibility, bang mang ta de jia ren.*" *Maddy must take responsibility, help her family.*

Madeline shook her head and smiled bitterly. Even then, even after everything

that had happened, Ma still had the same complaints about her: too independent, too disrespectful, not concerned enough about her family. Madeline found it ironic, given the circumstances.

“What the hell do you think I’m doing here?” Madeline asked, abandoning tact in her frustration. “Why else would I come all this way if it weren’t to help family, to help Grace? God knows I’d rather be anywhere else.”

But Ma wasn’t listening. “I don’t want to hear excuse! You are ungrateful girl. We send you to best school, give you best clothes, do everything best for you, and you not even washing dishes in return. Fine!” She thumped on the banister again. “Fine, you not helping, you see what happen. No more art show.” Thump. “No more art class.” Thump. “No more see friends.” Thump. “No more nothing!” Thump!

Now Grace and Madeline were truly bewildered.

“G-Grace, what is she—”

“Why you talking like I not here?” Ma shrieked. She grabbed Madeline’s arm and squeezed. Madeline winced, not expecting those scrawny fingers to have such strength. She wrenched herself free and massaged her wrist with her other hand. Senile or not, Ma was really starting to rile her.

“Ungrateful girl! Ungrateful!”

Madeline looked to Grace for help, for support, for *something*, but Grace had already turned away, brow creased in pain. Her sorrowful expression kept Madeline in check. Instead of yelling back or doing anything in defense or retribution, she merely held up her hands and walked away.

Back in bed, Madeline curled up and closed her eyes. Why had she come here?

she asked herself. Why had she come back? She felt so stupid. She should have remembered that there was a reason she'd left in the first place: Ma may have had dementia now, but she'd always been crazy.

Well, she wasn't going to cry about it. She hadn't shed a single tear in over three years—nothing had been worth it, nothing had compared to *that*—and she wasn't about to start now. She wouldn't give Ma that satisfaction.

With a sigh, she rolled over and settled into a more comfortable position. It had been a long day, and she was ready for it to end.

The phantom peeked his head up over the edge of the bed, and Madeline realized that she hadn't seen him in a little while. She wondered where he'd been; he had a habit of disappearing at heated moments. Madeline supposed he didn't like the conflict, and she couldn't blame him. But she was always curious about where he went, and she always kind of missed him. He'd been her only friend after Charles left her, her only darling after Ben went away. He'd kept her company after everyone had gone back to their own homes, their own families. He hadn't abandoned her; he'd understood her.

Now he crawled into the bed with her and tucked himself into the curve of her body. With her arm draped over him and her chin on his head, they escaped into the bliss of slumber.

It was almost midnight, and Jack had finally gone upstairs. After putting Evan to bed, Grace knew he would spend the night holed up in his office poring over depositions. That was getting to be his normal routine, and Grace missed spending time with him. But

she knew better than to say anything. It was only temporary, he would explain. Just until he was promoted to partner.

Ma and Grace sat quietly in the living room, sipping hot green tea from delicate porcelain cups. They made no mention of the earlier incident. In fact, they exchanged no words and felt no need to. They had always felt comfortable with their own silence.

Sometimes, when they were just sitting there like that, Grace wondered what her mother was thinking about. Did she even know what she'd just done? Could she comprehend the pain she had inflicted on Madeline? Grace didn't think so. In fact, Grace had begun to believe that Ma was almost completely divorced from her actions—they were totally spur of the moment, never planned ahead of time and never considered afterwards. The idea of that was so fascinating to Grace, perhaps because she was the exact opposite.

Their peace was interrupted by a loud cry from above. Grace turned to look at her mother, who was already looking at her, and they both rose immediately. Ma took her daughter's tea just before Grace bolted up the stairs and, with a composure befitting her age, slowly replaced both their cups on their matching saucers.

By the time Ma joined her on the second floor, Grace had already checked on Evan in his room. He was fast asleep, his fist tucked sweetly under his chubby chin. Perplexed, Grace shook her head in answer to Ma's unspoken question: it wasn't him.

"Maddy!" Grace exclaimed in a whisper. Together they moved to the guest bedroom. Grace eased the door open, taking care to turn the knob slowly and soundlessly. She tried to scan the room, but Madeline had lit candles and it took her eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dim, eerie orange glow.

Madeline was lying in the center of the large, four-poster bed, with the covers strewn about her lithe body. Her knees were curled up in front of her stomach, and her pajama shorts had risen up to expose her slim thighs. She trembled, and her hands, fisted around a pillow, gripped and twisted at the soft linen cover. Her face contorted into an expression of supreme anguish, and she cried out again. There were tears in the corner of her eyes.

“*Ta shuo shenme?*” Grace asked urgently, still whispering. “What’s she saying, Ma? I don’t understand.”

Her mother did not reply, but moved past her into the room. Standing next to the bed, Ma peered intently at Madeline, and for a moment Grace wondered if her mother was going to yell at her sister. She stepped forward, about to intervene, when Ma reached for the comforter and pulled it up to Madeline’s shoulders. Then she smoothed Madeline’s hair, gathering it from across the pillow and wrapping it behind her neck. Madeline was still moaning softly, repeating something Grace couldn’t hear, but Ma leaned in and listened, her ear practically touching Madeline’s lips. “Shh,” she whispered. “Shh, *xiao hai*, shh.” Tenderly, she stroked Madeline’s face.

Then she straightened, her face stony once more, and started to leave. She was just about to pass Grace when she grasped her arm.

“Ma,” Grace insisted. “What is she saying?”

Ma closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then opened them again and stared straight at Grace.

“Gui,” she finally replied. *Ghost*.

I still have nightmares about it. About that night, about the accident. I wasn't there, but I know what happened. The police told me, the truck driver told me, the phantom told me. They gave me the skeletons, and my imagination filled in the flesh.

I was in the kitchen. That probably should have been a sign in and of itself that something wasn't right. Charles preferred that I venture no farther than the refrigerator or the sink, and I was more than happy to oblige. Chef Boyardee is about as gourmet as I get, and that's on a really good day.

But Charles wasn't home yet, so I had to fend for myself. He'd been visiting his old college roommate Jeff down in Baltimore. When I called, Jeff said Charles had taken off "quite a while ago," so I figured he'd be home any minute. It's only a four and a half hour drive, but six hours later, I was still home alone. And of course, there's never any signal in Podunk, Pennsylvania, so Charles' cell phone was essentially useless.

At the seven-hour mark, I gave up. A little frustrated and a lot hungry, I figured Charles had run into traffic or something, or was just taking his time. That was so like Charles. Especially since Ben was with him, he probably even stopped to rest and get something to eat. Those two were definitely men ruled by their appetites.

Well, they weren't the only ones. I held off as long as I could before finally raiding the pantry for something I could prepare without accidentally injuring myself or burning the whole house down. There was Campbell's soup, tuna, and cereal, but Easy Mac took the gold. I put the bowl of noodles in the microwave and cut open the packet of cheese. Feeling rather empowered and proud of my survival skills, I even added some strips of turkey.

I took about four bites of the gloriously delicious mac and cheese, and then the phone rang. Irritated, I jabbed my fork into the bowl and got up to answer. “Hello?” The gleam of the fork caught my eye. Watery cheese sauce dribbled down the tines. The handle was sticking straight up. My stomach began to churn, but I told myself it was the hunger.

“Hello, Mrs. Freeman?”

I remember how odd it was to hear my married name. No one ever used it. I was Madeline Chen, the artist. “Yes?”

“My name is Eleanor and I’m with the Washington County Hospital. I’m afraid there’s been an accident.”

“An accident?” I took the phone back to the dinner table, sat down. “What do you mean, an accident? What kind of accident?”

“Ma’am, we have your husband here in the Intensive Care Unit. You might want to come down—”

“To the hospital?”

“Yes, ma’am. Washington County Hospital in Hagerstown.” The woman’s voice was kind. She sounded relatively young, maybe my age, maybe a little older. She sounded like she was inviting me over for dinner.

“But that’s in Maryland.”

“Yes, in Maryland. There’s been an accident, and your husband Charles Freeman is here. Charles Freeman is your husband, yes?”

“Yeah. Yeah, he’s my... What about Ben? Where’s Ben?”

There was a pause.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but I think you should come down here as quickly as you can. We’ll answer all of your questions, if possible, when you get here.”

“Where’s Ben?”

“Your, um...” She cleared her throat. “Your husband’s condition is very serious. We’re going to have to make some decisions, and we would like to consult with you as soon as possible.”

My hand hurt from gripping my chair so hard, but I didn’t stop. “Where’s Ben? Where’s my son?”

“Ma’am...”

“Where is my son?!”

“Mrs. Freeman, I’m so sorry...”

I stopped listening. I stared straight ahead. I screamed. I was vaguely aware of the fork and the bowl and the phone flying across the room, but I didn’t really care. I wasn’t hungry anymore.

“A Pittsburgh man was seriously injured and his son killed yesterday evening when the driver of an eighteen-wheeler fell asleep on US 70 near US 81 and swerved into their black Jeep Cherokee. Police say the SUV rolled over itself and onto the median of the interstate. The accident closed westbound lanes for almost three hours.

“The driver, identified as civil rights attorney Charles Freeman, 29, was wearing his seatbelt. His son Benjamin, 1, was also correctly fastened into a protective child seat. However, the young Freeman was pronounced dead at the scene by paramedics. His father was taken by Life Flight to Washington County Hospital in Hagerstown. He remains there in critical condition.

“Charges have not yet been pressed against the driver, whose name

remains withheld during the investigation.”

After the funerals, Madeline disconnected all the phones. She still checked the answering machine and her voicemail, but she couldn't deal with real-time conversations. Her brain was sluggish, drugged by grief and denial and anger and longing, and she couldn't process anything. Plus, she didn't like how vulnerable even the simplest of exchanges made her feel. Easy, casual questions like “How are you doing?” or “What are you up to?” seemed like traps to her, designed to pry underneath the carefully constructed armor she'd put on. Thus she came to prefer the distance, literally and figuratively, of letters or email correspondence.

It was weird at first, getting voices and sending back written words, but she got used to it, and so did the people who mattered. People like Grace and Jeff, who never asked her for more, because they knew she couldn't give it. She appreciated that, even though she never told them.

One day, though, Grace left her a message: “Call me back.”

Madeline hadn't dialed her sister's number in nearly three years, but she knew that if Grace was asking, it was important.

“Hello?”

“Grace? It's me.”

There was a brief silence on the other end, then a big sigh of relief. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Madeline barely remembered how this was supposed to go. “What's, um... What's going on?”

Grace hesitated. “It's Ma.”

Then she plunged in. She told Madeline about their mother's Alzheimer's, the aggressiveness of her senile dementia. She admitted that there was no cure, but added optimistically that there were ways to possibly delay the degeneration of the mind. She explained that she was bringing Ma back to Houston to care for her. She stopped just short of confessing that she didn't have the time to provide for Ma herself, that she'd probably have to hire someone to help out, but Madeline caught the insinuation.

"I could do it," she said.

"Do what?" Grace asked, hoping but not believing that she understood what Madeline was offering.

"I can come take care of Ma."

Quietly Grace let out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding, and she tried to keep her voice neutral. "Maddy, that's not necessary. We can easily afford—"

"It's not about the money, and you know that."

She did know it, so she didn't try to pretend otherwise. "What about your job? What about the museum, and your art?"

Madeline didn't answer right away. This was exactly why she hated the phone, hated the obviousness of silence that emails and letters hid so well. She couldn't tell Grace that she'd been fired, certainly couldn't tell her why. She'd just have to come up with something else.

"I can do art anywhere." That much was certainly true, or would be, if she still worked on anything. "And as for the museum... I quit."

"What?" The surprise in Grace's voice caused Madeline to flinch. "Why? When did that happen?"

“Uh, well, I just... I don’t feel at home here anymore. I’ve, um, actually been thinking about moving back to Houston.” It wasn’t true, but it sounded good. Hopefully she sounded convincing. “So this is perfect timing, really.”

“Wow. Wow, okay.” Grace nodded, even though Madeline couldn’t see her. “That’s fantastic, then. How soon could you be here?”

Madeline looked around as if she needed to take inventory, to make a mental calculation of her ties and how long it would take her to break them. The truth was, she didn’t have any.

“This weekend?”

“So soon. Are you sure?”

Madeline shrugged. Her house was full of things, things that had meant something to her once. The shell necklace from their honeymoon in Hawaii, her sketchbook from their trip to Paris, the family portrait over the fireplace. They’d all been such precious mementos, more valuable to her than any of the awards she’d won. Now, though, they were just reminders of everything she’d lost.

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

She began packing as soon as she hung up the phone. She stayed up all night and was done by sunrise. Nearly a decade was wrapped and stored into ten cardboard boxes. She stacked them neatly by the door. Then she went upstairs, walked right past the master bedroom, and slept in the small red race car bed for the last time.

The next morning, Madeline felt sick to her stomach with regret. What was she

doing back in Houston? What on earth had possessed her to believe that she should, or even could, do this? She groaned and rolled over onto her stomach. Maybe she should go back to Pittsburgh. Maybe she could run away to Europe. Maybe if she buried her face in the pillow just so, everyone would leave her alone.

Half an hour later, the little phantom woke her. She felt his cold breath on her arm and slowly roused herself. He was standing beside the bed, his bland, colorless face right next to hers. “What is it?” she asked him, her voice husky with sleep. “What do you want?”

He looked at the door, then back at her imploringly.

“You want to go out?”

He nodded.

“So go. I can’t deal with them. I’m staying in bed.” She rolled over and turned to face the other way. He scowled at her. She couldn’t see him, but she felt his glare. Anger emanated from him like a dull, steady heat. After a few moments of trying to ignore it and go back to sleep, Madeline gave an exasperated sigh and opened her eyes. “I am not pathetic. Fine, let’s go.”

Still wearing flannel pajamas and a t-shirt, Madeline descended to the first floor. The thick carpet was soft under her bare feet, and on impulse she stopped on the last step to squish it between her toes. She closed her eyes to deepen the sensation, braced herself with the banister, and took long, slow breaths. For the first time in a long time, she felt relaxed.

Then the phantom tugged at her shirt.

“Oh, come on. Can’t I just have one minute of peace?” she bemoaned.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Maddy.”

“Oh!” Madeline jumped up, eyes wide, heart racing. “Oh, Evan, you scared me.”

“I didn’t mean to, *Ahyi*.” The little boy looked down apologetically.

Regaining her composure, Madeline shook her head and awkwardly stooped down to meet his eye level. “No, don’t worry about it. I just…” She forced a chuckle. “*Ahyi* was just being a little silly.”

He looked back up at her but didn’t say anything.

For a split second, just the briefest of moments, his caramel skin turns mocha, and Madeline sees…

She shook her head again, this time to clear it. She’d seen nothing, no one but her nephew. “Evan, where’s your mom?”

“She and *Ama* went shopping for more food. She made breakfast and we were waiting for you to eat with us, but then you never came down, so we ate without you. Sorry again.”

“It’s okay. It was my fault for staying in bed too long.” Madeline stood and walked toward the main rooms. “What time is it anyway?”

Evan paused, then ran over to the television. He kept changing channels until he found a familiar program: Barney. “It’s three o’clock.” He lisped a little.

Madeline smiled at him. “Nice trick, kiddo.”

He beamed back at her.

Three o’clock in the afternoon, she thought to herself. Maybe the phantom was right: she was pathetic. No, she was just jetlagged. And last night’s incidents hadn’t exactly been rejuvenating.

Well, she'd gotten a solid amount of sleep. Now all she needed was some fuel. Preferably pre-made. "Hey, Evan, what was for breakfast?"

"Dad had to go to the office early, so Mommy and *Ama* got *dohjiang*."

Madeline grinned. *Dohjiang* was a staple of Chinese breakfast, one of her favorites, and something that kept very well. "Is there any left?"

Evan nodded. Forgetting the television, he darted past her into the kitchen. She watched with amusement as the refrigerator opened, seemingly by itself since the boy was screened by the counter. "Do you need any help?"

"No!" he replied excitedly. "You stay there, and I'll serve you. *Hao bu hao?*" *Is that okay?*

"*Hao ah.*" *Okay.*

Madeline sat at the dinner table, in the same chair as the night before, the same chair she'd chosen since college, and waited patiently. In the background, Barney was singing something about it being a great day for counting. For some reason—the light, the carpet, the inane sing-along, the prospect of good food—Madeline felt like a totally different person from the grouch who'd woken up ten minutes ago.

The microwave gave a sharp *ding*, and Evan called out, "It's ready!" She smiled as he emerged from behind the counter, carrying a large bowl of steaming soup.

"Be careful."

He nodded, biting his bottom lip in concentration. His small hands were stuffed oven mitts which comically covered him all the way up to his elbows. Very carefully, he placed the bowl in front of her. "Don't drink yet!" he said, and then sped back to the kitchen. He returned with a plate of fried dough, a napkin, and a spoon. "Bon appetit." He

gave an exaggerated bow.

She laughed and made a show of sampling the soup. “Mmm, delicious!” He grinned and took a seat across from her. He was such a beautiful child, with big eyes like his father, and round cheeks, and a strong chin. He’d grow up into a really nice young man, Madeline was sure. She found herself wanting to know about him. She wanted to ask him about his classes, his hobbies, his favorite movies. But she couldn’t make herself ask. He wasn’t her child, she reminded herself. What difference could any of those things make to her? None, none at all. So she continued to eat, in silence, while he watched.

“*Ahyi?*”

“Yeah?”

“*Ama* smells funny.”

Madeline nearly spit out her soup. She’d forgotten how random children could be. Stifling a laugh, she patted her mouth with the napkin. “What do you mean?”

“She puts little white things in her clothes. Mommy calls them mock balls.”

“You mean moth balls?”

“Yeah, moth balls.” He looked at her very seriously. “Does she do that because she’s crazy?”

Madeline frowned. “She’s not exactly crazy, Evan. And it’s not polite to say things like that about your elders.”

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “That’s what Daddy said, though.”

Madeline’s expression instantly turned sardonic. “Somehow that doesn’t surprise me.” She made a mental note to share some choice words with Jack later.

“If she’s not crazy, how come she doesn’t remember stuff, like who we are?”

She set her spoon down against the rim of the bowl. The silver met the porcelain with a *clink*, which made a strange counterpoint to Barney, who was now singing about the land of make-believe. “She’s just getting old, Evan. Sometimes, when you’ve lived a really long life, your head just can’t keep everything straight. It’s too full, you know? So some stuff leaks out to make room for the rest.”

His little forehead creased as he thought this over. Then he nodded, seemingly satisfied. Madeline picked up her spoon and began to drink again.

“*Ahyi?*”

“Yeah?”

“I miss Ben.”

Her heart stopped. For an instant, it just stopped beating. Everything went perfectly still and silent. Her hand paused halfway between the bowl and her mouth. She couldn’t hear the television. She thought she could sense the unnatural motionlessness of the air. Then, ignoring its previous rhythm, her heart picked up again, and she started breathing, and Barney kept singing. She willed the tears out of her eyes.

“Me too.”

Suddenly Madeline noticed the phantom. He was sitting next to her, in Ben’s seat. He must have been there all along. His eyes were furious, and the dull, irritated heat of before now burned her skin. Not wanting to alarm Evan, she ignored the pain and brought her spoon to her lips. Penitently, she avoided the phantom’s glance and continued sipping her soup.

A few minutes later, Grace appeared outside the kitchen door. Handicapped by brown grocery bags in both arms, she struggled to put the key in the lock. Madeline rose from the table to help her, but Evan beat her to it.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Grace said as he opened the door. Angling her lithe body sideways, she shuffled awkwardly through the doorway and into the house. Ma, carrying only her purse and a small takeout box, slowly followed. The tops of her stockings had fallen below the hem of her flower-print dress, and she could feel them slipping farther down even as she laboriously placed one black Mary Jane in front of the other. She wanted to fix them, but she wasn’t sure she could. Some days her body was like a good friend, or a maid complying quickly and competently. Other days, simply breathing seemed like an effort. Today was somewhere in between.

Grace’s bags thudded onto the marble counter.

“Do you need any help with those?” Madeline asked. She brought her dishes to the sink, and the phantom warily trailed her into the kitchen.

Grace handed Evan a package of tofu and a head of cabbage. He put them in their respective places in the refrigerator and turned back around for more. “No, I think we’ve got it.” Grace glanced at her mother. “But maybe you could help Ma with her shoes?”

Madeline looked over and was about to protest, but then she saw her mother staring down at her feet in contemplation. The look of intense frustration on the old woman’s face softened her. Without a word, Madeline bent down to undo the buckles on her mother’s shoes.

With one hand braced against the kitchen counter, Ma frowned. It seemed that everyone was doing that now, talking about her as if she were not there, treating her like

an inept child. She hated it. She *was* there, and she was not a child. She deserved respect.

Perhaps what bothered Ma most of all was that her own children were among those treating her this way. Like less than a person. She had come to accept it, if not expect it, from the people in this country. When she was younger, she'd been able to use her beauty to get her foot in the door, but now, at age sixty-eight, she had no such trick up her sleeve. People did not want to understand her, did not want to hear past her accent or see past her slanted eyes. They dismissed her as if she were an irritating fruit fly, instead of the talented, strong, university-educated woman that she was.

Even Jack. Ma had no delusions about her son-in-law's attitude towards her. While his affection was genuine, his reverence was lacking. He thought her superstitions were silly, her values antiquated, and her opinions uninformed. He assumed that because she did not speak often, she had nothing of value to say. He, like most Americans, did not appreciate the power of silence.

Ma had tried to teach her daughters better, though. Not only to save their words the way they saved coins in their piggy banks, but also to be patient with those who could not speak in a perfectly inconspicuous American accent. Like most Taiwanese immigrants in this country, Ma and her girlfriends had come to this country in their twenties seeking jobs or an advanced degree, or following husbands who were. They'd learned English in school but never had to speak it. Most already knew three languages—Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Japanese, thanks to the occupation—and yet here they were treated like inferiors. Their names—*Jia-li*, *Xiao-hong*, *Jing*—were butchered, but somehow that was *their* fault, *their* deficiency. And of course, their inability to say the soft *i* in “will,” or their tendency to mix up gendered pronouns, were far greater speech

crimes than any committed by Americans. *You are in our country*, a man once said to them in a grocery store. *It's your job to learn our language*. Yes, Ma had taught Grace and Madeline to be better than that, but could they really wonder why she and Ba had chosen to return to Taiwan?

Just thinking about her homeland made Ma smile. The tropical heat, the luscious forests, the snow-capped mountains, the bustling street markets. The way a person knew everybody on his street, and what they did, and who they were related to. The city parks that filled up at night with young children at play, parents watching over them, elderly couples, and teenagers who didn't want to drink or go to clubs. Yes, Taiwan was often humid, and dirty, and simple, but what was wrong with that? In Ma's opinion, America was a little too dry, too clean, and too complicated. A little too artificial.

"So why did you come then?"

Ma jolted, surprised by the question. "*Shen me?*" *What?*

"If America's so sterilized and fake, why did you come?" Madeline asked again, rephrasing her question.

Had she been speaking aloud? Ma couldn't remember. When had she started? What had she said?

Instead of answering, she pointed down at her feet. "*Wo de xie zi zai na er?*" *Where are my shoes?* "I cannot leave house without shoes."

Grace looked at Madeline, then at her mother. "Ma, Maddy just took them off for you. We just got home."

Fear flickered in Ma's eyes for a moment. She felt as if she were standing on a beach and her mind, her memory, was stuck out in the ocean, trying to run back to her on

the shore. Sluggishly, it did catch up, and the fear passed. Still, she felt vulnerable and confused. “I know,” Ma said defensively. “I know.” Still frowning, she walked out of the kitchen, her stockings sagging more with each step.

Madeline caught her sister’s eye and raised a brow. Grace’s lips tightened into a straight line. Disturbed, they went back to putting away the groceries.

Evan grabbed the boxes of Hamburger Helper that his mother had purchased for Madeline and headed to the pantry. Just before he went in, he chuckled to himself and said, “*Ama* is kind of funny, isn’t she?”

Neither Grace nor Madeline replied.

With the groceries put away, Grace sent Evan to prepare for his weekly piano lessons. He scampered off for some last minute practice, and Grace grabbed a pile of mail off the counter and seated herself at the kitchen island to sort through it. Madeline stood quietly by the counter. She drummed her fingers on the marble surface.

“Grace, I think I’m going to go for a drive.”

“Oh?” her sister looked up, an energy bill in her left hand. “Where to?”

Madeline shrugged. “Wherever.” Then, not wanting to seem rude or evasive, she hastily added, “Maybe down to Firenze Art Supply. Y’know, check out the selection, see if there’s anything I want.”

Grace beamed. “Oh, Maddy, that’s fantastic. So you’re working on something?”

Madeline heard the excitement in her sister’s voice, and she didn’t want to disappoint her. “I’ve been thinking about it,” she equivocated. She’d been thinking about

it for the past three years. Anytime anyone asked about her art, she'd been thinking about it. And she did think about it. She just couldn't seem to get past the thinking.

"Alright." Grace sliced open another letter. "Well, I have to take Evan to his piano lesson, but we'll be back around five-thirty, so we can all have dinner together."

"And Jack?"

Grace hesitated. "He should be home by then, too." She forced a laugh. "I mean, it's Sunday, right?"

"The day of rest," Madeline said with a nod. She reached over the answering machine for her purse. "I'll see you at five-thirty then."

The phantom took his place in the passenger seat as Madeline started the car. The sun had turned the inside of the black Grand Cherokee into a sauna, and she sat for a moment while the steering wheel cooled off. When it was finally safe to touch, she took a deep breath and switched the gears to drive.

She decided to avoid the freeways and stick with the local roads, so she made a right onto San Felipe and cruised through River Oaks. With the window rolled down she could enjoy the breeze and the smell of freshly mowed grass that graced the affluent neighborhood. She passed Evan's elementary school, the same one she and Grace had attended over twenty years ago. Black wrought-iron fences had been put up around the entire periphery, and Madeline couldn't help feeling a little sad about that. But then again, she of all people certainly understood the need to put up defenses.

Gradually she passed out of the residential opulence of River Oaks and into a more commercially developed section of town. She'd grown up in this area, and it was nice, although strange, to note what had stayed the same and what had changed. In

general, the stores had gotten bigger and flashier, but she doubted they'd gotten much better. The mom-and-pop restaurants were now national chains like Chili's and Starbucks. The gentleman's establishments, though surely just as sleazy as ever, had been repainted and renamed. There were more advertisements, more beggars, and a new gas station, but Madeline's favorite Japanese restaurant, Miyako, was still around.

When she came to South Voss, she turned left. There, stuck between the backside of a huge shopping center and an empty lot overrun by trees and brush, was her beloved Firenze Art Supply. The store inhabited a boxy old warehouse which, despite its humble architectural inheritance, the owners had managed to convert it into a two-story paradise for artists. While the real entrance was on the left side of the parking lot, a giant mural had the honor of facing the street. This façade had been repainted only once in all the years that Madeline could recall, and she was pleased to see that Progress had not touched this childhood treasure. As a girl, she would scamper out from the car and come to stare up at the huge, multicolored cow, the bucket of rainbow-colored paint, and the mud-stained ranch boots that were twice as tall as she was. Her family, tired of standing on the gravel and waiting for her, would go inside and chat with Mr. Basso, the owner and manager. Nearly seventy-five years old but still fit as a fiddle, he knew each of them by name and always had a treat for Grace and Madeline. Ma would cluck and say that truffles were bad for their teeth, but she smiled as the girls eagerly gobbled them up and Madeline began to roam around the store.

At first, Madeline had gone for the more infantile, primitive art supplies: stickers, markers, crayons and construction paper. To her credit, she'd made more of these materials than the average elementary school student. Her skies were multi-hued, her

trees and houses had shadows, and her collages had actually resembled the farm animals they were supposed to. Ma put every new piece of Madeline's artwork on the fridge, right next to Grace's straight-A report cards.

After she started private painting lessons in middle school, Madeline began to investigate the store's supply of oils, pastels, and her favorite, the watercolors. She loved the way the paints bled from her brush. She could control them, to an extent, but they always retained some degree of freedom, like kites in the wind. She could start strong, with a deep dark shade, but eventually it would dilute to a soft and hazy suggestion of itself. Because of this, there was always a soft, dreamlike tone to the pieces, and Madeline had always found that soothing.

Finally, in high school, she'd started to experiment with what would become her specialty: sculpture. Anything and everything was apt to become the focal point of her latest work, from an old shoe to a computer screen to the hood of a junked car. Madeline believed that the best things in life were usually the unexpected, so these found objects formed the basis of her artistic expression. Plus she loved the idea that the things she created might not only touch people but also be touched by people. Instead of sterile galleries with their artwork safely encased in glass coffins, Madeline preferred large-scale public pieces that relaxed in parks and waited at bus stops right along with the audience for which they were intended. Her parents had patiently tolerated the odd, occasionally grotesque sculptures that appeared on their lawn. The neighbors had not been quite as fond.

It wasn't until she'd been accepted to the prestigious Carnegie Mellon, with a significant scholarship from the Houston Endowment, that most people had begun to take

her art seriously. Madeline had hated all the false smiles and over-eager handshakes she'd started to receive from people who only thought she had talent or value because they'd read it on some glossy piece of paper. Instead she preferred the honest critiques given by her high school art teacher, the unconditional support and encouragement from her parents, and the knowledge and advice imparted by Mr. Basso whenever she came to Firenze Art Supply.

Mr. Basso was not an artist himself, but he'd been around them all his life. Born in Florence, Italy, he had grown up playing in the plaza by the Duomo, taking class trips to the famous Galleria degli Uffizi, and finding beauty around every street corner. With its stone bridges and rolling hills, the city was itself a living canvas, and until the age of twelve, he had painted on it.

Then his parents had taken him and his younger brother to America, leaving war-torn Europe for the golden land of opportunity. Capitalizing on what they could, the family opened a store to sell the "high quality genuine Italian art supplies" they'd brought with them. Named for their beloved home, Firenze Art Supply took off quickly.

Madeline's private art instructor had been the first to recommend it to her, and once she'd laid her small, seven-years-old eyes on that big, fantastical mural, she was done. Unless she was in a bind, she never shopped anywhere else for her materials, and even when she moved to Pittsburgh she ordered from their online catalog.

However, the computer couldn't provide the same sense of comfort that washed over her whenever she walked through the door. Before going to Pittsburgh, and again now, her eyes greedily drank in the rows of colored pencils, the rolls of canvases, the racks of T-bars and rulers. Everything was neat and in its own place. Mr. Basso was

meticulous about organization, and his store was every control-freak artist's idea of paradise. It had been nearly a decade since she'd last set foot there, but that much, at least, she could count on.

Feeling at once out of place and perfectly at home, Madeline decided to survey the entire store to see what had changed and what had stayed the same. After all, that seemed to be the theme of her life recently. The phantom was more interested in the children's section, so he wandered over and left her to exploration.

She was halfway down the second aisle when someone called out, "Madeline? Madeline Chen, is that you?"

The question had come from an extremely tall, thin man, and now he was walking towards her. His long legs covered the ground quickly, and soon he was right in front of her. He had kind eyes and a strong chin, and Madeline thought he looked vaguely familiar. Still, his rapid approach had put her on her guard. As he squinted and leaned his head down to see her better, she couldn't help shrinking back a little.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" she asked, bumping into the colorful display of Chartpak Ad markers.

Sensing her discomfort, the man drew back. "Probably not. Hi, I'm Colin. Colin Basso." He abruptly stuck out his hand, which she shook reluctantly.

"You're Mr. Basso's son?"

"That's what the name would imply." He grinned. "Sorry for staring at you like that. I don't have my glasses, and I forget how close I am to things sometimes."

"Don't worry about it," she said without conviction.

He laughed. "You've changed. You seem so shy now. Skittish, really."

“I’m not skittish,” she replied defensively. Then her expression changed from tentative to distrustful. “Wait a minute. I thought you said you didn’t know me.”

Colin wagged one of his long, thin fingers. “No, I said you probably didn’t know me. But I know you. Everyone knows you.”

She snorted. “They used to.” No longer concerned but still not quite at ease, Madeline shifted the tote bag on her shoulder and crossed her arms.

“I guess you’re an art buff then?” she asked. Her tone clearly indicated that she was unimpressed.

He shook his head. “Nope. Not a bad guess, considering my dad ran an art supply store, but let’s just say this apple fell pretty far from the tree.”

“How far?”

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wallet. From the worn folds of the fine black leather, he extracted a simple but well-designed business card. She accepted it.

“Software developer?” she asked incredulously.

He shrugged. “Fell far from the tree, rolled down a hill, dropped into a river, and floated down the stream.”

“I’ll say.” She offered him the card back, but he held up his hand to refuse it.

“Keep it. Who knows, you might need it.”

“Not likely.” But she slipped it into her bag anyway. “You said ran.”

Now he was the one caught off-guard. “Huh?”

Madeline liked the shoe being on the other foot, enjoyed asking the questions instead of having to answer. With an impish grin, she explained, “You used the past

tense, said your father ran this place. I can't believe he would retire. What's he up to now?"

The cheer drained from Colin's face. His expression was somber but still warm. "My dad passed away several years ago."

Instantly Madeline's playfulness disappeared. "Oh. I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Don't worry about it." He smiled bravely. "Just one more reason I don't know anything about art. Without my dad around to talk my ear off about the latest industry news, I haven't really kept in touch with it. And my cousin owns and runs the store now."

It had been years since Colin had heard anything about the art world. That meant he probably didn't know a thing about the accident or her fruitless past few years, and something about that appealed to Madeline, made her more comfortable with him.

"Your father was a good man," she said with feeling.

Colin nodded.

He was just about to ask her how she was and what she was doing back in Houston when suddenly someone called for him from the back room. "Col! Colin!" He sighed. "Speaking of my cousin, I promised him I'd take a look at his inventory database. My dad didn't know a floppy drive from a toaster, so it's a total mess."

"You should go then."

"Yeah." He took a couple steps, then paused. "Nice seeing you again, Madeline." He turned and walked to the back office before she could say anything, but she hadn't planned to respond anyway.

Slightly relieved to be alone again, Madeline decided to cut her tour short. When

she returned home, Grace had just decided what to eat for dinner. Jack had called to say they shouldn't wait for him, so she'd elected to prepare duck and green beans according to her aunt's recipes, with Asian pear for dessert: all things that she loved and Jack didn't. Ma was so delighted with the dishes that for a moment she forgot where she was and started calling Grace and Madeline by her sisters' names. She corrected herself quickly, though, and so Grace felt okay taking the mistake as a compliment of sorts.

Evan volunteered to wash the dishes and Madeline, still jetlagged and not adjusted to the time difference, went to bed early. Ma retired to her room. She liked to fall asleep watching the Chinese soap operas that Grace paid extra to receive by satellite. So once Grace had read Evan his bedtime story and tucked him into bed, and snuck into Ma's room to turn off the television, she was free to enjoy once of the only peaceful, solitary times of her week.

Grace's Sunday night routine consisted of thirty minutes in the Jacuzzi, a mug of hot green tea, and a stack of manila folders—her cases for the upcoming week. She liked to be prepared, so she reviewed each client's file, charted his or her progress, and made notes to herself about things to watch for, avoid, or suggest. Therapy was obviously a delicate affair, but Grace thought most of her peers in the profession played too passive a role. Actually, they didn't play at all, and that was the real problem. For Grace, helping her patients was a game of strategy: watch their moves, and counter. Granted, the analogy fell apart when one started thinking about winners and losers, because both sides had a mutual goal. Still, Grace preferred to take an active, constructive role in empowering her clients, rather than simply sitting back, listening to their troubles, and then blaming their mothers or prescribing the latest pills.

Mostly she worked with children and teenagers, kids plagued by family problems and school bullies. She liked the idea of working with youth, catching and fixing issues early, before they grew too large. They opened up more easily, too. Even the stubborn, angst-ridden teens were more open-minded than many adults who wouldn't listen to anything other than what they wanted to hear. The problem with their knowing more was knowing that they knew more, and then thinking they knew everything.

She closed the last file and set it on the stool she kept next to the tub. Rolling her shoulders back into the bubbling water, she closed her eyes and let the heat ease her muscles. The ends of her long black hair floated on the surface of the Jacuzzi and tickled her arms. The air blasting out of the jets rumbled in her ears. She tried to absorb each of these sensations, to lose herself in a cocoon of relaxation, but something was holding her back. She frowned and opened her eyes.

Through the doorway she spotted Jack standing at his dresser removing his watch and tie. His pinstriped shirt was already unbuttoned and pulled out from his slacks, but he was still wearing his shoes. Grace sighed.

“You’re home late.” There was more question than accusation in her tone.

Jack didn’t bother to turn around. “There was a lot to do at work.”

“On a Sunday?” She stepped out of the tub and reached for her towel. She dried her hair first, then wrapped the soft terrycloth around her body.

He shrugged, his back still to her.

“And you forgot to take off your shoes,” she said, joining him in the bedroom.

He sat on the edge of the bed and took them off now, set them at the foot of his nightstand. “I didn’t forget.” Wearing only his boxers, Jack tugged the sheets out from

underneath himself and slipped between them. He nestled his head into the pillow and shifted to get more comfortable.

“They track dirt into the house.”

He said nothing, so Grace decided to let it go for now. Pushing a point when he was tired never really got her anywhere, and she hated going to bed when they were fighting. A natural worrier, she had a hard enough time sleeping as it was.

She quickly finished drying off and put on a satin nightgown. She wanted to get into bed before he fell asleep. Skipping her usual ritual of applying lotion and touching up her eyebrows, Grace slid in next to him and curved her body to parallel his. She put her arm over his side and kissed him on the back of the neck.

“Grace, I’m tired.”

“Tough case?”

He mumbled something to the affirmative.

“Old or new client?”

He sighed. “Grace, seriously, can we not talk about this? I have to be back at the office for another long day tomorrow, and I’d really like to be rested for it.”

“Oh, okay,” she muttered apologetically. Giving up, she retracted her arm and rolled over onto her other side. She took a deep breath to steady her emotions, then closed her eyes and prepared for sleep.

Just as her mind was beginning to slow and shut down and give her peace, she felt Jack move to hold her. His breath was uncomfortably warm on her face and his arm heavy on her stomach, but she smiled anyway.

“Good night.” His words were barely intelligible through his sleep.

“Good night,” she whispered back. “I love you.”

Two

Ma was born in Taiwan's capital city in 1938, seven years before the end of the Japanese occupation. Third oldest in what would eventually be a family of twelve, she remembered—although barely—crawling under her desk with her elementary school classmates one afternoon as bombs sounded in the distance. For the most part, World War II didn't leave much of an impression on Ma, but that day, with her head pressed down against her knees, her weak white knuckles vised around wooden table legs, she quaked like a soldier on the frontline. Some of her peers began to cry, including her little brother. He sniffled, trying to keep the snot from spilling out of his nostril.

“Don't be such a baby,” Ma reprimanded him harshly. But she reached out to wipe his nose with the sleeve of her blouse.

After twenty minutes had passed without further incident, the teacher, pale-faced and wide-eyed, called out from under his own desk to say that class was dismissed for the rest of the day and they were free to go. Ma stood and dusted off her uniform skirt, and then she grabbed the hands of her big sister and little brother and marched them all home.

Their house was like many others of the time, a Japanese-style one-story, made of pale wood and elevated from the ground in case of a typhoon. A solid brick wall separated the narrow courtyard where the children played from the rest of the world. Even so, their shouts and wild games could be heard at both ends of the street, and mixed with the sounds of the vegetable market on the adjacent road. Vendors greeted one another with loud cheers, sharing the latest war news or neighborhood gossip. A man with missing teeth and a large hairy mole on the left side of his neck hacked at sugarcane,

his rusty cleaver cutting each stalk into sections small enough to sell as treats. One stray dog, mottled and mangy, always scrambled through the garbage, seeking any decent scrap for her breakfast. Sometimes Ma and her sisters would throw bits of their *bao zi* to her, but only the fluffy white bun part, never the meat. Sometimes the boys would throw empty tin cans at her. Their cackling laughter followed the poor stray as she fled down the street, tail between her legs, hoping to find a friendlier alley.

When the children grew tired of their games, or when their mother called them in, they slipped around to enter from the back, letting the screen door smack to a close behind them. Then they raced each other down the corridor to the kitchen, pushing to secure a chair, trying not to be one of the ones who had to share. While Ma and the older kids helped their mother to prepare and serve the meal, the others, with heads of black pearl hair, formed a dark crescent around the dining table. They waited as patiently as they could, the rich smells of *ca dou fu* and *ji rou* filling their wide noses. Their tongues, pink and rounded like the tip of an orchid, salivated in anticipation of a similar filling of their little rounded bellies.

Pei-pei, the youngest, didn't bother finding a seat. Instead she tugged gently on the hem of Ma's skirt, and Ma hoisted her baby sister up into her arms. Shifting the girl to one hip, she lifted the dish of salty chicken with her free arm and carried it to the waiting children, whose hungry eyes clamored for it like goldfish waiting for their pellets. After *Pei-pei* selected a piece and held it securely in both of her chubby, grubby hands, Ma set the dish on the table. Her father took his helping, and then the free-for-all began. By the time the last hand retreated back to its own plate, all that was left for Ma and the eldest siblings to eat was rice. They weren't surprised.

Ma became accustomed to sacrificing her wants for the needs of others. Despite holding stable, respectable jobs as a teacher and secretary, her parents could not afford to give all twelve of their children everything they each wanted. So a system of logical priorities developed. Ma's brush-painting lessons were sacrificed for her brothers' university books, her favorite skirts were taken from her closet and put in her sisters' to keep from having to buy new ones, and sometimes her stomach grumbled hungrily so that the youngest children's would not. Ma bore all this with dignity and patience, but she promised herself that if she ever had children, they would want for nothing.

She was a pretty girl, and she turned into a beautiful woman. She had large, round eyes, particularly striking for a Taiwanese girl. And though her figure was small, perhaps a bit too far on the skinny side, her hair was the envy of all her friends—straight, soft, and the purest black, like the dark, vast depths of the Pacific. In class she was respectful and demure, just the way girls were supposed to be, but she almost always knew the right answers. She downplayed her intelligence in public so as not to seem threatening, but she was the one her friends always went to for help, even the boys. She was kind-hearted but a little cool, and her mysterious quietness intrigued her peers. Many a young man offered to walk her home at the end of each day, and most of the time, she let them. To her, there was no harm in letting them think they had a chance, especially if it kept her a little safer.

Then Ma met Ba. The meeting was far from serendipitous; the Taiwanese have always trusted the judgment of their matchmakers far more than the luck of the stars. So they were introduced through a mutual friend, and they sipped tea delicately from porcelain cups and made small talk in the parlor of his parents' house. He was one of the few men who spoke less than she did, and that pleased Ma. His grey sweater vest and

light blue button-up shirt lent him an air of gentle masculinity. She kept shifting her focus from the portrait of his late grandfather to the mysterious little scar on his left ear. Both gave her the sense of being in the company of an old soul.

She was twenty-five, he twenty-four, and though there were no sparks or butterflies, they got along well. He was an engineer, which meant he had a stable job and could provide well. His family was respectable, comfortably middle-class, and they approved of Ma. It wasn't an arranged marriage so much as an accepted one. It wasn't passionate so much as affectionate. But it worked.

When they remained childless for three years, people began to talk. Perhaps Ba's family had made a mistake in their evaluation of Ma. Or maybe she had done something to anger the ancestors and as punishment they had stripped her of her fertility. The rumors were shared with any interested ear, whispered by the same lips that curved into polite smiles whenever Ma or Ba were near. But it didn't bother Ma. She knew she would have a child, because her mother had seen it in a dream.

When Ma was sixteen, her mother had grown sick with fever, and Ma spent all night taking care of her. Once, as she reached over to place a cool wet cloth on her mother's forehead, her mother grabbed her arm and pulled her close. "It's you," her mother whispered. "The ancestors sent me a vision, and it's for you."

She had seen Ma swimming in an ocean of colors, holding a baby and struggling to stay afloat. But the baby squirmed, slipping through Ma's arms, and Ma began to cry. The baby fell into the brilliant waters and sank all the way to the bottom, but there it crawled on the ocean floor, alive and well, while Ma sobbed helplessly. The baby laughed and smiled and explored its new underwater world. Soon the baby came across a

large oyster shell, strangely smooth, and black as night. Laughing with joy, the baby pried the shell open, and inside was a beautiful red ruby in the shape of a heart. Fascinated, the baby took the gem out to play, but as soon as the jewel was in its hands, the baby began to grow, to age into a young woman. And this woman heard her mother, heard Ma's cries from the top of the ocean. She knew she had to go back, but she didn't want to leave the jewel behind. So she swallowed it. And as she kicked to the surface, the gem began to merge into her heart; muscle and stone became one. Then she found Ma and the two embraced, happily reunited. Together they swam for shore.

Even with this vision from the ancestors as reassurance, Ma found it difficult to wait for the inevitable. At twenty-nine, she heard a ticking in the back of her mind, and she knew that time would not stay on her side much longer. Every day she saw small children clinging to their parents in the street, women lovingly holding their babes, and she watched them with wistful jealousy. Many of her brothers and sisters had already produced small broods of their own, and eventually they too joined in the gossip and speculation. Though Ma and Ba both pretended not to know what was being said behind their backs, the weight of that feigned ignorance hung over them at night as they lay in bed together, side by side, staring silently at the ceiling. What if the rumors were right?

Finally, in 1967, Ma missed a period. It was the first time in nearly a decade that she'd shed a tear, and the solitary droplet was quickly brushed away. Ba went directly to temple and thanked the ancestor gods for finally bestowing their blessing. Ma's sisters began to sew mountains of clothing fit for a baby prince, and those whispering lips all exclaimed their congratulations. It was a joyous time.

Four months later, Ba returned to the temple and tearfully asked the ancestors

why they had changed their minds. The smoke from the incense gave him no satisfactory answer, and he watched sorrowfully as it blew away in the wind. After asking humbly for their forgiveness and praying for a return to their favor, Ba rejoined Ma at the hospital where doctors were still monitoring her condition. She'd lost a lot of blood.

The next year, Ma became pregnant again, and this time she too went with Ba to the temple to pray. Though she had never been particularly religious, she closed her eyes, pressed her palms flat against each other, and knelt before the shrine to offer herself as a vessel for the great universe's next child. She promised to love and protect it, and to teach it to be all the things she was not.

Sadly, a few months later she was back in the hospital, and Ba returned to the temple alone.

Her third pregnancy was by far the smoothest and least painful, and both Ma and Ba thought for sure that this was an auspicious sign. However, all their hope bled out with the third miscarriage. When Ba finally got to take Ma home, both were so broken of spirit that neither one had the heart to go through it another time. They agreed not to try anymore, and they never spoke of it again.

So when Ma missed a period early in 1970, she said nothing. She prepared meals, washed clothes, and bought groceries from the morning markets as if nothing had changed. Her small frame barely betrayed her, and she successfully carried her secret in silence for a whole eight months.

Then one evening she was gripped by a sharp discomfort in her stomach. She closed her eyes and thought, *This is it*. Within seconds, she resigned herself to losing her child once again. She'd done it before, and she could do it again. At least this time she

was the only one who would know.

Ba, however, saw the way that she cradled her stomach and squeezed her eyes in pain, and without hesitation or discussion he led her out to the street. He carried a duffel bag and the keys to his brother's motor scooter. Fifteen minutes later they were at the hospital emergency room, where Ba calmly told a nurse that his wife was giving birth.

After a hasty C-section, the midwife handed Ma a tiny, pink-skinned newborn girl. Ma was pale from the operation, and her shiny black hair lay disheveled around her face, but she smiled with such joy as Ba had never seen before. He petted her head fondly and smiled too.

A doctor came in to explain that because the child had been born prematurely, her heart was small and weak. She was in no immediate danger, he assured them, but she might always be frail. Ma knew then that this could not be the daughter of her mother's dream. Still, she was a beautiful baby, and Ma shifted the bundle of cloth to cover her more securely.

Early the next morning, thin rays of sunlight crept into the hospital room and woke Ma. She immediately looked to the cradle on her right, felt her heart stop when she saw it was empty. Then she noticed Ba in the chair in the corner of the room, cradling the infant in his arms. He stood slowly and came to her side. Carefully, he handed the girl over to Ma, then caressed the baby's soft, delicate head.

She watched him as he watched their child. She wondered if he was disappointed that they'd had a daughter rather than a son. Judging by the intense look of adoration on his face—the likes of which she had never seen before—he didn't care at all.

Then she remembered what she'd wanted to know since the moment he'd ushered

her out of their apartment and to the hospital. “How did you know?”

Ba shrugged. “These past few months, you were so much yourself that you were not yourself. It was obvious that you were trying to hide something.” He kept his voice quiet so as not to disturb the child.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Why didn’t you?”

She nodded. “Fair enough.”

They said no more, and spent the afternoon looking at their new daughter.

Ba had said from the start that he wanted to work in the United States, so when Conoco Phillips offered him a job in Houston working on liquefied natural gas, Ma began to pack. Without a word of complaint, she quit her job and bid farewell to her brothers and sisters and friends. Everyone wished her the best, many expressing envy at her good luck. They all agreed that America held the promise and fortune of the future.

Their daughter, however, did not share that view. *Da-xin* was five years old and full of tears. They came out in steady, silent streams that rolled down her young round cheeks. Then Ma said very seriously, “Good girls don’t cry. Good girls appreciate good opportunities,” and the tears stopped.

Conoco Phillips helped the Chens find a small house in the Bellaire area of Houston. There they lived near a number of other Asian immigrants, all educated, all looking for better opportunities than they’d had in their homelands. Complete strangers became fast friends. People who never would have mixed on the other side of the

ocean—Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai—formed one large family, if for no other reason than that here in America, they were suddenly defined in the same way: not American.

All three of the Chens had learned English in school, but grammar and vocabulary lessons were a far cry from their new, inescapable immersion. For the first time in his life, intelligent and capable Ba felt intimidated in the workplace. While his colleagues made jokes and small talk around the water cooler, he sat quietly in his cubicle and buried himself in his work.

For Ma, tasks as simple as grocery shopping became troublesome endeavors. To get anywhere, she had to take a bus, which meant she had to walk to a stop, figure out which busses were coming and whether or not they would take her to where she wanted to go, pay for the ride, and then do it all again on the way back, this time with her arms full of bags. In the grocery store, Ma struggled with products and labels, trying to understand the difference between mayonnaise and sour cream. Frowning, she held a jar in each hand, and she looked from one white cream to the other, not comprehending. A young man in an apron wandered by and asked if she needed any help. She contemplated him as if he were a third jar.

There was also the issue of their names. Ba and Ma had it easy: the conventions of American society named them Mr. and Mrs. Chen. Their daughter, however, was given no title. When she started school and the teacher brutally mispronounced her name, *Da-xin* decided it simply wouldn't do. That day after school, she told her mother about the dilemma.

“I'm the only one, Ma.”

“The only one what?” her mother asked distractedly as she sliced cucumber for their dinner that night.

“The only one whose name the teacher can’t pronounce.” Despite her annoyance, the girl made sure to keep the whine out of her voice. There was no surer way to lose ground with Ma than to whine.

“A new name?” her mother frowned. “What’s wrong with the one we gave you?”

“Nothing, Ma, nothing,” the girl was quick to assure. “I just thought maybe I could take another one. An extra, like a nickname, but in English.”

Pausing the movement of her knife, Ma considered this. After a moment, she nodded. “Yes, I think that would be fine. Maybe even a good idea. To blend in, you know?” She began to chop again. “Just make sure you choose wisely.”

Da-xin could hardly believe it. “You mean I can pick my own?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Oh, thank you!” Delirious with the happy prospect, she thanked her mother profusely, bowing her head several times in rapid succession, and then running off before Ma could change her mind.

All week the girl thought about this momentous decision, considering her options day and night. This would be her new identity. This was the name she would put on every paper, the name her friends—and maybe someday her boyfriends—would call her. This was who she would be for the rest of her life. She found she couldn’t just choose.

On Sundays, when her new schoolmates were at church with their families and couldn’t come out to play, she turned on the black and white television Ba had brought home one evening. He’d bought it used from a coworker, but it was brand new to her.

She was only allowed to watch one hour each day, but sometimes when Ba was still at work and Ma had gone on an errand, she would sneak some extra time. Now she turned the knob, wincing when static exploded across the screen and out of the speakers. She kept the volume low as she searched through the channels, but she stopped when she heard a mesmerizing contralto voice.

*Amazing Grace,
How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost
But now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Da-xin had never heard such a beautiful song. She continued watching until the woman, with tears in her eyes, finished and took her bow. The camera panned to the audience, many of whom were crying as they clapped. As *Da-xin* saw how moved these people were by just those simple lines—not all of which she understood—she felt something stir within herself. Blinking furiously, because good girls didn't cry, she realized that this was the effect she wanted to have on people. She wanted to save them, to find them, to help them see. And so, she named herself Grace.

As months passed, the Chens learned how to melt into the American landscape. They turned themselves from husky lumbering black bears into lithe slinking leopards, blended stealthily and seamlessly in the bustling city thicket. Grace most of all could ensconce her foreignness, because she alone could eliminate her accent. However, both her parents made huge strides in their English-speaking abilities. Soon Mr. Chen was able

to join his peers at the water cooler, and Mrs. Chen saved several dollars each week with the coupons she discussed with the checkout clerk.

At the end of their first year in Houston, Grace had grown a whopping five inches, Ba had secured a small raise in pay, and Ma had news. There would be a fourth Chen to feed, she announced one evening as they were getting ready for bed. Ba nodded and said, "Alright." He was neither pleased nor displeased. In his opinion, they already had their princess, but perhaps they could make room for a little king.

What he didn't know, and what Ma decided not to tell him, was that she was expecting a queen. Already thirty-seven, Ma wasn't likely to bear any more children after this, and she had yet to deliver the girl of her mother's dream, the girl with the ruby heart. No, there would be no son for Mr. Chen to pass his name and fortunes onto, but there would be two very good daughters.

Born under the sign of the tiger, Madeline Chen surprised no one by coming into the world kicking and crying. Many, many years later, Ma would say that the only thing more painful than Madeline's birth was Madeline's insolence, but on this day at the hospital, she glowed with maternal jubilation. With a small movement of the fingers, she beckoned Grace over to look at her new sister. The young girl dutifully obeyed, peering into the blanket that held the wrinkly newborn and pronouncing it a beautiful baby: *hao piao liang*.

Ba sat in the stiff hospital chair in the corner with his arms crossed and his brow lightly creased. Even with such a stern expression, his soft face retained its appearance of youthfulness. A frame of slick black hair was combed around his smooth skin, which had turned pale under his office's florescent lights, their dull illumination no match for the

scorching Taiwanese sun. He steepled his short, thick fingers in front of him and sighed.

Ma knew he was disappointed, but she bounced the baby gently up and down in her arms and cooed at it. “She is an American citizen, you know.”

He knew.

“That means we can stay, right?”

He thought it did.

“Then she is helping us, helping to secure our future.”

Even though she is not a boy. They both were thinking it, but neither spoke the words.

Ba didn't want it to matter. He wanted to love this child, this new part of himself, unconditionally. But he had spent that generosity on Grace, and now the part of him deeply rooted in his cultural traditions and values objected. Though he was a modern man in a modern country, where women had the same rights as men and were exercising them to greater extents every day, Ba needed a son. He needed to be sure that someone could speak for Ma and Grace after he had gone. Could provide for them. Could stand strong and tall, be loud and firm. Could represent the family here in this busy, noisy world, where too many people got lost, buried beneath the tumult. No daughter, he was convinced, no matter how intelligent or well-behaved or able, could do that.

Ma, for reasons not concretely known to even herself, already loved Madeline more than anything else in this world. More than Grace, though she would never say that to anyone, because it was a horrible thing for a mother to think, and she did not want to seem a horrible mother. But she had waited over half her life for this dream child, this jewel of her mother's prophecy. How could she be content with a star when she'd been

promised the heavens?

She understood Ba's misgivings, but Ma knew in her heart that Madeline was destined for greatness. One day this girl would bring such fortune and honor to their family as Ba could never imagine, even from a son. Until then, however, she would have to find a way to keep the girl in Ba's good graces.

From then on, Ma protected Maddy like a fierce mother hen. When the infant cried, Ma took her to the farthest part of the house so that they wouldn't disturb Ba. As she passed through her Terrible Twos and on into childhood, Madeline quickly learned to hide behind her mother's skirts after she did anything wrong. Grace's complaints of pulled hair, stolen toys, and invasion of privacy were all overruled by Ma, who told her that as the oldest sister it was her responsibility to demonstrate patience and forgiveness. Grace received these mandates with a frustrated scowl as Madeline peeked around their mother's waist to stick out her pointed pink tongue. But Grace never ran to Ba with her long list of grievances. She accepted Ma's word as final law, and she was too principled to seek appeals.

Ma's indulgences ran so far as to let Madeline suck her thumb all the way to age seven. Ma had spent years half-heartedly discouraging Madeline from the disgracefully childish and dirty habit, but it wasn't until second grade teacher Mrs. Anderson brought the issue to Mr. Chen's attention that anything serious was done about the matter. After the parent-teacher conference, Ba immediately drove to Chinatown and purchased a bottle of bitter chicken sauce. That night after dinner, he called Madeline into the kitchen

and painted each of her thumbs with a generous amount of the flavoring. She cried, and Ma rushed to her defense, asking if this was really a necessary course of action. Ba just looked at her with a stony expression and said that it was. Ma backed down.

For a while, the sauce seemed to do the trick. Madeline pouted furiously, but the red speckled coating stayed on her thumbs and her thumbs stayed out of her mouth. So, every night after she and Grace had bathed, Madeline met Ba in the kitchen for their new father-daughter ritual: the reapplication of the bitter chicken sauce. What made it even worse for Madeline was that Ba had usurped one of her own paintbrushes to do the evil deed. She seethed at the injustice of it all.

Then one evening, Ba could not find the bottle. As he searched the cabinet for a third time, Madeline tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile. Eyeing her suspiciously, Ba summoned Ma into the kitchen, but she couldn't find the sauce either. They both turned to their youngest daughter.

“Chen Mei-di,” her father began sternly. *“Where is the bottle?”*

Madeline heard the anger in her father's voice and sobered instantly. Her eyes wide, she shook her head. *“I don't know, Ba.”*

Her voice was steady, but he did not believe her. Taking a chopstick and wielding it high in the air, he was about to strike the palm of her pudgy little hand when Ma intervened. Ba sighed and put the chopstick down, but he demanded that Ma purchase another bottle of the sauce when she went to the store the next day.

A week later, that bottle disappeared too. Again Ba interrogated Madeline, and again she said she didn't know. Ma stepped in once more to keep him from punishing the girl, and she volunteered to buy another bottle. Ba accepted this solution one final time.

But when that bottle disappeared as well, and this time before it could even be opened, Ba had had enough. Without any warning, he searched the entire house. He turned up not one, but three glass bottles of chicken sauce. They were stashed on a shelf in Grace's room, hidden behind some of her old textbooks. Ba called both girls into the room. Exhibiting her usual fearlessness, Madeline stood with remarkable composure, while Grace squirmed, made nervous by the possibility of getting in trouble.

Ba pulled out two chairs and had the girls sit straight up facing him. They were not to look at each other, talk to each other, or talk at all, unless he asked them a question. "Is that understood?"

Neither one spoke.

"That was a question," he clarified. "You may answer."

"Understood," the girls said in unison.

"Good." He started with Madeline. "Did you hide these bottles?"

She shook her head.

"Answer with words," he said reproachfully.

"No, Ba. I didn't hide them." She looked quite innocent in her white dress with blue spots. She even had two matching bows holding her hair in pigtails. But Ba knew better. Madeline was no angel.

"So you didn't want to suck your thumb?"

"I did. I do. But I didn't hide the bottles."

"Who did then?"

The girl paused. She tried to glance at her older sister for help, but Ba blocked her face with his hand. "Don't look at Grace. I'm asking you, not her. Who hid the bottles if

it wasn't you?"

Petulantly, Madeline stuck her chin up. "I don't know."

Ba put his hand back down. "Very well." He turned to Grace. "Did you hide the bottles?"

Her eyes looked around the room wildly, avoiding his, but she didn't answer.

"I don't think it was you, Grace, but Madeline says it wasn't her, and I know it wasn't your mother, and I know it wasn't me. That leaves only one person."

"Or a spirit!" Madeline chimed in helpfully.

Ba turned. "A spirit?"

Madeline nodded vigorously, thinking herself quite clever. "Maybe the spirit wants to be my friend, so he was trying to help me."

Ba shook his head. "Spirits are serious creatures. They guide us to uphold the honor of the family. They do not bother with girls who suck their thumbs." He returned to his inquisition of Grace. "So it wasn't Madeline, Ma, me, or a spirit. Again, that leaves only you. Tell me now that you did it, and for your honesty, I will forgive you. After all, you were just trying to do your sister a favor, right?"

Again, Grace held her tongue. She couldn't bear to lie and take the blame, but at the same time, she didn't want to get her sister in trouble. She knew her father would be hard on Madeline.

"This is a limited time offer," he said, imitating the advertisements he had heard on the radio. "Speak now or forever hold your peace."

Torn though she was, Grace opted for the latter.

Disappointed in them both, Ba shook his head. "Alright then, you leave me no

choice.” He retrieved a thick bamboo stick that neither of the girls had noticed leaning against the wall. “Stand up,” he said to Grace.

Her eyes grew large with fear. “Ba...”

“No, it is too late for you to speak now. You should have said something when I asked.” He grabbed her and positioned her in front of him. She was facing Madeline now, and the two girls stared at each other in horror. Grace’s eyes filled with tears, but she bit her lip and closed them and braced herself for the spanking.

Ba pulled back and prepared to hit his beloved favorite daughter for the first time in his life. He took a deep breath to steady himself and then swung his arm forward. There was a sickeningly palpable silence as the bamboo rod arced through the air.

“No!”

The stick halted mere inches from Grace’s bottom.

Both Grace and Ba turned to look at Madeline, who had covered her eyes with her hands. Her knees were pulled up to her chest so she sat in an upright fetal position. Her head bent forward and her silky pigtails hung by the sides of her face. Her voice came out as a quiet squeak from within the cave of her body. “It was me,” she confessed.

Ba exhaled slowly, making sure neither girl could hear his relief. He didn’t think he would have had the heart to go through with it, but he was glad Madeline hadn’t called his bluff.

“I hid the bottles in Grace’s room,” she continued apologetically. “I was desperate. The sauce is so gross! I thought you’d just give up when it kept disappearing.” She sniffled. “It’s not Grace’s fault. Please don’t hit her.”

Ba motioned for Grace to go, and she fled the room as quickly as she could. A

few tears of gratitude threatened to escape, but she wiped them away with the sleeve of her blouse. She knew Ma was still out visiting a friend, so she sought comfort in a different embrace. Though she hadn't done this in years, she quickly scrambled under the piano and backed herself up against the stems of the pedals. There, she felt safe.

From this alcove on the other end of the house, Grace heard the door to her room close. Then came three sharp *whacks*, and three soft accompanying cries. The door opened and closed again, and Grace saw Ba walk into his bedroom. She waited a moment before getting up from her place beneath the grand piano, and then she tread softly back down the hall.

When Grace entered her room, Madeline was in the same curled up position as before, but now she was sitting on the floor instead of the chair. The bamboo rod was propped in a corner, its end split into five or six bands. Grace pulled her sister up so that they were both on the edge of her springy twin bed, and she hugged the little girl tight. As she soothingly pet Madeline's hair, tears soaked the front of her shirt, but neither of them said a thing.

After that day, Madeline stopped sucking her thumb, Ba threw the bottles of chicken sauce away, and no one mentioned the incident again.

For as long as she could remember, answers came easily to Grace. She won the spelling bee all three years of middle school. In classes she raised her hand so often that teachers were forced to stop calling on her just to give other students a chance. In eighth grade she took the SATs and qualified to participate in the Johns' Hopkins programs for

talented youth. Parents, particularly those of the competitive Asian variety, would ask their children, “How did Grace do on that test? What did Grace get on this assignment?” While these inquiries flattered Grace, they also worried her. Luckily none of her friends seemed to hold her successes against her, blaming instead the unfair, unreasonable, un-American expectations of their immigrant parents.

At the end of eighth grade, there was always a big post-graduation dance, and for once Grace wanted to attend. Contrary to Ma’s proud belief and Ba’s unwarranted relief, Grace was not immune to the “love-bugs” that bit all of her thirteen-year-old girl friends. The boy of her dreams was Jason Goldberg, whose comically orange hair stuck out in any crowd. He had a reputation for being arrogant and relying on bathroom humor, but from sitting beside him every day in Spanish class, Grace knew he had a sensitive side as well. When Señora Ana wasn’t looking, he wrote love poems to his girlfriend, a freshman in high school, and he sketched pictures of her lips and hands and hair. Jason also had the most incredible eyes Grace had ever seen: their color was as rich as the clear aquamarine waters of the Cancún coast, which Grace had only ever seen in pictures in the Mexico section of their textbook.

The dance would be the last time Grace would probably ever see Jason again. Unlike most of her classmates, she would not be attending Lamar High School in the fall. Ma was insistent that Grace transfer to Bellaire instead. Not only was it fifteen minutes closer to home, but it had also been named the best public high school in the city. “And we came to this country for the best,” Ma reminded her.

Grace’s friends were probably more upset by this than she was. When she broke the news at their lunch table one day, Sandra cried so much that they were both excused

from their P.E. period so that Grace could console her in the locker room. As her best friend's tears fell onto her standard issue gym shorts, Grace assured her that it wouldn't be so bad. They'd still see each other every Saturday for Chinese school. Frankly, she thought Sandra was overreacting. After all, Grace had picked up and started over once before. At least this time she was only crossing town, not an ocean.

After the graduation ceremony, Grace went home with Sandra, whose ABC parents—American-born Chinese—allowed her to buy short, sparkly tank tops from the Limited Too. The girls spent the afternoon trying on outfits, throwing rejected items onto a pile on the floor. An hour later Grace finally settled on a long, fluttery, powder blue tunic that made her feel like a modern-day princess. Sandra tried to convince her to match it with a dark blue mini-skirt, but Grace's conservative tastes had her clinging to the grey dress slacks she'd worn to graduation. Shaking her head, Sandra relented and moved on to makeup.

When they arrived at the school cafeteria a few hours later, Grace wished she hadn't been so stubborn. She was the only girl in the whole crepe-papered place not wearing a skirt or dress. Sandra fit right in with her cranberry-colored velvet halter top and white sarong. When Grace froze in the entryway Sandra grabbed her by the arm and pulled her inside. "I did not give you a two-hour makeover just so you could chicken out now!"

The cafeteria had been converted into the administrators' idea of a dance hall, which made the students question if their faculty and staff had ever been young before. Still folded up and rolled out of the way for graduation, lunch tables lined the room, but now the stiff chairs parents had endured for all one hundred minutes of the ceremony

were gone. In their wake, chintzy streamers draped from the high ceiling, and a disco ball hung directly over the center of the floor. Grace and Sandra were overwhelmed by scent of lemon, left behind by the cleaner used on the floor. Like most school cafeterias, this one served as an auditorium as well, and on the stage where just hours ago Grace had given a speech as an officer in the National Junior Honor Society, Assistant Principal Woods was deejaying. Colorful dancehall lights swept across the dome of his bald head, lit up the suit jacket he was still wearing from earlier and the jeans he now had on underneath.

For an hour and a half he played all the popular hits from the past decade: Olivia Newton John's "Physical," the Bee Gees' "You Should be Dancing," Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," and that song from *Flashdance*. Most students shuffled awkwardly across the linoleum, boys trying to get closer to their dance partners but afraid to seem fresh, girls wanting to maintain a respectable distance. Seven young men in slacks and pressed shirts asked Sandra to dance, and each time Grace would nod and push her out onto the dance floor. She watched from the safety of the punch bowl as her best friend turned and twisted and thoroughly enjoyed herself. Sandra even rested her head on the shoulder of one young man, whose hands then slowly wandered down to her lower back. He stopped there, too scared of crossing the line to risk the ground he'd already gained, but his friends still grinned and winked, giving him thumbs-ups from the sidelines.

Despite their audience, Grace wished she and Jason were the ones dancing so closely. She sipped from her sixth cup of punch and tried to subtly scan the room for him. Normally his shock of red hair was like a quick and convenient homing beacon, but in the jumble of dimness and colorful spotlights, he was a little bit harder to find. Finally she

saw him near the exit hugging one of his friends goodbye. At first Grace's breathing halted in panic because she thought Jason was leaving and that would be it, the end of their nonexistent story. But his friend walked out the door, and he returned to the dance floor.

"Alright, boys and girls," Mr. Woods said into the microphone. All night he'd been purposely lowering his voice to try to sound like a hip night-time radio host. Instead he just reminded everyone of Mrs. Corbitt, the ancient school nurse who had long white nose hair and carried a pack of Virginia Slims in her coat pocket. "This is the last dance," he intoned.

Grace's eyes went wide with fear. In just three minutes the song would be over, students would collect their purses and blazers, and parents were probably already waiting in the circle drive to take their sons and daughters home. Jason would get in the passenger seat of his father's Lexus and roll out of her life forever. He had no reason to remember as anything other than the girl who sat next to him in Spanish, and even that would fade soon enough. She now had two minutes and fifty-five seconds to keep from being a mere photo in a dusty yearbook on an overlooked shelf.

Another twenty seconds passed before she worked up the nerve to walk up to him. "Excuse me," she said, but he didn't hear her over the warbling Bee Gees. He only turned because he'd felt her light tapping on his shoulder.

"Oh, hey, Grace." His voice was still in the between stage, and Grace remembered the time it cracked when he was giving his oral presentation about the Dominican Republic. He'd looked past her then, staring straight at the wall, just like he was looking past her now, scanning the room as he spoke. "How's it going?"

“Do you—” She squeezed her eyes shut. She’d never felt so lost before. She didn’t like not knowing the answer. “Do you want to dance with me?” she finally blurted. Fearfully, Grace opened her eyes to check the aftermath.

Jason merely stared at her with surprised. “Oh, dude,” he sputtered, his voice going trill for a second. “I mean, sure, I guess I could.”

Two minutes and thirty seconds remained. Grace stepped awkwardly forward. Jason was about to do the same when the sound of his name caused both of them to turn. Just inside the entrance to the cafeteria stood Kathy Kilduff, Jason’s girlfriend from Duchesne Academy. Her silver stilettos and strappy black dress made Grace feel the way she had when as a toddler she’d tried to go into the big kids’ pool and everyone had laughed at her bright orange floaties.

Jason half-turned his head, speaking to Grace without taking his eyes off Kathy. “Hey, sorry, dude. I promised my girlfriend the last dance if she came.”

“Oh, of course,” Grace said, but Jason was already walking away. She watched as he grabbed Kathy around the waist and spun her in a circle in the air, both of them laughing and looking into each other’s eyes.

Sandra, who’d been watching while she danced with a nice blond-haired boy, excused herself and went to her best friend. “Excuse me, miss. May I have this dance?”

Grace shook her head. “Thanks anyway.”

Sandra lay her temple on Grace’s shoulder in sympathy. Sighing, Grace rested her cheek on her friend’s lilac-scented hair, and that was the end of her middle school career.

Grace wasn't the only one leaving her friends behind that year. At the same time that her big sister was consulting a map, orienting herself to the 3,000-person Bellaire High, Madeline sat pouting in the main office at River Oaks Elementary, arms folded across her Smurfs sweatshirt. On either side of her were Ma and Ba, talking with Principal O'Leary about their daughter's urgent need to skip the fourth grade.

"She is not being challenged," Ma said firmly. She hadn't slept the night before, rehearsing her arguments in her head, going over the sentences in English. "My daughter can do more difficult things than practice her cursive letters on a lined tablet."

Principal O'Leary looked up from the papers in the manila file folder that lay open on his lap. "Several teachers say that Madeline is quiet and withdrawn in class."

"Because she is bored," Ma insisted. She turned to Ba for support. He nodded. She gave a quick *tsh* before continuing, "Mister Principal, Maddy is a good student. She turns in her homework on time, she gets good grades, and she is well-behaved. We know that she is mature enough to handle the jump. And Ms. Abrams agrees."

Ms. Judith Abrams was a middle-aged woman with a tightly screwed face who taught math and science to fifth graders. Madeline had been a member of several of Ms. Abrams After-School classes—a program started to help care for children whose parents couldn't pick them up when school let out at 3:30 p.m. Since Ba didn't get off work until 5 p.m., Maddy took two of these classes each day, just as Grace had done. Remembering Grace's intelligence and good manners, Ms. Abrams had taken immediately to Madeline, whose solitary nature endeared her even more to the spinster. When Ms. Abrams had praised the girl exceedingly on the one afternoon Ma had accompanied Ba to retrieve Madeline from school, Ma realized that this was the woman she'd been looking for.

“Mister Principal, when we first asked you about this for Grace six years ago, you said that the rules required willing parents, willing student, and willing teacher to sponsor. This time we have all three.”

O’Leary sighed. He was a firm believer in childhood. A boy at heart, and with two teenage sons of his own, he knew too well how quickly time could pass. He’d never understood why anyone would want to rush life even more. But now, here they were, in his office, asking him for just that. At least it was only a year, he told himself. At least she wasn’t going to college.

“Alright,” he acquiesced with a shrug of his broad shoulders. “She can start in Ms. Abrams class tomorrow.”

“Perfect,” Ma said graciously. “Thank you very much.” She and Ba stood to shake hands with O’Leary. “This is what is best for our daughter, and that is all we want.”

“Then I’m glad I can help.”

He led the family through the short hallway to the front of the administrative offices. After saying their goodbyes, Ma took a peppermint from the glass bowl on the secretary’s counter. She handed it to her daughter as Ba led the way to the car.

“Be happy, Maddy,” Ma said, beaming as she opened the Corolla’s back door. “Tomorrow you will be a big girl. You will start class with the fifth graders.”

Madeline looked out the window as they drove away. Tomorrow she would return to this white building with its green trim and giant wooden doors, but it would be a totally different place, as foreign to her as the jungles of Africa, but hopefully not as fierce.

Lunch periods were assigned by grade. Kindergarten ate at 11:30 a.m. First grade followed at 11:45 a.m., second at 12:00 p.m., and so on. By the time fifth graders got in the lunch line at 12:45 p.m., the youngest three groups had already left, the third graders were throwing away their brown paper sacks, and the fourth graders had just started on their jello. Maddy let several of her classmates cut ahead of her while she scanned the cafeteria for her friends. She spotted them at a table in the middle of the room, a cluster of black heads, but none of them noticed her standing against the wall with its peeling eggshell paint, waving desperately. Crestfallen, Madeline melted back into the line.

Upon entering the serving room, she got a tray and slid it across the ridged metal counter, pausing at each station to let the lunch ladies drop portions of pizza, green beans, and red jello into the appropriate compartments. She selected a carton of chocolate milk to drink. When she handed the cashier her lunch program ID, the dark fleshy woman asked, “Why the long face, sugah?” She swiped the card and handed it back to Madeline.

Not understanding the expression, Madeline replied in earnest, “No one ever told me it should be shorter.”

The lunch lady just laughed.

Madeline carried her tray out to the eating area and tried to find a place to sit. Even if she’d been allowed to rejoin her fourth grade friends, there was no room next to them. Instead she chose a spot at the far end of the last fifth grade table. Her friends were facing away from her, and she sat with her back to them. This way they wouldn’t see her sitting alone and she wouldn’t see them laughing and blowing bubbles in their milk without her.

She was pushing the green beans around with the tines of her metal fork when a redhead with white ribbon in her hair asked to sit next to her. Maddy looked up at the girl's round green eyes and freckle-spattered face. She was so focused on the girl's carrot-like coloring that she forgot to reply. The newcomer asked again, "Is this seat taken?"

Maddy glanced around. The closest person was Bobby Ehmer, clear on the other side of the table. She wondered if this girl was making fun of her for being the new kid. But Freckles, as Maddy started thinking of her, just stood there holding her scratched up plastic tray and waiting for an answer.

Madeline shook her head. She scooted over a little—even though she was the only one on the very end of the otherwise unoccupied bench—and Freckles sat down next to her. "Cool," Freckles said.

Madeline watched as Freckles unfolded her napkin and used it to wipe off each of her utensils. Then Freckles held her slice of pizza down with one hand and daintily picked off all the sausage bits with the other. When she finished, she pulled a moist towelette from the pocket of her denim overalls and used it to clean her fingers. After taking a bite of the denuded pizza, she noticed Madeline's puzzled expression and laughed. She finished chewing and swallowed before she spoke. "I don't like germs and I don't eat meat."

Madeline still looked at her as if she had two heads.

"You're a friendly one, aren't you?" Freckles said, but she didn't sound offended. "Aw, man! I got the wrong kind of milk." She picked up the carton and frowned at the skinny white cow on its side. "Do you like skim? I'll trade you."

Madeline hated skim, but she nodded. She probably wouldn't have drunk hers anyway. She had no appetite that day.

"Thanks a bunch!" Freckles swapped her milk for Madeline's. She split the top of the carton and pushed back on the two flaps, opening a diamond-shaped hole. Taking care with the wrapper, she uncovered the straw and stuck it in. Thick brown liquid wormed its way up the semi-clear tube and into her little pink mouth. "Delicious! Chocolate milk is the best." She beamed at Madeline.

Madeline didn't say a word.

"We could be friends, you know. I mean, if you talked ever." She paused. "Don't you want friends?"

Madeline still didn't answer.

"Do you want me to just leave you alone?" Freckles asked.

Before she could reply, two girls sat down across from them. Madeline recognized them as Sally and Rachel Meyer, supposedly the most popular girls in fifth grade. Fraternal twins, they were nearly identical, the only difference being that Sally had blond hair and Rachel brown. They shared the same bright cobalt eyes.

"Hey, Julia," they said unison. Now Madeline knew Freckles' real name. "Who's this?" Sally asked with intimidating interest.

As they tore her apart with their eyes, Maddy thought about the way Bambi and the other deer had glared at each other when they were fighting over Feline. She didn't know what she'd done to anger them like that, but she wasn't interested enough in Freckles' friendship to come to blows, literal or not.

"I have to go wipe the tables," she mumbled, rising with her tray of uneaten food.

“It’s alphabetical, and I’m a C.”

As she hastily made her retreat, she thought she heard Freckles saying, “So she *can* talk!”

After lunch, Madeline spent the whole of recess sketching under the shade of an oak tree. She’d snuck some computer paper out from the lab when no one was looking, and now she tore off the perforated edges to make her clean canvas. Watching her classmates closely, she captured them with her dull No. 2 pencil. Her eyes traced the arcs of their movements and her hand transferred these motions to paper with swift sweeps of the wrist. For twenty minutes she drew without looking down. When she was done, she bent her head to inspect her work.

Though there were no heads or hands in the picture, Madeline could see each person clearly in the crush of lines she’d impressed upon the page. The squiggle in the center was Catie straining to reach the next monkey bar. On the far left, a fat arc showed Ryan pushing the four-square ball to Mercy. In the bottom right corner, bouncing lines and circles imitated Teo and Eric playing leapfrog in the grass.

Later in art class Madeline would paint in oil pastel over these avant-garde representations, adding some color and clarity to the scene. Much later, years later, this piece would be labeled “Playground sketch #1” and sell for two hundred dollars from a gallery in San Francisco. For now, Madeline tucked it carefully into a pocket of her Lisa Frank folder.

Ms. Abrams always gave a five-minute warning before the end of recess, that way

anyone who needed to use the little boys' or little girls' rooms could do so without being late to class. Although Madeline had no need to relieve herself, having thrown away Freckles' skim milk without even opening it, she decided to go to the bathroom to wash her hands. They were smudged with pencil lead and dirt, and she didn't want to accidentally get either of those on her face.

In the bathroom, she clamped her folder to one side with her elbow and stuck her pencil in her mouth. Using her free hand, she turned on the faucet and reached for the soap. Goopy pink gel dripped onto her palm. She pushed it through her fingers and lathered her skin, then let the running water whisk the dirtied bubbles down the drain. As she turned to find paper towels, the pencil slipped out of her mouth and rolled across the floor, under a stall door. "Man," Madeline whined as she went to retrieve it.

The graffiti-ridden door had just swung to a close behind her when three girls entered the bathroom. Concealed within the stall, Madeline could only hear their voices, but she recognized them instantly: Freckles, along with Sally and Rachel Meyer. She bent to pick up the pencil, and to peek through the crack between the door and the stall wall.

Rachel and Sally went immediately to the sink with the cleanest mirror, splitting it so that each of them could examine their reflections. Sally tugged at one of her hair elastics to re-braid the left side, and Rachel pulled out cherry chapstick to apply to her puckered lips. Looking bored, Freckles leaned against the wall, one sneaker lying flat against the vertical tiles like a ballerina in *passé*.

"Hey, Sal, don't you think that new girl's kind of pretty?" Rachel asked her sister too loudly to be natural.

Sally scoffed. "No way! With those slanty eyes and flat face? You're kidding."

“But her hair’s so perfect,” Rachel offered without much conviction.

“Eh,” Sally said with a shrug. “It’s okay. I like yours better.”

“Aw, thanks, Sal.”

The blonde nodded, twisting her elastic back around her new plait. “And I mean, if you’re going to have dark hair, it’s way better not to have brown eyes. That’s just so boring, you know?”

“I guess.” Rachel pretended to look conflicted. “Well, even if she’s not that pretty, she could still be nice. Right?”

Sally shrugged. They both turned to the third girl in their trio. “What do you think, Julia?”

Madeline waited for the onslaught. She held her breath and waited for Freckles— Julia—to tell them what a weirdo she was, how she barely talked at lunch, how she’d spent all of recess drawing crazy lines under a tree.

Instead, Julia said, “I think she’s nice and I want y’all to leave her alone.” Her tone indicated that there was no room for negotiation.

Sally and Rachel gaped in disgusted disbelief. Madeline was just as surprised.

“Sometimes you are so not fun,” Rachel sneered. Shaking their heads and whispering to themselves, the twins left. Madeline watched their baby blue Keds disappear before she dared to exit the stall.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

Julia turned to her and smiled. “She speaks again!”

For some reason, Madeline felt nervous, like she should be grateful to this girl. Head down, she dug at the toe of one shoe with the toe of the other.

Chuckling, Julia stepped forward and put her arm around Madeline's shoulder. "Look, I know you skipped a grade and all. Ms. Abrams told us. So you're probably missing your friends, right?"

Madeline didn't look up, but she nodded in reply.

"Well, you can either miss them all year, or you can make friends with people in our class. People like me."

When Madeline's eyes met Julia's, they looked almost sorrowful. "I don't think Sally and Rachel will like that."

"Yeah, well, tough noogies. My mom is their mom's big sister, so I don't really care what they think." She flashed another grin at Madeline, who noticed that her teeth were pleasantly imperfect, like a jagged row of tiny eggs. Suddenly she felt like she could trust this freckle-faced girl. So she nodded, and Julia said, "Good," and the two of them returned to class to sit next to each other during their geography lesson.

Julia Watson was unlike anything Madeline had ever known. Apart from the red hair and vegetarianism, Freckles, as Madeline still sometimes called her, had four older brothers, a swimming pool, and a big shaggy dog that jumped on everyone. Piercings were strictly forbidden by Ma, but Julia had two in each ear. She ate her favorite foods, pizza or Kraft macaroni and cheese, for lunch and sometimes even dinner. She wore two-piece swimsuits. She shaved her legs. Julia's whole life was a treasure trove of the American youth lifestyle denied to Madeline, and it fascinated her.

The first time Madeline went to Julia's house in Piney Point, she gaped at each of

the magnificent homes in turn. Their landscaped lawns and stonework facades blurred into one long line of elegance, reminding her of the perfect row of Radio City Rockettes kicking in their Christmas television special. Mrs. Watson's Lexus stopped in front of a two-story colonial house with great big columns and a fountain on the front lawn. Past that were matching wicker rocking chairs on the porch, crystal chandeliers inside, and a clear blue swimming pool in the backyard. Madeline was pretty sure she'd seen this stuff in magazines at the dentist's office, but somehow the three-dimensionality made it seem even less real than those thin glossy pages.

Slipping across the marble floors, the girls played tag with Julia's youngest brothers Mark and Sheldon until Ma called to say Ba was on his way to pick Madeline up. Then, so she wouldn't have to go home, Mark suggested they play hide-and-seek. As Sheldon ran for the laundry room and Julia squeezed into the space behind the grandfather clock, Mark took Madeline's hand and led her into the pantry. When they heard Ba's voice politely insisting to Mrs. Watson that she find his daughter so he could take her home for dinner, Madeline rose from her seat on an unopened bag of rice.

"Wait," Mark whispered.

"I have to go," she said.

Eleven years old and gawky, he found himself struggling for words that would convey enough but not too much. "I want you to stay."

Madeline suddenly felt too warm, but not in an entirely uncomfortable way. "I can't," she apologized. "But don't worry, I'll be back."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

He let her go. He waited a few minutes before following her out of the pantry. By then she was already walking to a car with her father. He watched her so intently through the window that he didn't notice Julia until she stood directly beside him.

"Hey!" he said, jumping back in surprise. She raised an eyebrow at him. "What are you looking at?" he asked defensively, scowling at her.

"Funny," she said. "That's what I was going to ask you."

By the end of middle school, Madeline thought of Julia as her sister more than Grace. Certainly they had more in common. They wore the same denim jackets, did their hair in the same high side ponytail, even shared the same lip gloss and nail polish in Molly Ringwold pink. Only Ma held Madeline back from being a total Julia clone. She still had to attend Chinese school every Saturday morning, still couldn't go to concerts or co-ed private parties or stay the night at anyone's house. For some reason, Madeline didn't resent these handicaps as much as the physical ones, the differences that distinguished her from Julia. While her best friend had grown to be a very curvy five feet and six inches, Madeline's body still looked pretty much the same as it had the day they'd met in fifth grade. Frustrated, stunted, she blamed her shortness and her flatness and her inability to tan on her mother, and these she considered far worse than her 9:30 p.m. curfew.

The fact that boys overlooked her but practically drooled at Julia's feet would have bothered Madeline more if it weren't for Mark. With awkwardly long limbs and shaggy auburn hair that fell across his forehead into his eyes, he hardly looked like the prince Madeline had dreamed up in conversations with her best friend, but still he ended up with the part. Three years after that afternoon in the pantry, she was in eighth grade

and he was a sophomore in high school, but he finally acted on the feelings he'd had for Madeline since that first day in his house and he asked her to be his girlfriend. Though her parents had forbidden her from dating until she went to college, Madeline thought about the flowers, starlight, and passionate kissing she'd seen in movies and said yes. Keeping it a secret, from everyone except Julia, only made it that much more romantic.

Every day after school Mrs. Watson picked Madeline and Julia up from their middle school, then swung by St. John's School for Mark and Sheldon. Squeezed between her best friend and her boyfriend in the back seat, Madeline would slip her hand to meet Mark's in the space between her leg and his. His skin was always shockingly warm, shooting feeling up through the nerves on her fingertips and into her whole body. Once while she was supposed to be doing homework with Julia, she snuck down to the pantry to meet Mark for their first kiss. And even though Madeline returned with Diet Cokes for both of them, Julia knew from her friend's pink cheeks, dazed eyes, and nervous but happy grin. "Just don't tell me what kind of kisser he is, okay? I mean, it's my brother."

One by one the Watson family found out about Mark and Madeline. Sheldon figured it out from all their poorly concealed flirtations, and his only comment was, "Ew. She's like a sister, man." Mrs. Watson caught them holding hands on the sofa one afternoon when they were watching Beverly Hills Cop III with Julia. Naturally she told Mr. Watson. The two oldest Watson boys were already in college and therefore could have cared less about their baby brother's Chinese friend, as long as no boys were sniffing around their baby sister.

Mrs. Watson agreed to keep the relationship a secret from Ma, patting Madeline's

hand and saying, “I understand, honey. Your mother just wouldn’t get it. Love isn’t a part of her culture.” Madeline smiled and nodded, but inside she wondered what Mrs. Watson meant. A culture without love? A culture that belonged to her mother but not her? Madeline was quiet on the car ride home that afternoon, thinking over all the possibilities, and Ba noticed. He wasn’t one for subtlety, but he kept his hands on the steering wheel and his eyes on the road while he talked. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, Ba.”

“School’s fine?”

“Yes, Ba.”

“And you’re physically well?”

“Yes, Ba.”

“Nothing happened?”

“No, Ba.”

His brows furrowed into a V, his trademark of puzzlement. “Then why aren’t you talking? Usually you’re a regular chatterbox.”

Madeline pursed her lips for a moment, giving her the look of a troubled child rather than the burgeoning adolescent she was. “Ba, do Taiwanese people love?”

The light they were approaching turned red and, surprised by her question, Ba stopped a little more abruptly than he’d intended to. They both jolted forward slightly, and then back against their seats. He turned to look at her. “What do you mean?”

“Just what I said: do Taiwanese people love?”

He shook his head. “What a silly question. Of course they do. Everyone does. Your mother and I tell you and your sister all the time how proud of you we are.”

“Yeah, but that’s pride, Ba. What about love?”

“Pride is a part of love.” He continued before she could protest. “Yes, yes, we love you.”

“Then how come you never say it?”

“Don’t we?” He frowned. “I suppose it’s just not in our nature. Growing up in Taiwan, we did not hear or say these things in our family. We talked of duty and respect, and more importantly, we showed them. That’s how mothers and fathers and daughters and sons love.”

“And husbands and wives?”

He paused. The light turned green. Ba stepped on the gas and slowly accelerated into a left turn. “Respect and duty are important in marriage too,” he replied.

Madeline still wasn’t satisfied. “Do you love Ma?”

The Corolla stopped again, and they were home. “Go inside,” Ba said. “That’s enough of these foolish questions today.”

Eventually Madeline started to feel guilty about deceiving her family, particularly her mother, who would certainly care most out of the three. Madeline had learned long ago, thanks to some bitter chicken sauce, the importance of honesty. Plus, how hard-hearted could her mother be? Like Ba said, Ma loved her, and so Ma should be able to forgive her for breaking the dating rule. Forgiveness, like pride, was a part of love. And unlike what Mrs. Watson had said, Ma could understand. After all, she had chosen to come to this country, had lived here for nearly fifteen years already. She bought Omaha steak and drank Florida orange juice. Surely she had taken in some of the American mindset along with those meals.

One morning Madeline woke up earlier than usual, beating Grace to the cheerfully yellow bathroom that they shared. She quickly brushed her straight white teeth and dressed for the school day. Grace tapped her foot impatiently on the other side of the door. “Geez, what are you doing in there? Putting on a new face or something?”

“I’m not the one who needs it!” Madeline retorted loudly. She emerged a moment later, smelling like zesty Crest toothpaste, with stray droplets of water still clinging to her hair from a hasty face wash. “It’s all yours.”

She hurried into the kitchen, where Ma was putting soft white *bao zi* into Ziploc bags, two each for her and Grace’s lunch. “Good morning,” she greeted her mother in Mandarin.

“Morning,” Ma replied. She reached for the pear slices she’d just cut and placed them into small round Tupperware. The blue lids felt smooth against her hands, and they snapped into place with a secure *chikh*. “You’re up early.”

“Yeah.” Like her father, Madeline wasn’t one to beat around the bush. “I wanted to talk to you, actually.”

“Oh? About what? Is there a problem at school?”

“No, Ma, school’s fine.”

“Are you sick?”

“No, Ma, I’m fine.”

She folded the tops of their brown lunch bags. “Then what is it?”

Madeline took a deep breath. “I like a boy.”

Ma turned around very slowly. Her expression was alive with emotion—surprise, anger, concern—but her body moved as if just waking from a deep sleep. “No.”

“No?” Madeline echoed dumbly. “What do you mean ‘no’?”

“I mean, no. No boy, no dating. Not yet. You’re too young.”

“I’m almost thirteen! Julia had her first boyfriend when she was eleven.”

“Too young. Julia is not my daughter, but you are. I said no, and that’s final.”

Considering the matter settled, she started to clean up her work area. Intending to wash it, she picked up the knife she’d used to cut the fruit and used it to sweep peels off the cutting board and into the palm of her hand.

“That’s not fair!” Madeline protested, her hands balling into fists. “Don’t you even want to know who he is?”

“No!” Ma stabbed the knife into the cutting board. Grace gasped, and that was when they noticed her and Ba standing in the hallway watching them. Ma took a long breath to steady herself, pushed up the sleeves of her housecoat, and carefully extracted the knife. She set it on the counter. “Go. It is time for school.”

Seething with frustration, Madeline snatched the lunch sacks. “I hate you,” she muttered as she stormed past her father and sister.

Wide-eyed, Grace stared at her mother to see what she would do. But Ba started for the car, and Ma merely shoed the girl with her hand, telling her to follow. “Don’t be late.”

Nodding, Grace complied.

For the second time that week, Madeline was abnormally quiet in the car, but neither Ba nor Grace asked her about what had happened. The girls went to school and their father went to work. When they all arrived home for dinner, no mention was made of the incident that morning. Instead, they all lifted the rice and soft green *cai cai* to their

mouths and chewed. The click of chopsticks against the porcelain bowls was the loudest sound for the rest of the night.

Meanwhile, with Grace in her senior year at Bellaire, the college application process staged a coup d'état in the Chen household. Grace began to receive more mail than her parents, slick pamphlets about universities and loans and the benefits of joining the military. She took the SAT test, ending up with a perfect score on her second try. She worked late into the night to perfect her personal statement, finishing all of her applications two months before their deadlines. For several weekends Ba accompanied Grace on visits to brand name colleges around the country, leaving Ma to care of Madeline by herself. The first time they left, to see Harvard and MIT, Ma came into Madeline's room after midnight and crawled under the covers beside her.

Madeline hadn't spoken to her mother in several days, not since the incident in the kitchen. She was tempted to ignore her still now, but curiosity got the best of her. "Ma, what are you doing?" Her voice was laden with sleepiness and irritation.

"Nothing," her mother replied, smoothing the blankets over their two bodies. "Just sleep."

"I am sleeping!"

"Good. Okay, good night."

Madeline shook her head. "No, I'm sleeping, but you're interrupting."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Well, be a good girl and close your eyes and sleep."

Exasperated, Madeline sat up and glared at her mother. In the darkness, the look had little effect. "Ma!"

There was silence, and as her eyes adjusted, Madeline could see her mother's

head settled peacefully onto the extra pillow. Only a quirk in the corner of her lips gave away any sense of desolation.

“I can’t fall asleep by myself,” Ma finally said. “The room is too empty.”

Madeline realized that her parents had never been apart since coming to this country, not for a full day. Sighing, she lay back down and wrapped her arm around her mother. “Good night, Ma.”

“Good night.”

Three

After a few weeks, the newly enlarged household found its rhythm. Ma woke before anyone else, preparing breakfast for herself and her daughters in the dim blue light of pre-dawn. Then while she and Grace ate in the alcove off the kitchen, Jack would come downstairs, retrieve his keys and briefcase from his office, and depart without a word to either woman. After breakfast, Grace grabbed Poptarts for Evan and drove him to school. Sometime before noon, Madeline slunk sleepily from her room and spent the day indifferently chaperoning her mother. They shopped, strolled, and visited old friends, which was by far Madeline's least favorite activity as it required her to be social. Whenever her aunties remarked on how lucky she'd been with her art career, how good she was to her mother, or how skinny she'd become, Madeline had to smile politely and nod her head in deference. She would have much preferred Jack's routine.

One morning in early March, Madeline woke early enough to join her mother and sister for breakfast. "Well, look what cat carried in," Ma said dryly. But she used a spatula to scrape half of her scrambled eggs and a quarter of Grace's onto a clean plate. This she set in front of Madeline, who had already taken a seat beside her sister in the alcove.

By now the sun had just risen above the horizon, sending beams of pale gold between the women, sisters on one side of the table, mother on the other. For a moment they looked like an old monochrome photograph, or a fossilized scene, preserved for all time in a thick amber glow. Then Jack came in and all three looked up, their beautiful tranquility disturbed.

“Morning,” Madeline called out.

He stopped, hand on the doorknob, and gave her a confused glance. Then he continued out.

“See?” Madeline said, gesturing to the door with her fork. “That’s why I’m never nice to him.”

“He’s just not a morning person,” Grace apologized.

“Or an afternoon person, or a night person.”

“Maddy.” It was half-warning, half-plea.

She shook her head. “Fine.” She played with her food.

“No good?” Ma asked, watching her daughter intently.

At first Madeline thought she was referring to Jack and almost laughed. Then she realized that she hadn’t eaten a single bit of her mother’s breakfast. “Oh, no, the food’s great.” She quickly took a bite to prove it. She smiled.

Ma nodded once, then continued to work on her own plate.

Grace, who ate quickly so she could be ready to take Evan to school, finished and carried her plate and empty milk glass to the sink. “Hey, Maddy, maybe you could take Ma to the Museum of Fine Arts today. It’s free on Tuesdays, and she read about a new exhibit by Susan Larijani. Didn’t she graduate with you?”

“Yeah,” Madeline replied, scowling although she wasn’t sure why. “Susan was actually in the design department, but she kind of fell into modern art during our junior year.”

They’d gone to the Carnegie International show together and seen some fantastic pieces by Lee Bontecou. Susan began to imitate that style, mixing mechanical and

organic forms, but adding typography, a touch of her graphic design. Critics ate this up, and she'd been whisked away to New York right after their Commencement. Madeline hadn't spoken to her in years, but they ran in the same professional circles. Well, they had, back when Madeline had still been working.

“What do you think, Ma?” Grace asked cheerfully. “Good plan?”

Ma shrugged and nodded. “I always like to see art. Especially Maddy's.”

“No, Ma, this isn't Maddy's show. This is her friend Susan's.” Grace smiled at Madeline as she walked into the living room to get her purse. “But I'm sure now that she's here, it's only a matter of time before Madeline gets an exhibit up at the MFAH too.”

“Are you working on something?” Ma asked. She nodded a thank you as Grace picked up her dishes on her way back into the kitchen.

“No,” Madeline replied curtly. Her mother knew very well that she hadn't produced anything new in the past three years.

“You should,” was Ma's equally terse response.

Annoyed, Madeline rose and took her plate to the sink. This was the first time she had bothered to get up early enough to eat with her mother and sister, and she reminded herself not to do it again. From now on she would remain in bed as usual, lingering for hours on the tortuous edge between sleep and wakefulness that passed for rest nowadays.

She hadn't slept well since the accident. That first night without Charles beside her, she couldn't fall asleep, couldn't remember how to do it alone anymore. Months passed before she could sleep a whole night through, and even then, slumber came reluctantly, induced only by her extreme physical weariness. Those nights, though she

remained still, breathing evenly, her slumber was plagued by wild dreams, ones that left her with turbulent emotional aftermath when she woke. Although her body could finally recharge, her mind and spirit carried the weight of the dreams' sorrows or anxieties, and after a week or so, these burdens became too cumbersome. She stopped sleeping again. This turned into her pattern, her destructive nighttime cycle, and it had endured—or rather, she had endured it—for the past three years. Madeline no longer remembered what real sleep felt like.

“Evan!” Grace called out. “We need to go!”

A minute later, the boy scrambled into the room, his hair disheveled and his backpack open and flapping. “I’m ready!” he shouted with needless enthusiasm.

Grace eyed him skeptically. “So I see.” She shook her head and chuckled.

“Alright, Dopey. Put your shoes on and go to the car. I’m right behind you.”

He scampered off obediently, and Grace shot a look at Madeline. “Kids, huh?”

Madeline tried to hide her pain as she nodded. “Yep. They’re something else.”

From somewhere upstairs, Ben begins to cry.

Madeline shook herself and recoiled physically, pulling back from the reverie the way as if it were a snake poised to attack. Disoriented, she rubbed her eyes and took a steadying breath. Then she noticed Ma watching her.

“What’s the matter with you?” Ma asked. Her tone was sharp, but concerned.

“Nothing,” Madeline replied too quickly. Her mother didn’t look satisfied with the answer. “I just haven’t been sleeping well. It’s no big deal.”

“Sleep is very important for good, clear mind.”

If she weren’t so irritated, Madeline might have laughed at the irony of her nearly

senile mother giving advice on how to stay lucid. Instead, she said, “Thanks, Ma,” and headed for the stairs. “I’m going to go get ready for the day, okay? Then if you want, I guess I can take you to the museum.”

Ma nodded. She didn’t much care about going to see the art, but she’d purposely mentioned the exhibit to Grace. Ma had always believed in playing people like chess pieces, with cunning and strategy. As she listened to one daughter closing expensive French doors and the other climbing a grand marble staircase, she thought the game was going well enough.

Madeline lingered in the shower long after she was clean. Steam spilled over the top of the glass door, fogging the mirror and the window, coating every surface in the room with a fine dew-like sheen. She never used to dawdle this way, in fact had considered it wasteful indulgence. But over the long months she’d become more and more reluctant to relinquish the sanctuary of the rushing water. The girl who had once refused to bathe for an entire two weeks when she was eight had become a woman who stood in the shower, just stood there, for unjustifiably long periods of time, twisting the knob farther left every time she started to get cold.

The water scalded her skin, turning her flesh pink like raw chicken. After the initial sting, Madeline enjoyed that feeling of melting, of being stripped and cleansed in a way that had nothing to do with being unclothed. Her head angled down to avoid getting anything in her eyes, but this allowed her to follow the curve of her calf to her ankle, to watch the droplets racing over her skin. As she rubbed soap into the crevices of her body, she felt at once intimately connected to herself and yet strangely detached, as if it were just a dream and she wasn’t in control, wasn’t responsible for her actions because they

weren't really hers. One time she suspected that she might have been crying, but with the water coursing down she couldn't tell. She liked that.

Eventually she tore herself away. As the stream petered out, she patted away her goose bumps with one of Grace's soft rose whisper towels. Then she put on her underwear and bra, without ceremony, without thought. In Pittsburgh, she used to have to apply lotion first. Her skin, born and raised in Gulf Coast humidity, shriveled and flaked under that chilly northern glare. So she'd soothed it, fed it slick, apple-scented cream. Sometimes Charles would watch her, a faint smile on his face. And sometimes he would help her, massaging the thick lotion into her back, over her shoulders, down to her breast. Then she would stop and watch him, the smiles on both of their faces reflected by the steamed up mirror.

"Hey," she says, her voice soft and husky with desire. "You're not helping."

"What do you mean?" he asks, all sugar-sweet with innocence. She sighs involuntarily when the stubble on his chin tickles her. He has bent down to nibble-kiss the place where her neck and shoulder gracefully slope into one another, and she can hear his breath in her ear, feel it glide over her naked skin. His rough palms skim circles around her nipples, and she closes her eyes to fully absorb the sensation.

"You've used up all the lotion on your hands," she mumbles, clearing not caring.

"Is that so?" he asks. A tease, he pulls away. "Well I guess I'd better let you finish this yourself then, since I can't seem to do it right."

Laughing at the audacity of his cruel game, Madeline opens her eyes and squeals, "Don't you dare stop!"

But she is alone.

Madeline swallowed her sob before it could crawl up and out of her throat. Then, to steady herself, she looked at the mirror, at the plain grey cotton draped loosely over hipbones and chest. Who was this half-woman and where had she come from? Madeline could count her ribs, could see where muscle met bone in her arms and legs. Her eyes were ringed by purple tinges. Her face caved in from cheekbone to jawline. Black and thick, her hair was the only part of her still full, and now it hung limp and wet down her back. Madeline wondered where the other half of this woman had gone.

“Hey!” Ma’s voice cut through the house. “What’s taking you so long?”

She sighed and reached for her top, pulled it over her head. “I’m coming.” She wasn’t sure she’d said it loudly enough for her mother to hear, but she didn’t really care.

When she finally returned to the kitchen, her mother was wearing a faded flower-print apron, seated at the table in the alcove, glaring impatiently. “Yin-mei, you are the slowest girl I know. You’re like a slug!”

Madeline paused, unsure of how to respond. “Sorry,” she mumbled. She still wasn’t comfortable with her mother when she lapsed this way.

“Well, you’re going to be more sorry when father comes home and wants to know where his lunch is. Come on, we’re going to have to work quickly.” Ma stood and went to the refrigerator, poking into its cavity like a circus trainer with her head between a lion’s gaping fangs.

Madeline took a tentative step towards her mother. “Father isn’t coming home for lunch today,” she said slowly. She didn’t even know whether she was talking about Ma’s father or her own. “We were going to go to the museum today, remember? To see the new art exhibit?”

Sometimes when she was quietly reminded of reality this way, Ma would stop and frown and work to reposition herself. Madeline could sometimes see the internal struggle through the subtle straining of her mother's facial muscles. It reminded her of the anatomical studies she'd done in her introductory art studios.

This time, however, Ma did not return to her. "Hey, Yin-mei, we don't have time for your nonsense. Father will be home soon, and I do not want another beating this week."

"Grandpa hit you?" Madeline asked in astonishment. She remembered the way her mother had hung the picture of her father after his death, so reverent and grieving. Each night Ma had placed new bowls of fruit in front, burned incense to carry her father's spirit to their ancestors. With tears in her eyes, she had told Madeline and Grace that their grandfather was a saint on Earth.

"No, not grandpa. Father." Ma stopped and stared at her. "What is the matter with you today?" she asked, one hand fisted at her hip, the other holding a giant head of cabbage. "Have you been sneaking wine?"

Madeline shook her head. "No. But remind me, why did Gran—" She caught herself. "Why did your father hit you?" She chose her words carefully, determined not to encourage her mother's dementia by playing along, but at the same time not wanting to alarm her or damage her fragile mental state.

"Are you serious?" her mother exclaimed. She gestured wildly with the cabbage, showing her frustration. "Can't even remember two days ago! You know Wei-zhen broke Father's new clock and said it was me. Father was furious. The clock was a reward from his superior at work."

Madeline was stunned. Ma *never* spoke of Wei-zhen. Once on a childhood trip to Taiwan, Madeline had heard her aunties gossiping about him, their youngest cousin, at one time treated like a brother and son but later “forgotten,” as if he’d never existed at all. Madeline hadn’t managed to learn why, but apparently wherever and whenever Ma thought she was, Wei-zhen was still in favor.

“Why didn’t you tell your father Wei-zhen broke it?”

Again Ma looked at her as if she were crazy, as if she had uttered some horrible, unthinkable sin. “You don’t tell on family,” she said quietly. Then she turned back to the fridge and the matter was closed.

Sunset found Madeline lounging on the sofa, flipping through a publication she’d selected from the short oak bookcase there in the living room. The whole house was bathed in a tranquil silence, and Madeline appreciated the false sense of solitude it gave. In reality, Ma was somewhere upstairs watching Chinese soap operas on the cable channel that Grace paid extra for, but what Madeline couldn’t see or hear couldn’t bother her. A red afghan covered her reclining figure. Her wire-rimmed glasses had slipped to perch on the edge of her nose, comically lending her the appearance of both a college student and an old woman. When the waning light fell on her in a certain way, she looked more like her mother than ever.

The soft rumble of Grace’s SUV interrupted Madeline’s peace. She glanced at the grandfather clock stationed like a soldier on the opposite wall: nearly eight o’clock. Grace and Evan would be returning from his weekly piano lesson. Apparently, like his mother Evan was quite the prodigy on those black and white keys. When she listened to

him practicing, Madeline couldn't help wondering if Ben would have been good at violin, maybe even better than she had been.

“Hey,” Grace greeted, letting Evan run into the house before her. “How was the museum?”

Madeline glowered. They hadn't gone to the museum. They'd cooked for Father. And they'd waited for Father. And when Father did not come home for lunch, Ma had become distressed and confused. Realizing there was something wrong, some mistake on her part, Ma had quietly excused herself and retired to her bedroom. When she woke, she had no recollection of that morning. “What's all this food for?” she'd asked, eyeing the pots and then her daughter warily.

The nervous look in her crinkled old eyes gave Madeline reason to wonder if Ma knew the real answer, but she lied anyway. “I made it while you were napping.”

“What for?”

Madeline shrugged, possessing no enthusiasm for these fabrications. “Out of boredom?”

Ma considered this. Her eyes narrowed. “You don't know how to cook.”

“Maybe I learned while you were napping,” Madeline quipped. Despite her sarcasm, she had felt the need to protect her mother.

Similarly, she now felt the need to shelter her sister from the worst of Ma's affliction. So when Grace asked again, “Did you hear me? How was the museum?” Madeline slipped out from under the afghan, laid her book on the glass-top coffee table, looked over at her sister, and smiled. “Peachy.”

Accustomed by now to her sister's sarcasm, Grace let it pass without even

realizing. “That’s good,” she chirped. She rummaged through the refrigerator, puzzled over the missing bok choy and beef. “Did y’all eat already?”

“Oh, yeah, we did. Sorry.” Actually her mother, still suspicious, had refused to eat the dishes they’d prepared, and Madeline hadn’t been hungry, so she threw the food away. She’d realized later she could have put it in Tupperware for someone else to eat later, but by then it was already putrefying in their neighbor’s trash can, where Grace would never discover it and ask questions.

Grace shook her head. “Don’t worry about it.” She spread cold cuts across two short rolls of French bread. “Evan and I—” She paused, as if interrupted by the memory of something unexpected. She moved to the pantry to retrieve another baguette, meanwhile trying to continue smoothly, “—and Jack, we can fend for ourselves. I’m just glad you and Ma are getting to spend some quality time together.”

“Oh yeah, it’s great.” Madeline made sure to turn away before rolling her eyes. She stood and stretched her arms up towards the ceiling. “Hey, I think I’m going to head out for a bit. That alright?”

Grace tilted her head in surprise. “Really? Uh, sure. But, at this time of night, where—”

“Just make sure Ma takes her meds, okay?” Madeline was already out the door, her hand suspended on the knob while she waited for her sister’s reply.

“Of course,” Grace said.

“Thanks.” The door whooshed to a close behind her.

Grace finished preparing the sandwiches and called up the stairs to Evan to let him know they were ready. While she waited for him to come down, she moved into the

living room to tidy up after Madeline. Meticulously she matched the rounded corners of the afghan to one another, folding in half and then quarters and then eighths. She set it in the wicker basket on the end of the sofa, on top of another quilt and an extra pillow, all the same brilliant ruby red.

“Are you coming, Mom?” Evan asked impatiently. He was already seated at the table in front of his plate, which he knew was his because of the honey mustard oozing from the innards of the sandwich. Grace had also given him a bowl of almond jello, topped with a sweet maraschino cherry. She rarely indulged herself that way.

“Yes, dear,” she replied with a smile. Just as she was about to join him in the alcove, she noticed Madeline’s book lying open on the coffee table. Curious, she looked at the cover. *The Joy of Motherhood*.

“Oh,” Grace gasped softly, covering her mouth with her hand. She picked the book up with a mix of care and distaste, as if it were coated with some dangerous flesh-eating bacteria, and sorrowfully replaced it on the shelf. Then she rushed to kiss her son on the top of his warm, precocious head.

The phantom was already outside waiting for Madeline. His opaque form blurred the car like a smudge on the lens of a camera.

“Ready to go?” she asked him. But she knew he wouldn’t answer, because he never did. He hadn’t spoken one word to her, not even the first time he’d appeared. She barely remembered that day now, so many had passed since, all blurring into one long, unimportant stretch of Time. But it had been cold, bitterly cold, so that even the brisk

walk from her car to the funeral home had left her ears and the tip of her nose frozen. No one had greeted her in the lobby, and she'd stood there thawing for several minutes, but she never felt any warmer. Then somehow she'd been in the display room, with one extra-large casket on the left, and one extra-small casket on the right. And that's when she'd first noticed the phantom. He sat quietly next to her there in the front row of chairs, and he put his arm around her while she cried.

Now he was sitting next to her again, as they buckled in and she started the ignition. she had long ago given up on trying to make him respond. She had learned to accept his lack of words, lack of features, lack of color. He was a body and he needed her, and that was enough. It was certainly better than nothing.

The headlights cut through the heavy night, which had descended rapidly like the curtain at the end of a play. Madeline maneuvered the car past a souped-up Accord and turned right onto Westheimer, cruising down the smooth wide road. With one hand on the wheel and an occasional glance at the traffic, Madeline watched her life pass her by.

The Galleria, a beautiful behemoth of a mall, where she'd gone as a young child, toddling around with her mother, and later as a young girl, shopping for clothes and boys with her friends. Just past that was James Coney Island, a Houston staple for teenagers and, late on Thursday and Saturday nights, for leather-clad bikers from all over the state. The first boy she'd ever had a serious crush on had worked there one summer in high school, so once a week she would put on a pair of low-rise jeans and a tight tank top to buy a plain foot-long hot dog during his shift. He never seemed to notice, though, and eventually she gave up.

After a few more minutes she made the turns toward Richmond and then Bellaire,

passing the street where her old Chinese school still stood, offering Saturday morning classes to grudging children. She and Grace had given up many precious weekends to learn the language and culture their parents left behind. Missed birthday parties and That had never seemed quite fair to Madeline.

She made this drive at least once a week, sometimes twice. Always she ended up at Star Ice, a small but chic café in the heart of Chinatown. Sitting at the end of a long row of similar snack shops, all advertising the ever-popular bubble tea and wireless internet, Star Ice had a strangely alluring interior décor that set it apart: fierce red walls, softened by a flowery glass overlay, and an exposed latticework of ducts and lights on the ceiling. Every surface gleamed, suggesting a cleanliness that was both rare and reassuring in a Chinatown. In the corner by the door were stands of Chinese-language newspapers.

The phantom followed Madeline into the café and waited patiently as she ordered *bing*, the shaved ice dessert she'd loved ever since her first taste on the sticky, sweltering streets of Taiwan. The girl behind the counter was one of three they usually saw there, and she already knew that Madeline would choose red beans and black tapioca pearls as the first two of her four toppings. Then Madeline considered her other options, a colorful assortment of fruit, jellies, beans, and peanuts behind the sneeze guard. Finally she pointed to the mango jello and green apple jelly, which the girl dutifully scooped up and dropped onto the little mound of ice. Madeline doused the *bing* with a thick layer of condensed milk, which melted into the ice, softening and sweetening.

Madeline followed the phantom to a secluded square table in the far corner of the rosy room. After setting her bowl down, she made the usual phone call, this time without deliberation. Ten minutes later, Colin Basso walked through the door.

Sometimes she didn't feel like having company—other than the phantom, of course—but she knew he'd ask later why she hadn't called. Other times she desperately wanted to see him, and that was precisely why she didn't let herself. Better to suffer from a little loneliness now. Depending on someone only led to disappointment, of one variety or another.

Tonight, however, Madeline had not felt strongly one way or another. He could have come, or not, and either occurrence would have suited her equally. These nights were usually the best to invite him. Her indifference kept her safe.

Tall and broad, Colin was Gulliver among the Lilliputians here in Chinatown. But the teenage girl behind the counter greeting him bashfully. His had become a familiar face, and it turned now, scanning to the room to find Madeline's.

She resented the easy way Colin smiled when they made eye contact, resented that she wanted to do the same. As he walked toward her, she couldn't help noticing the crisp lines of his suit pants and his elegant Italian shirt. Painfully, they reminded her of how well Charles used to dress.

She grabbed onto that pain and held it tight as Colin joined her at the table.

“You shouldn't be so happy to see me. I'm like the little dark cloud you can't get rid of, remember?”

He shook his head. “I never said that. You did.” He crossed an ankle over his knee, sat back comfortably. “And besides, maybe I'm like Gene Kelly. Maybe I like the rain.”

She sneered. “No, you're more like a dog, the way you come any time and every time I call. And dogs hate the rain.”

His expression darkened severely, and she knew she'd crossed a line. "Sorry," she mumbled. She hoped her embarrassment didn't mask her sincerity.

He sighed. "Whatever. You usually just give me a minute, or twenty, before you sink your teeth in." He reached for the extra spoon, which she never mentioned but always had handy. Carefully avoiding the red beans, he took a bit of the *bing*. "Bad day?"

She shrugged. "Surreal day. But I don't really want to talk about it."

"You never do."

They picked at the dessert in silence. An old Britney Spears DVD played on a large flat-screen TV on the opposite wall, but they had long ago learned to tune it out. Madeline listened instead to the chatter from the other occupied tables, which fused pleasantly into a sort of ambient noise. And she watched the phantom, who always seemed a little nervous around Colin. Like a third wheel who didn't know whether to butt in or give up and go away. She'd tried to reassure him before, telling him on their drive home that Colin was the unwanted one, the intruder. But for some reason, the phantom never really bought that.

"Are we playing tonight?"

Colin's abrupt question startled Madeline out of her reverie. It took her a second to realize he was referring to their "game," and not one of Houston's sports teams. She nodded.

"Who's first?" he asked. His eagerness always made her nervous, even though she'd invented the game herself. Well, no, that wasn't true, was it? She and Charles had invented it inadvertently, right after they'd moved in together and she'd panicked, worrying they might not know enough about each other. Charles had laughed and kissed

her on the forehead. “You probably should have thought of that before you signed your name on the lease.” But then he’d taken her by the hand, led her to the couch, and said, “Okay, Mads. What do you want to know?”

But Madeline wasn’t ready for that kind of all-access honesty with Colin. So she’d modified the rules a little bit. Instead of each person asking the other something, he or she had to volunteer one unknown fact. About anything, as long as it was personal and true. Colin, never aware of the original rules, seemed more than happy to play the game this way. His appetite for information about her discomfited Madeline, but at least this way she could control what he knew, and how much. Plus she got something in return.

“You first,” she decided. Distracted by her mother’s episode that morning, she’d forgotten to prepare her usual inane anecdote to share. She needed a minute to regroup.

Colin set his spoon down and considered. “Okay.” He nodded, as if approving the decision-making neurons in his head. “When I was fifteen, I walked in on my parents having sex.” Even now, he winced at the memory. “I’d come home late from studying at a friend’s house. It was about half an hour past my curfew, so I wanted to grovel at their feet to make sure I didn’t get grounded or anything, y’know?”

Madeline nodded sympathetically.

“Well, I guess they were a little too busy to notice. They didn’t even stop when I opened the door.”

Madeline groaned. “Aw, come on! I knew your dad too,” she said in protest.

He shook his head. “Trust me, not the same. It’s infinitely more traumatic when it’s your own parents.”

She almost laughed, but caught herself and permitted only one small chuckle.

“Alright, I’ll take your word for it.”

“And you’re lucky you have to.” He waited a moment or two, then cleared his throat meaningfully.

“I know, I know!” Madeline said, smiling despite herself. Sometimes she couldn’t help getting caught up in his good-natured cheer. That was one of the things she liked most, and least, about him.

She finished the last of the *bing* and wiped her mouth with a paper napkin. Then she tapped a finger against her lips as if she were still thinking. “Okay, I’ve got one. But you can’t tell on me.”

Colin held up his hand in the Boy Scout salute. “You have my word,” he said with mock solemnity.

She grinned. “I vandalized my high school.” She watched for his reaction. Nothing came. “Hello?”

He shrugged. “I’m just waiting for you to tell me something true. It’s one of the rules.” He wasn’t angry, but he clearly didn’t believe her.

“I’m serious!” She leaned forward, palms flat on the table, in an expression of urgent earnestness. “In eighth grade!”

He wagged his finger at her. “Aha! See? Lies. High school starts with ninth grade.”

“Well I didn’t go there *yet*,” she clarified. “But Grace did, and I followed the next year. But when I was thirteen, Grace was dating this awful guy—without telling our parents, of course. They would never have approved.”

“Even though she was, what, a senior?”

Madeline snorted. “My mother would have picked our husbands for us if she could have. She would never have had us go on a single date in our lives. A waste of time, if we weren’t looking for a husband. And if we were, well, she trusted her judgment better than ours.”

She’d tried not to let it, but a little bit of bitterness had slipped through, and she could tell Colin had sensed it.

“Anyway,” she rushed on, “Grace was dating this miserable excuse of a guy named Clayton, and finally she broke up with him after he tried to pressure her to do some things she didn’t want to.” Madeline gave him a meaningful look. “He didn’t take it too well. Told his buddies he’d scored with her and then dumped her. Called her a slut.” Madeline shook her head. “I didn’t take that too well.

“Late one night I broke into the high school. Security was a joke—sneaking out of and then back into my own house far more difficult. But anyway, I covered Clayton’s locker with sketching paper and drew a very anatomically correct, but very small, penis. Then I drew an arrow and wrote, ‘If they did IT, she didn’t feel *it*.’ He didn’t have a first period class, so I’d say a good two thousand kids passed by and got a nice laugh at his expense, before he came and tore it down.”

Colin just stared at Madeline, who looked mighty proud of herself even though she knew she shouldn’t.

“So the vandalism wasn’t permanent?”

“No,” Madeline admitted. “But the damage to his ego was, I hope.”

Like a swollen river finally breaking through a dam, Colin let out a hearty laugh. “I think it might have been. Poor bastard. I also think I should never, ever cross you.”

“Or my sister,” Madeline added.

“Deal,” Colin agreed.

They let the humor recede, settling into pleasant silence once more. All but two of the tables in the café were empty now: theirs, and one belonging to a group of twenty-somethings probably on Spring Break from college. Madeline eyed them with something more like pity than envy, thinking they didn’t have much longer to enjoy the carefree naiveté of youth.

“*Mei-di?*”

Madeline whirled at the sound of her Chinese name. She looked first at Colin, who seemed just as confused as her, then she noticed a small raisin of a lady hobbling slowly toward them. “*Ahyi, hao,*” Madeline greeted the woman, who she recognized now as *Liang Tai Tai*, one of her mother’s friends. Madeline thought she might have babysat for the woman’s grandkids once or twice, but she’d done so many favors like that for her mother that she couldn’t be sure.

“*Ni hao,*” *Liang Tai Tai* said, smiling at Madeline, and then beaming at Colin. Madeline had noticed that he had that effect on women, of all ages. “*Ni men zai zuo shenme?*”

Colin shot Madeline a puzzled look. Before she could answer either of them, the old woman switched to English and smiled at Colin again. “I asked what you two young people are doing here tonight.” She enunciated so carefully it sounded strange, almost foreign in its perfection.

“Just catching up, *Ahyi,*” Madeline replied quickly. She didn’t like the idea of Colin getting too friendly with this woman, or vice versa. So far she’d managed to keep

him totally separate from the rest of her life, and she liked it that way. “We were actually just about to leave.” She threw her napkin into the empty *bing* bowl, followed by their spoons, and stood to prove her point. Colin was clearly surprised by this, but Madeline ignored him and carried the dishes to the depository.

Liang Tai Tai followed. “Is this good-looking young gentleman your new male friend?” she asked in Mandarin.

Madeline had forgotten how blunt old aunties could be. “No, just a friend. Not even a friend really.” She immediately cringed, feeling guilty for the lie. The truth was, he was probably the only friend she had. “Colin is just helping me with some computer stuff. He’s a technician.”

Liang Tai Tai nodded, but Madeline couldn’t help wondering if the woman even knew what a computer technician was. Then the woman’s wrinkled face wrinkled even more. “But what does an artist need with a computer? Are you changing jobs?” She jabbed Madeline lightly with her elbow. “Finally looking for the money, eh?”

Madeline scraped the waste into the trash can. “No, I’m still...” she trailed off. “I’m not working right now. I’m taking care of Ma full-time.”

“Ah.” *Liang Tai Tai* nodded in approval. Her eyes, already nearly invisible among the many creases and folds of skin, faded even more as her mood sobered. “And how is your mother? You are a very good, loyal daughter to come here for her. Even many sons do not maintain that kind of devotion. Not anymore, not in this country.”

Madeline let the comment pass. “Ma has been better, but she is strong.” This was as much of the truth as family honor and personal dignity allowed.

Liang Tai Tai nodded again, her head bobbing up and down on her neck like a

lobster trap on the waters of the gulf. “Yes, a very strong woman indeed. She has endured much suffering.”

Believing the conversation to be over, Madeline led the way back to the table. “Well, *Ahyi*, it was nice to see you. I will tell my mother that you send your best.”

“Yes, and tell her to come visit me.” Now that Colin was within earshot, it was English again. When they stopped walking, *Liang Tai Tai* took Madeline by the hand. She was surprised by how firm and soft and smooth the old woman’s skin felt. The complete opposite of her face. “It’s so lonely in my home, with no company but a little bird.”

Madeline remembered now. She *had* babysat for the grandkids. They’d released the blue and yellow parakeet, and she’d spent half an hour chasing it, trying to coax it back into its cage.

“I’ll be sure to tell her,” she said with a smile. She reclaimed her hand, politely, and picked up her purse. “*Ahyi, zai zhen.*”

Liang Tai Tai nodded, once to her and once, with a toothy grin, to Colin. Then she headed towards the counter to make her order.

“Sorry about that,” Madeline said to Colin. “I—”

“Oh, *Mei-di*?”

Madeline sighed. “Yes?”

Liang Tai Tai had turned and retraced her steps back to their table. “I never got the chance to tell you how sorry I was about what happened to your husband and son.”

Madeline froze. She wasn’t sure she could breathe. Her mouth went dry.

Liang Tai Tai didn’t seem to notice. “Such a tragedy,” she continued sincerely.

“All of us, all of your mother’s friends, we felt so bad for her.”

For Ma? Madeline was disgusted by the thought. She felt like she needed to spit, to rid herself of the bad taste suddenly on her tongue.

“You know she cried so hard.” It wasn’t a question, but Madeline angled her head, confused.

“No. No, I had no idea.” Madeline let out an incredulous breath. “Ma doesn’t cry.”

“Oh yes,” *Liang Tai Tai* insisted. “Even though they were *hei ren*, your mother loved them, and she cried for the loss of her grandson. She cried for the pain she knew you would feel.”

Madeline didn’t resist—couldn’t, because she was too stunned—when *Liang Tai Tai* moved to pat her hand. She mumbled a thank you as the old woman then left for a second time. She sat down dumbly.

After a minute or two, she became aware of a movement in her periphery. It was Colin, standing up. She had forgotten about him.

Still a little numb, she looked up at him, at the strange, distant expression now on his normally friendly face. She waited for him to say something, to berate her, to express his disappointment. Or worse, to ask her about it. About what had happened, what the hell this crazy old woman was talking about. Why she hadn’t told him first.

Instead, he stood there silently, looking back at her.

Finally she broke the silence. “Where are you going?”

He considered his words. “It’s late,” he said quietly. “We should probably both be getting home.”

Home was the last place Madeline wanted to be. Not this home, anyway. And the one she wanted—longed for, dreamed of—no longer existed, as *Liang Tai Tai* had so graciously reminded her.

“I’m not in a rush.” She hadn’t meant to say it. Certainly not like a plea. She’d never heard herself sound so desperate.

He took a moment, wet his lips. “I can’t say.” He paused again, as if searching for a happier ending to a sad story. “I have work in the morning.”

She nodded.

“Good night, Madeline.”

“Good night.”

Sadly, she watched him walk away. Again, the crisp lines of his pants and shirt reminded her of Charles. But this time she resented herself.

Grace hardly ever went into Jack’s study, not even to clean. In fact, they had a weekly maid service for that. Almost a year ago, Jack convinced Grace that she was too busy, between her practice and Evan’s after school activities, to be mucking around the house; why not hire help? So they did, and naturally they had selected one with a strong reputation for being trustworthy and thorough. But when it came to Jack’s office, Teresa, their personal “house assistant,” knew that she was to keep strictly to surfaces: mop the hardwood floor, vacuum the Oriental rug, wipe the desk and bookshelves with a washcloth, but never, ever go into the drawers.

“If you’re looking to steal something,” Jack had joked on the woman’s first day,

“stick with the kitchen.”

Teresa’s short stout body had stiffened, but when she opened her mouth it was merely to ask where they would prefer her to rinse out the mop. Mortified, Grace later sought her out and apologized profusely. She even offered the woman a slice of pie. Teresa had politely declined.

But she’d stayed on with them, a silent shadow slipping through the house, dusting and scrubbing and generally leaving things bright and shiny in her wake. She never caused a disturbance. She seemed almost invisible, and she seemed to want it that way.

Initially Grace had been a bit disappointed by Teresa’s standoffish manner. She’d heard Teresa say “*mijo*” on the phone once—which she was pretty sure meant “my son”—so they were both mothers, both working women. Couldn’t they get along, have a chat, maybe even be friends? But Teresa came in at one o’clock in the afternoon, left by dinner, and hardly looked at or spoke to anyone, if she could help it.

Now that her mother and sister were here, though, Grace never really lacked company. Either she would relieve Madeline from watching over Ma at night, or else the three of them would sit in the living room with the television on and savor each other’s company. If Evan needed help with his homework, Grace let him spread it out on the carpet so they could work in Ma and Madeline’s presence. Before, when it had been only the two of them, Grace had insisted that they go up to his bedroom to use his desk. She’d wanted to encourage good study habits. But family was just as important.

And that was precisely the message Grace was carrying with her as she approached Jack’s study room. It was nearly midnight, and everyone in the house had

already gone to sleep, save them two. Actually she'd been in bed for the past hour, reading a romance novel that her secretary had given her for Christmas, and waiting for Jack to come up so they could talk. But he hadn't come.

So, dressed in a flower-print silk robe, she stepped lightly down the hall, down the stairs, and around the kitchen to her husband's study. She stopped for a moment outside the door and straightened her hair. Even after a decade of marriage, she hadn't been able to rid herself of the feeling that she needed to look her best in his presence. She ran her tongue over her teeth, which had already been brushed, and then tightened the sash at her waist like a warrior tying on armor. After a deep breath, she knocked twice, lightly, on the door.

"Come in," Jack said after a moment. He sounded annoyed. Instantly Grace balked. The tone of those two words was enough to make her reconsider—did she really want to do this?—but she'd already begun. And if she was anything, she was a finisher.

"Hey, Sweetheart," she said, entering tentatively and keeping her voice casual. Jack sat at his desk in the corner by the window. The only light in the room came from the desk lamp, which illuminated a small bright circle in front of him. Darkness obscured his face. "You're still working this late?"

"Yes, Grace. Obviously." His fingers never even paused from their furious scribbling. He reached the bottom of his yellow legal pad and flipped to the next sheet hurriedly, almost violently. The staccato of rustling paper ripped through the otherwise silent office and startled Grace. She knew better than to cry out, though. With her heart beating too quickly, she moved to a cabinet on her right to retrieve another pad. She set it on his desk, out of his way but close enough to read, and said, "You're almost out," to

answer his quizzical look.

Jack tilted his head to examine the thinness of the tablet beneath his pen. “Hm,” he grunted in agreement. Then he resumed working, head bent over his depositions, brow creased deeply in concentration.

Grace frowned. Jack clearly wasn’t in the mood to talk, and she knew that pursuing a serious discussion now would be unproductive. In conflict resolution, both parties needed to be willing to sit down and tackle the issue at hand. At least, that was what Work Grace would have said. But as a rule, Home Grace and Work Grace kept out of each other’s business. Work Grace had seen too many of her colleagues’ personal lives fall apart—or rather, get picked apart—by psychoanalysis. Spouses liked to be people, not patients. So Home Grace cleared her throat.

Reluctantly, Jack looked up. “Is there something you need?”

Grace resisted the urge to squirm under his stare. “You missed Evan’s Little League game tonight.”

He rolled his eyes. “I was busy.”

“He was really disappointed that you weren’t there.” Really disappointed was an understatement. Evan had spent the entire game lifting his head up so he could see past the brim of his cap and into the stands. Grace smiled and waved every time, but she could see his little face fall. During the seventh inning stretch, while the other boys ran to high-five their dads, Evan had dejectedly accepted the juice box from Grace’s hand and gone to sit by himself on the bench.

“I’ll catch the next one,” Jack said to appease her.

Grace put a hand on her hip. “Jack, this isn’t something you ‘catch.’ It’s not a

disease, it's our son. You have to make the time."

"No, I have to make partner," Jack corrected her. "And I can't do that if I'm in the stands at an elementary school while my competition is finishing all their briefs and scooping all my cases." Done with the conversation, Jack lowered his head and scrawled some more notes on the yellow pad.

Grace waited a moment. She had a gambit, a card hidden up her sleeve. But as much as she wanted to make him care, maybe even make him feel bad, she also couldn't help feeling like he didn't deserve to know. She shook her head at herself. "He scored a run."

Jack's head snapped back up. "Really?" He almost didn't believe her, but when she nodded, his look of incredulity turned to elation. "That's my boy! I knew the apple couldn't fall *too* far from the tree."

For a second, the thought of Evan being anything like Jack caused bile to rise in the back of Grace's throat. But she choked it down and told herself she was just angry, just thinking irrationally. "He's not doing this because he likes it, Jack. He's doing it for you."

"Oh, he'll learn to like it," Jack assured her. He smiled easily, and again Grace felt vaguely disgusted. Clearly in his mind, nothing was wrong. "Every American boy loves baseball."

Grace practically snorted. "He's not just American, you know."

"What, Asians don't like baseball? I hear it's huge over in Japan."

"If you're trying to be funny, you're failing miserably."

She sighed. She hadn't intended to go this direction, but Jack was giving her the

perfect opportunity to bring up the other major point of contention between them: Evan's identity. She tended to avoid it, for her own sake rather than Jack's. They'd had many strong disagreements—she refused to call them fights—over the issue, none of which had done anything other than distress and disturb her. But now, tonight, Grace couldn't help herself.

“He should be starting Chinese school,” she blurted out. “Every day we wait makes it that much harder for him to learn. He's already starting to forget what little he knows.”

“This again?” he asked, shaking his head in disbelief. “So what?” Uninterested now that they were not discussing his son's sports feat, Jack tried once again to return to his work.

Grace refused to leave him alone. “So there's an entire half of his family he won't be able to communicate with.” She kept the volume of her voice steady, but she couldn't help the way her tone rose with urgency and frustration. “This is very important to me, Jack. Evan already has very little sense of what it means to be Chinese. Now that Ma's with us, he's eating more of the food, but he still doesn't know about the traditions, the values, the history, the culture—much less the language. And those things are all part of him.”

“No, they're part of you,” Jack interrupted. “But you left Taiwan, and you came here. And this is where Evan was born. This is who he is.”

“I didn't leave Taiwan to leave those things behind,” Grace protested. “Jack, I didn't even *choose* to leave Taiwan.”

“Then go back!” His fist slammed solidly on the desk, rattling pens in their

holders and causing the circle of light to quiver over his papers. “Dammit, Grace. I don’t have time for this. I don’t know why you would come down here to pick a fight with me this late at night, but I can’t play these games with you right now. I don’t have the energy, and I definitely don’t have the time.”

“It’s not a game. And I’m not trying to pick a fight.” Suddenly she was on the defensive. She felt herself backpedaling, searching for safe ground. She never did react to his temper well.

“Then what do you want, Grace? Because this sure looks like a fight to me. And if that’s not what you came for, then get to the point, so we can get it over with.”

He stared at her, waiting, but she was frozen, speechless, filled with rushing thoughts and emotions, yet unable to express any of them. Jack was volatile, in a way, but he’d never been a physically violent person, and she wasn’t afraid of him. But when he got like this, with that ugly redness in his face, and that impatient, toothy scowl marring his handsome eyes, she always faltered.

“Well?” he asked, as if speaking to a slow and simple child. “What did you want to say?”

Grace wished she could yell. Sometimes she felt a loudness scratching inside her, clawing its way up her throat, but it always fell back down, sinking quickly and heavily into the depths of her gut. It made her sick to her stomach—the desperate need to lash out, or the inability to, she wasn’t sure which—and she pressed her hand to her bellybutton now, as if to comfort herself.

“I wanted to say that we miss you,” she said finally, almost whispering. Tears formed in her eyes. She hoped Jack would mistake them for deep feeling and apology,

rather than the humiliation that they really were. Or maybe he wouldn't see them at all, since she was mostly in the dark. Either way, she didn't want him to know what she was really feeling, so she said what she knew would diffuse the situation. "I miss you."

The lie was an honest one. She missed Jack, but not the man who sat at the desk in front of her.

Jack stood up, walked over to her, and kissed her on the forehead. "That's much nicer." Through the thin robe, he traced a finger over her collarbone, the curve of her shoulder, and down the side of her arm. She shivered, but he didn't seem to notice. "I miss you too," he said. "But once I make partner, I'll be able to spend much more time with you again. You and Evan. Okay?"

She nodded weakly.

"Alright. Now go to bed. You're clearly tired." He walked back to his desk, rolling his head from shoulder to shoulder to relieve his muscles before setting them to work again. "You know that's the only reason you get emotional like this."

She didn't say anything.

He sat back down and smiled at her, encouraging her with his eyes and a jerk of his chin to leave. The idea of getting away flooded Grace with relief, and she complied immediately. Once the door was quietly but firmly shut behind her, she allowed herself to press her forehead against the wall. She felt her pulse pounding against the cool wood, and she found comfort in that.

After a minute or two, she forced herself to stand upright and go upstairs. She paused for a moment at the top landing. To her left, Evan, Madeline and Ma each slept in their own bedroom, each peacefully and blissfully unaware of anything other than their

dreams. To her right, her own king-sized bed waited.

She took a step forward. The sound of Ma's soft snoring came to her, drifting on the same wave of air that brought the scent of the citrus-scented shampoo Madeline used. Grace felt tears spring into her eyes again. She took a step to the left.

Through Evan's open door, she could see him sleeping awkwardly in his red racecar bed. His arm covered his face so that his nose squished into the curve of his elbow, but she had long ago learned not to worry, he could breathe fine like that. She wished he was squirming or kicking his covers so that she'd have an excuse to wake him and to hold him in her arms. But he was a calm, happy child who slept soundly and dreamt sweetly.

Another two steps and she was at Ma's door. The snoring had subsided a bit, but Grace put her ear to the door to listen to her mother's steady breathing. She remembered the rhythm of that sound from her childhood in Taiwan. Combined with the whir of a fan and the faint noises from the street, it had been her lullaby in the crowded apartment they'd shared with Ba's older brother and his family. For the first few weeks after they'd moved to America, where sturdy walls separated her small pink bedroom from her parents', Grace had had a hard time falling asleep.

One last step put Grace outside Madeline's room. She knew from experience that her little sister slept heavily, so she turned the knob without worry. As expected, Madeline's dirty clothes were strewn in a pile one corner of the room, and even after living there for months, she still used her boxes and suitcase to store the rest of her belongings. Grace thought back to the first night Madeline had come, when she and Ma had raced upstairs to see why Madeline was crying out. She looked at her sister now and

thought that she seemed much more at peace. Her brow was smooth, her eyes and mouth free from distress. At least they appeared so to Grace.

She thought about lifting up the covers and climbing into bed with her sister, sleeping next to each other the way they'd done as girls. Grace didn't want to be alone, didn't want to be in bed, asleep and vulnerable, when Jack finally came up. But she was a grown woman now, and she couldn't just run to Madeline's bed whenever she wanted comfort.

So she eased her way out of the room and back into the dim hallway. Reluctantly, she moved one foot in the direction of her bedroom, then the other. The darkness piqued her senses. The thick carpet tickled her soft skin. The citrus smell, even stronger now that she'd forgotten to close Madeline's door, followed her down the hall. And her mother's snoring picked up again.

She left her own door open and slipped into bed. With these traces of her family enveloping her like a soft, warm blanket, Grace surprised herself by quickly tumbling into slumber. Her last conscious thought before she succumbed to exhaustion was that maybe in the morning she could pretend it had all been a dream.

Morning had become a test. If Ma knew that she was in Grace's room in Houston, if she knew her name and birth date, if she knew what had happened the previous day, then she passed. If not, then she clutched at the bed sheets and her eyes darted around the room until she could calm down enough to investigate. On those days, she would slowly examine everything in the room to try to piece together some sort of story for herself.

She started with her own body and its soft honey-colored skin, which wrapped tenderly around her small muscles and bones. These she stretched out slowly, her limbs moving reluctantly, aching, but obediently. She pressed her palms to her face, feeling the lines at her eyes and the hollowed curves of her cheeks. She looked down at the long hair snaking over her shoulder, and its color—the grey of dirty snow—surprised and saddened her.

Then she took in the room itself. A comfortably-sized square, it was still too small to be a master bedroom, so she must have been someone's guest. The walls were painted in two pleasantly neutral shades of taupe, and a large watercolor of a park in Taipei hung directly opposite her and the bed. Somehow, no matter what kind of morning it was—pass or fail—Ma always knew that park. In the left foreground of the painting stood the massive white marble gates, positioned at the entrance like giant blue-headed sentinels. Just inside their guard, on either side of a wide walkway, sat stout sienna-roofed twins: the National Concert Hall and the National Theater. And at the end of the seemingly endless walkway the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall rose like a great white mountain, capped by blue glass shingles. Against a backdrop of clear azure skies and verdant landscaping, the park could have been someone's version of heaven.

Sometimes Ma could sense that the painting itself should be familiar to her, but always she recognized its subject: her favorite place in the city where she'd been born. Although the monument had been built after she'd gone to America, she had fallen in love with its beauty and grandeur immediately upon her return. No matter what state of mind she was in, waking up to the view of it on her wall gave her a sense of comfort and strength.

From her vantage point on the bed, there was little else that Ma could inspect, except for the nightstand, which held a handful of personal effects that she could only assume were her own. Usually there was a glass of water on a sunflower coaster, and a pair of large wire-rimmed glasses. She would put these on, then realize that she'd been able to see clearly before, so they must be for reading. She let them stay perched on her nose as she picked up the last item, a slim journal with the family name Chen inscribed on the cover, both in Mandarin and English. Curious, she opened it, found the characters flowing from top to bottom and right to left in her own messy handwriting. She only ever read the first page, because that was all she could take, at least in the morning.

These were hard days, but not the worst. Ma had learned that the most dreadful mornings were the ones she thought she passed, but didn't actually. Of course, she had no way of knowing which these were, not until something—a photograph, a comment from one of her daughters, or just a random spark inside her own deteriorating mind—lit the imaginary bulb over her head like the Bugs Bunny cartoons Madeline used to watch. Then, after a slow and plodding journey back from wherever and whenever her illness had taken her, Ma had to rejoin the present and find a way to pretend like she had never left. It wasn't just pride that motivated her to bluff; a mother should never make her children worry. The concern in Grace's voice, the anxiety Madeline's eyes couldn't hide, these were Ma's fault, and she felt guilty. She didn't want to scare her girls, or herself.

Of course, sometimes it went the other way, and the light bulb would go dim, and instead of slowly sliding back to the present, she would fall away from it in an instant. When that happened, she couldn't fight it the way she could submit to its inverse: going from cave to sunlight, she could give her eyes time to adjust, but upon entering the cave,

darkness was immediate and all-consuming.

She always felt angry after she recovered from these episodes, and whenever she couldn't remember something from her past. Her life was like a garden carefully cultivated over the years, and now someone was stealing the flowers and the fruit. She feared that soon she would be nothing more than a plot of dirt.

One day Ma found herself holding two socks, but she couldn't remember why. She was seated on the living room sofa. The television was on, but muted. There was a plastic hamper at her feet, filled with clothes that smelled faintly of detergent. She could feel their warmth on her lower legs.

“And then what did Ba do?”

Still confused, Ma looked to her left. Madeline stood behind her ironing a shirt. Her head was down, so she couldn't see Ma's discomposure. Ma faced forward again. She was doing laundry with her daughter.

“Ma?” Madeline prompted.

Ma had forgotten the question. “I don't remember,” she said hastily. “I don't feel like talking anymore.”

Madeline grumbled in irritation. Ma knew her daughter would think she was being fickle, but that was preferable to the truth. She rolled the sock in her right hand into the left one, set it on the cushion beside her, and bent down for more clothes. She handed button-down shirts and slacks to Madeline and folded everything else. They worked silently until the hamper was empty. Then Madeline gathered all the pressed items into her arms and headed for the master bedroom.

“I'm going to hang these in Grace's closet. I'll be back.”

Ma remembered now that Madeline always told her where she was going, and how long she would be away. She'd done that when the girls were younger, so that they would know how to reach her if they needed something. If they needed help.

Ma reached for a stack of Grace's pajamas and began transferring all the folded garments back into the hamper. They made a neat dome inside the plastic basket. She was sweeping all the socks on top, like sprinkles on a scoop of ice cream, when Evan burst into the house through the kitchen door.

"Hi, *Ama!*" he called out when he saw her. She smiled and nodded her head to acknowledge him. He noisily set his backpack by the counter and came over to see what she was up to. "Do you need help carrying that?"

She followed his gaze to the laundry. She worried that it was too heavy for a young child such as Evan, but before she could say anything, he hefted it up and headed for the stairs. "Thank you," she said softly in English.

As she watched him go, she realized there was a lot of Jack in him, physically. Evan's features had not yet ripened, but already Ma could see Jack's long, sturdy legs, and his strong jaw, and his thin, straight nose. The boy had the same brown eyes and hair as most children made by Asian and American mixing, but he would stand out as he grew older, Ma had no doubt, and be one of the most handsome of men. He had his mother's fair skin and his father's good facial structure, her graceful carriage and his charming grin. That was the point of hybridization, from a strictly intellectual point of view: getting the best of both worlds. Evan had certainly accomplished that.

When he disappeared from view, Ma turned back to the living room, and as she clicked off the television, she wondered what Ben would look like now. Ma had never

actually gotten to see him in person before he died. She'd been planning to return from Taiwan for his birth, but Madeline had gone into labor two weeks early. No one had known she was coming, no one expected—suspected—that she would have cared about the offspring of the daughter she no longer spoke to and her black husband. So she'd canceled her plane tickets and never told anyone.

She'd seen pictures, though. Grace and Jack and Evan had gone to Pittsburgh to visit Madeline and Charles and their newborn, and as usual, Madeline had taken over a hundred photos. Grace emailed a few of them to Ma, letting her know that her second grandson's was named Ben, weighed seven pounds and three ounces at birth, and never cried. He was a happy, healthy baby. He was beautiful.

Ma had examined the infant through the images on her computer screen, squinting through her glasses to catch every detail. Already he had a full head of springy curls, and Ma could only imagine how unruly they would become. His skin was lighter than she'd expected, more like tea than coffee, but she worried about it darkening with age. He looked strong enough, though, and the one thing Ma could say in his favor was that his eyes were big and round, with long curly lashes. And like his father's, the irises were a striking copper, fiery and intelligent. That, at least, she approved of.

Now Ben would have been about four years old, turning five soon. Ma couldn't remember his exact birthday, but she'd written it down. She'd started doing that, making notes for herself, nearly a decade ago, when she'd first started to forget things. Ben had a whole page for himself, and on it she'd recorded the bits of information Grace sometimes slipped into her email correspondence: the formula he ate, the toys he received, the first word he spoke. Apparently he'd squealed whenever Madeline or Charles turned on the

radio, and he'd loved his Fisher Price keyboard most of all. Ma wondered if he might have become a famous musician.

Certainly he would have been tall, like his father. And if his skin color stayed the same, and his hair didn't get too out of hand, he could have been a pretty cute kid, like the son of that actor from the old television show, *Fresh Prince of the Air* or something. When they were in middle school, Madeline and Grace used to watch it during dinner sometimes, and they were always laughing. But Ma had never understood that program or the characters on it, their music or their humor. Whenever she'd thought of Charles' family, she wondered if they were like those people.

"Ma, where did the laundry go?"

Suddenly Madeline was standing next to her, holding her elbow as if she had gotten lost. Ma pulled her arm away defensively. She knew what her daughter was thinking, but this wasn't one of those moments. She might not have noticed Madeline come in, but everyone got caught up in their own thoughts sometimes. "Evan took the clothes upstairs," she replied a little haughtily.

"Evan's back?"

Ma nodded. "He came home about ten minutes ago." She thought for a moment, trying to recall where the boy had been all day. "His friend's parents must have dropped him off."

"Oh, right," Madeline said, nodding as she remembered. Evan's school was on Spring Break, so he'd been allowed to spend the day at his best friend's house. "Well, I finished hanging Jack's shirts and slacks." She paused to shake her head and roll her eyes. "Do we have any more chores left?"

Ma shook her head.

“Great.” Madeline plopped onto the sofa and picked up a magazine from the coffee table. She lay back against the armrest and began to flip through the glossy pages.

Ma watched her daughter and frowned. She had begun to realize that Madeline never really did anything. The girl slept, ate, chaperoned her, and occasionally went out at night without saying where. Ma had held her tongue about that last one, in part because she was afraid to know what exactly her daughter might be doing, and who with. But she was tired of seeing her grown, talented child wasting away in this house.

Ma moved next to Madeline and snatched the magazine out of her hands. “How come you haven’t done any art?” she asked sharply.

Madeline stared at her, bewildered. “Are you serious?”

“What kind of joke do you think this would be?”

“Did you just take my magazine?” Madeline sat up angrily. “I was reading that.”

Shaking the publication in her hand, Ma said, “Yes, I know. I have eyes. And they can see that all you do is lie around the house and read.”

“You used to say reading was good for me,” Madeline retorted sarcastically.

“Don’t take that tone with me!” Ma’s eyes narrowed. “No matter how old you are, how smart or successful you think you are, I am still your mother.”

Madeline glowered, but said nothing.

“And you *were* successful,” Ma continued. “But what now?”

Madeline let out a scornful laugh. “I’m here visiting you, Ma. And isn’t it so much fun?”

“Don’t blame me.” Ma threw the magazine back on the coffee table, and it made a

keen slapping noise when it hit the glass. “You have plenty of time to draw, to paint, to sculpt. To do anything! But instead you do nothing. That is not my fault.”

Madeline shook her head. “Fine, Ma. Whatever.” She leaned back against the sofa. “I don’t feel like arguing.”

“I’m not arguing, I’m asking.” Seeing that she had the upper ground again, Ma let her tone soften, but just a little. “Aren’t you bored? You used to do art all the time, every second of the day.”

“Things change.”

“Yes, and they should change again, if this is what you’ve settled on.” Now it was Ma’s turn to shake her head. “You know, I would rather you go back to Pittsburgh than stay here and waste your time. Go back to work at the museum. Aren’t you worried they’re going to fire you if you’re gone too long?”

“Not really.”

Ma snorted. “So arrogant. You think you’re irreplaceable?”

“No,” Madeline said, pushing herself up from the sofa forcefully. “But they’re not going to replace someone who doesn’t work for them!”

Ma grabbed her daughter’s arm before she could walk away. “What are you talking about?”

Madeline sighed. Ma watched her daughter’s nostrils flare as she calmed down, as she considered whether or not to talk. But Ma knew she would talk. This was how their fights always went.

“They already fired me, Ma.”

Stunned, Ma released her arm. All of the momentum she’d built up during the

argument quickly drained out of her as she struggled to comprehend. “Because of me? Because you had to come here?”

Madeline stared at her, measuring.

They’d never said it before, not explicitly, but Ma knew the euphemisms. “I know you’re not here to visit me,” she said quietly. “I’ve come back from Taiwan before. But Grace asked you. She needed help taking care of me, as I...” She trailed off, not wanting to admit to her condition out loud. Madeline let it go, but Ma could see the pity in her daughter’s eyes.

“No, Ma. They fired me a while ago.” Her voice softened as she made her own confession. “I haven’t worked there in almost two years.”

“Why?”

Madeline shrugged, even though she knew the reason. “I wouldn’t talk to anyone.”

“No one?” Ma asked, confused.

“No, Ma. I wouldn’t talk to anyone like Grace.” She spelled it out. “A therapist.”

And then Ma understood. She observed her daughter now, the way her head hung in defeat, yet her body stood braced, as if she expected to be punished for this failure. It was such a pathetic stance. In truth, there was a time when Ma would have been upset, when she would have yelled at Madeline for being so stubborn, for letting tragedy take over her life that way. But lately she’d become all too familiar with the bitter taste of loss and failure. Plus, she could still see the image she’d conjured earlier of Ben as he might have been now, and she had to admit he was as beautiful a child as Evan. He, too, would have had the best of both his worlds.

Ma had never been known for giving physical signs of affection. In her entire life, she had never been seen kissing her husband in public, or hugging anyone over the age of ten. But there were times, she knew, when human beings needed contact, needed to feel the warmth of another person's hand, or mouth, or body. This was one of those times.

She took a step toward her daughter, wrapped her arm awkwardly around Madeline's side, and pat her gently on the back. "It's okay," she said soothingly. "It was a hard time for you."

Slowly Madeline's chin came up, and she looked at her mother with surprised, appreciative eyes. Ma saw her own somber expression reflected in Madeline's dark irises, and she tried to smile encouragingly. When a tear rolled down her daughter's face, Ma quickly wiped it away with her finger.

"None of that," she said seriously. "What's done is done. We cannot change it. We can only accept it, and learn from it." She moved her arm from Madeline's back and cupped her daughter's face. "You have a special gift. You can make things beautiful. So take this, and make it beautiful."

Before Madeline could respond, Evan came back downstairs with the empty laundry basket in hand. "All done!" he reported cheerfully.

The two women quickly backed away from each other and turned to face the boy. "Thank you, Evan," Ma said, bowing her head.

Without a word, Madeline retreated to her bedroom. For a moment Ma watched her go, but remembering the boy, she forced her attention back to her grandson. "For being such a good helper, I think you should get a treat."

Evan beamed. "Chocolate?" he asked hopefully.

“Mango,” Ma corrected. She ushered him into the kitchen and retrieved the fruit from the refrigerator. When they were both seated at the island counter, she sliced the juicy round bulb into two halves. The flesh was the perfect shade of golden orange, and she knew it would be sweeter and more satisfying than any Hershey’s bar. She handed Evan his half and a spoon.

“*Ama*, aren’t you going to cut it into slices? That’s what Mom usually does.”

“No,” Ma answered gravely. “This is how I ate mangoes as a girl. My brothers and sisters and I climbed the trees like monkeys and brought home bags full of these fruit for our parents.” Suddenly, and just for a moment, she looked like a young, mischievous girl as she leaned in and asked, “Don’t you want to be a little monkey?”

Evan tilted his head, considering. Then he stuck his spoon into the mango and took an enthusiastic bite. The juices ran down the utensil and over his fingers, which returned eagerly to the remainder of his treat. Watching him, Ma couldn’t help smiling. He was a beautiful little monkey indeed.

Madeline waited at the crosswalk as cars sped by. In her sandals and sleeveless tunic, she was ill-equipped for the cool rain promised by the moody grey clouds, but she didn’t mind. In fact, the idea of falling victim to a loud and violent thunderstorm made her smile. She imagined herself soaked from head to toe, blue jeans turned black and sticking to her legs, long hair dripping against her back, and lightning flashing against a wild purple sky behind her.

The image matched her own disposition, which had been tempestuous ever since

the conversation with Ma in the living room. After she'd had some time to think about it, Madeline couldn't believe her mother's nerve. "Make it beautiful," Madeline muttered angrily. Whether she was talking to the phantom or herself was unclear, but his shadowy little form hovered by her side. She leaned forward to check the light. It was still red. "As if she knows anything about me or my art."

In Pittsburgh, they'd said the same things. "Work through the tragedy with your art," or "Find closure in your work." But what the hell did they know? Madeline asked herself. They just wanted her to produce, so they could market and sell and profit. Had any of them ever lost a husband and a son? Impossible. Because if they had, if they knew what it was like to spend every waking second aching for someone, trembling at the breeze in their hair because they thought it was their loved one's breath, choking on tears whenever a child says "Mama!" because that call will never again be for them—if they knew the simple, excruciating pain of that life which was not living at all, then they would say nothing. They would not attempt to console or encourage. They would not smile or hug. They would merely step aside and, with their silence, respect the dead, both those who had been taken to the next world, and those forced to remain here.

But Ma was not someone who understood this, or anything about Madeline, it often seemed. Ever since Madeline could remember, Ma had interfered, told her and Grace what they should think, feel, and do. It drove Madeline just as crazy now as it had fifteen, twenty years ago.

That was what had finally gotten her to give in and call Colin. Weeks had passed since the incident at Star Ice Café, and in that time Madeline hadn't heard a single word from him. Once or twice she considered breaking the silence herself, but she'd stopped

before dialing the last number. If Colin didn't want to see her, then she didn't want to see him either. She didn't need him, or anyone.

Today was different, she assured herself as the signal changed, giving her and the phantom permission to cross. Today was not about need, but rather lack of alternatives. She wanted to vent, but Grace never took sides, and the only other person in this city that she talked to was Colin.

Once they reached the other side of the street, Madeline led the phantom down the sidewalk toward Transco Tower and its Waterwall. That was where Colin had instructed her to meet, when she'd finally dialed the last digit of his phone number and forced herself to wait through the ringing. She remembered how calm he'd sounded, as if mere days had passed since they'd last seen each other, rather than almost a month. She'd been irritated at his reaction, and yet grateful for it at the same time.

She felt the same way now upon seeing that she, and not Colin, had arrived first. On the one hand, she would have preferred to keep him waiting, to have that little bit of the upper hand back. So far this time he'd called all the shots, and she wasn't used to that.

On the other hand, now she had the opportunity to appreciate one of Houston's most beloved attractions, and one of her favorites. A sort of urban waterfall, the Waterwall rose sixty-four feet into the air, paralleling the sixty-four stories of the corporate skyscraper it was meant to accompany. Every day from ten in the morning to ten at night, thousands of gallons of water streamed down both sides of the semi-circular wall. The outward curve lay opposite a small street and some expensive low-rise apartments. The inner curve faced a brick archway, which also served as one end of the rectangular lawn between Transco and the fountain. The rest of the grassy mall was

bordered by a cement walkway with benches and trees. Madeline remembered standing in the exact focal center of the Waterwall and gazing out at Transco and the park. Then she'd turned to the fountain and, although it wasn't exactly a sculpture, with its cool mist falling gently onto her skin, she'd promised herself that someday she would create great works of art like this.

Madeline returned to that same spot now. Even after twenty years, the magnitude and magnificence of the Waterwall struck her with awe. Dwarfed by its immensity, she almost felt like a child again.

Since no one was around on this cloudy mid-week afternoon, she gave in to her whim. She closed her eyes. She lifted her face to the stormy skies. Droplets fell lightly onto her hair and skin, from the clouds or the fountain she didn't know. She held her hands out, palms up, and deeply inhaled the wet air. She held the scent for a moment, then released it slowly. Despite the major interstate nearby, only the rumble of rushing water reached her ears.

She'd brought Charles here once. Grace and Jack had been newlyweds, both too busy with their own careers and too wrapped up in each other to chaperone a pair of lovesick students around. So Madeline packed a picnic lunch, and she and Charles found a spot on the grass where they could watch all the people but still hear each other talk.

It's a sunny Sunday afternoon, and the park is brimming with children playing ball, parents chatting and barely keeping an eye on their young ones, and couples strolling hand in hand along the perimeter. Madeline grins as she bites into a ham and cheese sandwich. "Isn't this place great?"

Charles doesn't answer. He is busy inspecting his own sandwich, lifting each

layer to verify its content and quality.

“Oh, relax,” Madeline says. With one finger, she pushes the sandwich closed. “I bought it at a bakery, okay?”

“I didn’t say anything,” Charles remarks. But he looks reassured and takes a bite. “I just remember the last time you made me a sandwich,” he adds after he has chewed.

“Hey!” She throws her napkin at him. “I was in a hurry,” she defends herself. “And horseradish looks an awful lot like mayonnaise when you’re in a hurry.”

He gives her a look, then they both laugh at the memory. Charles kisses her on the forehead as an apology, and they continue to eat and people-watch. Madeline explains the history of the Waterwall, how it and Transco Tower were designed by the famous architect Philip Johnson, how technically it was Williams Tower now, but she’d grown up with the other name and like many locals has no intention of calling it anything else. She is peeling clementines while Charles works on his second club sandwich, when suddenly a large red ball bounces onto their picnic blanket. Chasing after it comes a little girl with brown pigtails. Something about the girl’s eyes strike Madeline as she hands the ball back. They are small but not slanted.

The girl looks at her for a moment, as if deciding. Then she says, “*Xie xie, Jie jie,*” and runs off to rejoin her friends.

“What’d she say?” Charles asks. He puts the last bit of bread and roast beef into his mouth and wipes his hands with a napkin.

“Thank you,” Madeline translates without looking at him. She searches the crowd for the girl’s parents, hoping to confirm her hunch. “There they are!” she says triumphantly.

Charles follows her gaze to a middle-aged couple sitting on a bench watching a group of children play. “Who are they?” He scoots closer to her, puts his arms around hers, kisses her shoulder.

“That girl’s parents,” Madeline replies, shifting in to face him. “She’s a halfie. She said thank you and called me Big Sister in Mandarin. Plus, she had the look.”

Charles chuckles. “There’s a look?”

“Oh, yes,” Madeline answers very seriously. “It’s usually pretty easy to tell, because they seem out of place no matter who they’re with, Asians or whites.”

Charles lifts a brow. “Is that the only mix possible?”

“No, but it’s the most common among Chinese. The most accepted.”

“I see.”

Charles grows quiet, and she feels his body stiffen. Madeline peers at him closely, trying to read his mind through his eyes and his skin. Her clementine sits on the blanket, forgotten.

Finally Charles’ eyes meet hers. “Your mother doesn’t approve of us, does she?”

Madeline hesitates. “No,” she admits, wishing desperately that she could either lie or change the truth. “But I don’t care!” she adds hastily. “She’s in Taiwan, half a world away. Her opinion doesn’t matter.”

“And if she were here?”

“Her opinion doesn’t matter,” Madeline repeats.

He shakes his head. “She’s your mother.”

Slowly, as if it hurts him to move, he retracts his arms. He leans back on them and stares up at the clear pale blue of the sky. She observes him, and she is painfully aware of

the distance that has grown between them in just these few seconds.

They have never talked about this before. For them and their friends, race is not an issue. Several people they know are also dating outside their race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, tribe, or whatever. But none of them are Asian.

Charles doesn't need to ask why Grace's marriage to Jack is okay, but his relationship with Madeline isn't. She already explained that whites were the more common, more acceptable deviation.

Madeline reaches out and touches Charles on the arm. When he doesn't respond, she gently pulls him to her. They are face to face, and she can hear his breath, feel its warmth on her skin.

"Her opinion doesn't matter. Not to me, and I hope not to you. She comes from a different place, and she just can't understand. So I don't care what she thinks. And I don't care if you're black, white, yellow, green, or polka-dotted. I love you. Okay?"

He doesn't speak. For a long time, he just sits, staring back at her, silent. She faintly hears the cries of children, the murmur of the Waterwall, the cars on the freeway. But all of that is eclipsed by the pounding of her heart. Blood flows and throbs in her ears, each pulse reminding her of her greatest fear: that maybe it isn't okay. Maybe Charles can't forgive her mother. Maybe their love won't be enough.

Finally, Charles looks at her again. "I bet even I'd be able to spot a polka-dotted halfie."

Madeline half-laughs, half-exhales in relief. "Probably." She reaches behind his head and pushes him close for a kiss on the cheek.

"I love you too," he whispers.

They finish their picnic and carry their trash to a waste bin along the walking path. Madeline pulls him toward the fountain, and they amble hand in hand until they are directly in the center of the Waterwall. A family from Istanbul asks them to take their picture. Charles defers to Madeline. “You’re the artiste,” he says with a grin.

Madeline quickly sticks out her tongue at him before proceeding to help the foreigners. She counts to three and pushes the button, then secretly takes a couple more while they regroup for a second pose. She has always preferred candid shots, and she composed the pictures so beautifully that she knows the family will choose those, and not the posed ones, to show their friends back home.

With many thanks and quick bows of the head, the family walks away, leaving Madeline and Charles to themselves. She walks up to the wall, the roar of the water growing louder with every step. The way the fountain’s receptacle is designed, receding underneath the very stone on which she stands, gives the illusion of a great chasm that leads down to the center of the Earth. Madeline loves that.

Suddenly someone pushes her from behind, and she nearly stumbles into the Waterwall. She turns to see Charles darting around the corner. But before he turns, he gives a taunting wave and wink.

“Hey! Just where do you think you’re going?” she asks, laughing and getting ready to give chase.

“Nowhere,” Colin replied confusedly. “I just got here.”

Madeline blinked, and her eyes struggled to focus. The clear blue sky had disappeared, the fat white clouds replaced with gloomier versions of themselves. The bustle of children and inattentive parents were gone, but in the distance she saw the

phantom darting in and out of the trees. Dark, beautiful Charles had run away, but there was tall and soft-spoken Colin.

He stepped closer, concern crowding his brown eyes. “Madeline, who were you talking to?”

“No one,” she answered instinctively, defensively. The phantom had paused his games to watch them. She could tell he was curious, and worried that she might need him. She shook her head. “I mean, I was talking to myself. You know, just thinking out loud.” The excuse sounded lame even to her, but Colin didn’t press for more, and reluctantly the phantom resumed his romp. A little cold and a lot self-conscious, Madeline crossed her arms over her chest. Faint goose bumps rose over her bare skin. “Nice to finally see you again,” she said with sincerity.

Colin frowned and glanced at his watch. “Have you been waiting long? I didn’t think my meeting had run late.”

Only now did Madeline notice the briefcase and business attire. He must have been consulting with one of the corporations in Transco. She might have put that together sooner if... She cut off her own thoughts.

“No, I haven’t been waiting long.” She hesitated. “But I wasn’t referring to today.”

He smiled. “Ah.” He said no more.

They were both standing by the archway now, out of the path of the Waterwall’s spray. Colin had moved close, so that he sort of dwarfed her too. But she didn’t feel like a child next to him. She felt safer, stronger.

“You’re not going to say anything about it?”

Colin shrugged. “What’s there to say?”

She thought there might have been plenty. She wasn’t sure whether his impassive composure was good or bad. “Well, I hope you’re not mad that I didn’t tell you.” It wasn’t an apology, but a challenge.

He sort of laughed. “I hope you’re not insulted that I didn’t already know.” He shifted his briefcase to the other hand. “Apparently it was a pretty big deal in the news, as I’ve discovered.” He paused. “Apparently you’re a pretty big deal, huh?”

“Was,” she corrected. She turned away, contemplated the grass. It was so vividly green that it nearly stung her eyes. “Thankfully this country doesn’t prey on or obsess over its artists the way it does its actors, or musicians.”

“Mmm,” he agreed with a nod. “But I still found plenty of material on you. And incidentally, it turns out I’ve seen your work before.”

She raised a brow. “Have you?”

“At a networking conference last year in Silicon Valley.” He grinned. “And by networking, I don’t mean meet-and-greet.”

Madeline groaned.

“What? Are you offended that your sculpture—the Phoenix, I believe it was called—was surrounded by a bunch of computer geeks?”

“No.” She clasped her hands to her heart as if experiencing chest pains. “I’m just recovering from your awful pun.”

He laughed and punched her playfully in the shoulder. She grabbed his wrist to deflect it, and he didn’t pull away. He let her fingers linger and warm his skin. She felt the heat coursing from his body into hers, reddening her cheeks, and after a moment she

had to release him.

Colin reached up to loosen his tie. Then he decided to take it off altogether, and put it in his briefcase. He removed his jacket as well, and slung it over his shoulder. He rolled his head from side to side, stretching his neck. “There, much better.” He smiled at her. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Madeline nodded her assent and the two started down the cement walkway. Thunder bellowed in the distance, causing Madeline’s head to turn. She saw lightning flash not too far away, in the vicinity of Grace’s house. Evan, she’d learned, was slightly afraid of storms, but Grace was home with him and Ma today. She had testified downtown in a court case involving a minor, so she’d closed her practice for the day. That was what had allowed Madeline her freedom this afternoon.

When she turned back abruptly, she caught Colin watching her. But he didn’t look bashful or apologetic, and his scrutinizing gaze didn’t falter.

“What?”

“You tell me,” he said. “You called.”

“Because you didn’t,” she tried to protest. She felt scrambled, and she didn’t like it. She told herself it was because she couldn’t keep up with the stride of his long legs.

“Slow down.”

He did. “I never call. It’s always you.”

Madeline frowned. He was right, of course, and she’d always thought of that as being her advantage, her command. But now something in the way he said it made it sound like pressure instead of prerogative.

“I was giving you space,” she muttered.

“That’s generous of you,” he said, clearly amused by her discomfort. “I didn’t need it, but I appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

He waited for her to respond, but she was silent as they rounded the first corner. She was thinking, thinking back to their first meeting at Firenze, and their first lunch a week later, and the way he’d smelled both times, and every time after. Like rosemary. She’d resented him for it, for helping her traitorous nose to forget the scent of Charles. But now, with the storm coming and the breeze blowing harder, she couldn’t smell Colin. And she resented that.

They turned another corner, and Madeline became aware of their silence.

“I got in a fight with my mom,” she confessed. And it sounded so childish to her, as if she were still the teenager who didn’t want to take violin lessons anymore, who came home past curfew and then got upset about being caught.

But Colin merely asked, “About what?” in a tone that didn’t make her feel silly or immature.

“My art.” She explained to Colin how Ma had picked on her while she’d been reading on the sofa. She told him Ma had called her lazy, unproductive, a has-been. She admitted to him that, as Ma had accused, she hadn’t produced anything since coming to Houston. But, she told him, that was none of Ma’s business.

She left out that she’d been fired from the Carnegie, that she refused to see a psychiatrist, that actually she hadn’t worked on a piece since the accident. That at first she’d attributed her abstinence to mourning, then to apathy, then to lack of inspiration. That now she feared she might have lost whatever special spark ignited inside a person and made them create.

Colin listened respectfully, attentively. The storm was drawing nearer, and a strong wind pushed her toward him. She let some of the distance between them close, but she needed those last couple of inches to remain.

“This happened...?”

“A few days ago,” she finished for him.

“And you’re still mad?”

“Yes.”

“At whom?”

Initially Madeline thought he’d misunderstood the whole story. Then she realized it was a trick question.

He’d understood even before she did: she wasn’t mad at Ma. She was mad at herself, because Ma was right. She *was* a lazy, unproductive has-been. And neither grief, nor apathy, nor lack of inspiration had anything to do with it. For the past three years, she’d been self-indulgent. She’d used Charles and Ben as her excuse to give up. She was mad at herself.

“I hate you,” she said without enthusiasm.

He smiled. “I know.” He put his arm around her neck, eliminating those last few inches she’d left between them. Her body tensed, and instantly she felt sorry because he must have noticed it. But he kept his arm where it was, and she forced herself to relax. It was a common gesture of friendship, she told herself.

It started to rain. Lightly at first, but the downpour built quickly, and in a matter of seconds the storm was fully upon them. Madeline shrieked with delight as Colin ran for a tree. She followed, but she was laughing and staring up at the sky. Perhaps the

violent skies and roaring thunder no longer fit her mood—or vice versa, really—but she still loved a good storm.

Colin, on the other hand, looked concerned.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her eyes crinkled with amusement.

“My laptop.” She could barely hear him over the rain. He pointed to his satchel.

“It’s my life, my work, everything. It cannot get wet.”

She pulled his jacket from his shoulder and threw it over the briefcase. “Now you can run to your car.”

He shook his head.

“Don’t worry about leaving me here. I—”

“No, that’s not it,” he cut her off. “I parked too far away. Even with the jacket, I don’t think there’s enough protection for this.”

Madeline glanced out. They were stuck halfway between Transco Tower and the Waterwall, but she could barely see either. The rain fell down so fast and thick that it was practically solid. It pelted the ground, sometimes bouncing back up against itself violently. Many drops snuck through the thick roof of branches and leaves above them, tumbling roughly onto Madeline and Colin.

“On a day like this, you seriously didn’t bring an umbrella?”

“I don’t own one.” His voice was low and grumbly like the thunder as it rolled past them.

“Are you serious?”

“I’ve lost every umbrella I ever had.”

Somehow Madeline wasn’t surprised. Ma’s impression of Colin—“*Oh, you mean*

that little cross-eyed boy who used to follow you around the art store?”—suddenly came back to her, and she had to suppress a laugh. She could picture him as a gangly teenager trying to find his umbrella before running out to the school bus, then giving up and using newspaper to cover himself instead. He’d have been drenched, his glasses speckled with water, pulpy newsprint hanging limp from his hands. Madeline looked at him now. He’d had to bend his head to fit under the tree, his glasses were slightly fogged, and he was holding his briefcase wrapped in the jacket like a baby swathed in blankets. Maybe he hadn’t outgrown his awkwardness after all.

“*You* didn’t bring one?” he asked.

“Nope. Because I don’t mind getting wet.” To prove the point, she stuck one arm out from under the safety of the tree. She pulled it back in a few seconds later, covered with fat droplets that rolled down her slick skin and plopped onto the muddy ground. “Maybe you should look into water-proofing ‘your life, your work, your everything,’” she teased.

Colin repositioned his jacket over his briefcase. “There’s other stuff in here besides my laptop,” he muttered.

The rain began to thin out. The storm was moving away. It wasn’t light enough for them to venture out yet, but the stealthy drops had stopped trickling through their shelter.

“I have something of yours, actually.”

Madeline gave him a quizzical look. “Have you been stealing from me?”

He shook his head. “Just wait for the rain to stop.”

She didn’t want to, but he looked so uncomfortable that she didn’t have the heart

to push the issue. Her sympathy was rewarded: the rain stopped after just another minute, and the two gladly returned to the sidewalk. Colin sighed over his expensive loafers, which had been ruined by their little mud bath. Madeline, on the other hand, stepped into a large puddle that had formed nearby, and her feet and sandals emerged relatively clean.

“I hate you,” Colin said.

“I know.” Madeline smirked.

He held out his jacket and briefcase. “Hold for a minute?” She took them. Colin shook his head like a dog drying off, and instinctively Madeline shrank back to avoid getting wet, forgetting it was too late for that. Then he rolled up the sleeves of his button-down shirt, and as the cloth was still too damp to put anything on over, he took the jacket back and hung it over one arm.

“Open it.” He motioned with his head to the briefcase, which she was still holding.

She did. She saw a few papers, a calculator, the aforementioned priceless laptop, and something wrapped with brown butcher paper. “I don’t see anything of mine.”

He pointed to the plainly wrapped package. “Sorry. In addition to umbrellas, I don’t own any giftwrap.”

She eyed him suspiciously, but slid the package out from between the laptop and the papers. He took the briefcase back. As she began to unwrap her gift, he continued, “Now, I clearly know nothing about art, but I read on the internet somewhere that watercolor is your favorite medium.”

By this time, Madeline had pulled away all the butcher paper to reveal a Winsor & Newton deluxe studio set. Inside would be a full palette of watercolor pans, brushes,

and a mixing tray, all set inside an elegant mahogany case. It had been a while since she'd purchased any supplies herself, but Madeline knew that this kind of quality didn't come for less than a hundred dollars, and she wasn't sure she and Colin were close enough to warrant that.

"You shouldn't have," was all she could think of to say.

She was referring to the gift, but he pretended not to know. "Oh, believe me, I didn't want to. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I wanted to get to know you in a more..." He stopped to search for the right word. "A more genuine way. But I am a tech guy at heart, so when it became clear that you were holding back a lot more than I thought, I gave in and Googled you." He gave an apologetic half-shrug, then grinned. "Did you know you're a pop star in Malaysia?"

She laughed despite herself. "No, how fascinating." Madeline sighed. "But seriously, you didn't need to get me this."

"Why not? Have it already?"

As a matter of fact, she did. But she hadn't brought any of her art supplies to Houston. They were all still sitting in the basement studio of the house in Pittsburgh. That whole place was probably like a museum now, she thought. An exhibit of the person she used to be. All that she'd left behind had become artifacts. Dead to her.

"No," she said finally. "I don't have it already."

"Good," he replied. "You have to promise me you'll use them, though."

"Oh, I will."

It was an automatic response, one given without thought or earnestness, and Colin wasn't satisfied. He looked directly into her eyes. "You promise?"

She met his stare with equal solemnity. “I promise.”

“Good.”

They continued to walk, in silence, Madeline carrying her new watercolors and the butcher paper folded up by her side, Colin with his jacket over one arm and his briefcase in hand. When they reached the other side of the rectangular path, they said their goodbyes. Madeline headed left, to where she’d parked, and Colin went right. She had taken about fifteen steps before she turned around and called out, “It doesn’t always have to be me.”

Colin stopped and faced her. “What?”

“You have my number,” she said. “You don’t have to wait for me to call.”

He smiled before continuing on his way.

She put the watercolors on top of the butcher paper on the passenger seat. Every now and then, and whenever she got caught at a red light, she would quickly glance down at them, and her heart would beat faster. She insisted that her excitement came only from the thought of the gift, not the giver. She was going to be an artist again. She was going to paint.

When she got to Grace’s house, Madeline rewrapped the Winsor & Newton set in the brown paper. She carried it in casually, hoping not to draw any attention. She didn’t want to have to explain to Ma or Grace where the gift had come from—or really, *who* it had come from. But she needn’t have worried. The first thing she heard as she closed the kitchen door behind her was Jack’s voice, loud and furious, bellowing from somewhere upstairs.

“Goddamit, Grace!”

Madeline couldn't make out her sister's words. Through the walls all she could hear was muffled protest. She set her keys and the watercolors on the kitchen counter and hurried to the stairs. Taking them two at a time, she bounded to her sister's defense. She wasn't sure what exactly she could do, but there was no way she was going to let Jack treat Grace this way.

However, when she reached the top of the staircase, Madeline froze, and her heart broke a little. Evan stood by the far end of the banister, his head barely peeking over the rail. His brown eyes were wide with fear and imminent tears. One look at the poor boy and instantly Madeline knew the best way she could help her sister.

Evan ran to her. "Aunt Maddy!" He threw his arms around her waist and clung tight, like the phantom sometimes did. Only Evan's touch had a warmth that Madeline only now realized the phantom's lacked.

"It's okay," she murmured, stroking his hair. The motion was as soothing to her as it was to him. She lowered her eyelids and let herself hug him close. Her clothes were still a bit damp from the storm she and Colin had gotten caught in, but Evan didn't seem to mind. She couldn't see him, but she felt his young face pressed into her stomach, and his tiny hands at the small of her back. He could have been any little boy—could have been *her* little boy. But he wasn't, and she knew that.

She'd always been afraid to touch him this way, afraid that her mind would forget her nephew, would lose him in her desperate longing for her son. She was afraid that she would wish he were Ben, maybe even pretend that he was. And that wouldn't have been fair to Evan. Or to Ben, really. But there they were, hugging each other hard, and he wasn't her son, and she knew that. She was fine with that.

“It’s okay,” she repeated. “Let’s just go back to your room.”

Madeline led him back along the banister to his bedroom. A quick glance told her that the toy chest would serve as the best distraction, so she lifted the lid and, with a nod of her head, motioned for him to pick something. Evan selected a Lego set and carried it to his play corner. He began to rebuild a castle that had been attacked by his collection of dinosaur figurines a few days ago. Madeline stayed for a minute, watching to make sure he’d be alright.

Suddenly she thought of something. “Evan, where’s your Ama?” Panic leaked into her thoughts, but she kept it out of her voice for the boy’s sake. Ma could have easily been frightened and disoriented by the fighting, and forgotten because of it. If she had chosen to distance herself from the chaos, to simply walk away, no one would have noticed. Madeline pictured her mother wandering the neighborhood in her big cotton pajamas, a frail old woman lost among the multi-million-dollar homes.

But Evan pointed across the hall to Ma’s room. She was safe.

Madeline nearly shook with relief. “I’m going to go check on her, okay? You stay here.”

He nodded, absorbed in his little world of primary colors and plastic.

Madeline slipped back into the hallway and closed the door behind her. She hoped that would block out the worst of the fighting, which still seemed to be going strong.

“I didn’t touch your things, Jack.” Grace’s tone made her words sound more like a plea than a defense.

“Then where the hell is the file, Grace?” Jack’s voice rippled with anger.

Madeline didn’t need to see Jack’s face to know how ugly it was right then,

contorted with fury, eyes sneering and demon-like. She'd always been repulsed by it, by his ability to transform so quickly and completely at the slightest provocation. She'd first seen it during a visit to Stanford. It was Grace's last year there, and her first dating Jack. He was studying for his boards at Grace's desk, while she and Grace were giggling over some romantic comedy on television. Out of nowhere, he'd punched the desk and growled at them to keep their "idiotic tittering" down. Grace was clearly horrified, mortified, by his outburst, but not surprised. She apologized and made excuses about how stressed and tired Jack was, how much pressure he was under. Madeline dutifully accepted her sister's justifications—or pretended to, anyway—but she'd vowed that very second to never be with a man who could do that, who could become so ugly so swiftly, and at something so insignificant. It was something she'd watched for in Charles. But he'd been gentle and patient, always. Even when he was studying for his boards.

The fighting seemed to hit a lull as Madeline opened the door to her mother's room. The darkness took her by surprise. The lights were off and the curtains drawn. Madeline fumbled for the switch, but Ma called out, "No!" So the room stayed dark.

Madeline waited a moment for her eyes to adjust to the weak light that filtered through the gauzy curtains. When they finally did, she saw Ma sitting in a chair, rocking back and forth, with her knees pulled up under her chin. She wore the same expression that Evan had when Madeline found him at the top of the stairs.

"Ma?" She walked slowly towards her mother.

Ma nodded. "She's fighting with Father," she whispered.

Madeline stopped short. It took her a moment to figure out what was going on, but she realized that Ma was not with her. She was not there in Grace's house. Ma

thought that the voices she heard arguing belonged to her parents. In a way, she *had* been lost in the confusion, just as Madeline had feared.

But, Madeline thought, that didn't necessarily mean that they couldn't still help each other. "Why are they fighting?" she asked, resuming her walk to Ma.

Like a frightened child, Ma continued to rock back and forth. She stopped only when Madeline was standing right next to her chair. Then she took Madeline's hand and clasped it tightly. "*Jie jie!*" she cried.

Madeline felt the words—"big sister"—like a punch to the gut. But what could she do? She had never seen her mother look so vulnerable, so young and scared.

"I'm here," she murmured reassuringly. She began to stroke Ma's head, as she'd done to Evan. And like his, Ma's hair was thick and soft, even though it had long been grey as rain-laden clouds outside. Madeline tried not to think about how much Ma resembled Evan in that moment. She preferred not to compare her strong-willed, overbearing mother to a small and helpless child.

"What are they fighting about?" Madeline asked again.

"Father misplaced his files, and he thinks Mother moved them," Ma replied. Her voice sounded younger, its pitch perhaps altered by fear. "If he doesn't find them soon, he might beat her."

Madeline's whole body tensed, taut as a violin string, and her hand stopped its soothing rhythm.

Ma had been with Grace and Jack for nearly a month before Madeline had come to help. Had she witnessed something, some act of violence between them? Had Jack's habitual tantrums given way to a more serious kind of temper?

Madeline knelt in front of her mother and took both wrinkled hands into her own. Ma had started to rock again as soon as Madeline had stopped stroking her hair, but Madeline held her steady now. She looked directly into Ma's quivering eyes. "Ma, listen to me. I know you're scared, and your mind is racing, but I need you to think clearly now." She had never tried this before, had never attempted to force her mother back into lucidity. She'd worried that it would be too much of a shock. But this was too important, and Madeline needed to know. "Ma, has Jack ever physically harmed Grace?"

If she was scared before, she was terrified now. Ma pulled her hands away and shrunk back from Madeline. "Who is Jack?" She pronounced his name slowly, as if it were foreign, her tongue and teeth stumbling over the strange sound. "Grace?" Not recognizing her own daughter's name, she split it into three more manageable syllables: *guh-ray-suh*.

Madeline sighed. Guilt, sadness, frustration—a whole palette of emotions painted themselves into the realization that she couldn't bring her mother back. But the issue of Jack and Grace was too important for Madeline to let go. While she hated the idea of playing along with Ma's dementia—of giving in, essentially—Madeline knew she had no choice if she wanted to learn anything at all.

"*Mei mei*," she said, addressing her mother the way she would a little sister. She noticed Ma relax a bit and felt encouraged to continue with the tactic. "*Mei mei*, I haven't been paying attention for the past few months. Can you tell me, has Father hit Mother?"

Ma thought for a moment. "No."

"Are you sure?"

Ma nodded, and Madeline felt some measure of relief. Granted, there was no way

she could trust Ma's word as truth, but something was better than nothing. She decided to keep a closer eye on matters, to see for herself and be sure.

She stood back up. "*Mei mei*, why don't you take a nap? It'll calm you down."

Ma followed Madeline obediently to the bed. Her mind might have told her she was a child, but her body was grounded in reality, and she moved with the slow, tremulous steps of her age. She got under the covers but remained sitting up, her eyes still filled with concern. "What about Mother?"

Madeline quickly crafted a reassurance. "Don't worry. I know where Father put his files," she lied.

Placated, Ma lay down, and Madeline tucked her in. She left the room, again closing the door behind her to block out any noise that might disrupt her mother's rest. Then Madeline stood in the hallway, listening.

Nothing. No more fighting.

She wondered where Grace was.

Grace shadowed Jack as he ravaged the house. He had come home early, ranting about a missing file. He was supposedly searching for it now, but his rapid pace and rough handling of things was almost certainly doing more harm than good. Grace tried to calm him down as he picked up a Chinese language newspaper and then slammed it down again on the coffee table, but he blew past her and across the house to shuffle through papers on the narrow table by the front door where they put the mail each day.

"Honey, if you just think about where you last had the file, I'm sure we could find it," she said in as soothing a tone as she could manage.

He ignored her.

She straightened the lampshade he'd bumped into before following him upstairs. Evan had come out of his room at the sound of the commotion. Grace pointed at his door. "Go back inside, Sweetheart." Then she hurried into her own bedroom after Jack.

He whirled through their suite, rifling through the stack of ESPN and Time magazines on his nightstand, as well as the patient files on hers. He even checked both closets and the reading material on the stand by the toilet. He was on all fours with one hand holding up the comforter so he could check under the bed when Grace came up behind him.

"Honey," she started, but she was cut off by the loud thud of his head hitting the bed frame.

"Goddammit, Grace!"

She winced and helped him up. He pressed a hand to the point of impact. "Shit," he muttered. "I'm going to have a bump."

"Sorry." She tried to find a bright side. "It probably won't show under your hair," she offered.

He glared at her for an instant. "Just stay out of my way," he snarled.

He made his way back down the stairs to start the search again. She sat numbly on the edge of the bed and listened to his footsteps as he moved through the house, from his office to the kitchen, the living room to the laundry. He wasn't using any common sense, wasn't trying to remember where he'd gone with the file or piece together its location. Like a beast or a brute, he was on a rampage, senselessly charging about.

He didn't bother with Evan's or either of the guests' rooms. He hadn't been to any

of them in months. In fact, the more Grace thought about it, the more she realized the file had to be in either their suite or his office. Those were the only two places in the house Jack could ever be found anymore.

As she stood up to conduct her own search of their rooms, Jack barreled back in. “What are you doing just standing there?” he snapped. “You could help me, you know.”

She knew it would be useless to tell him that that was exactly what she was trying to do. In contrast to his agitated and cursory hunt, Grace calmly and carefully ferreted through the stacks on their nightstands.

Jack emerged from their closet empty-handed and even more frustrated. He spoke as if he’d never stopped. “Especially since you’re the one who lost it.” He joined her in the bathroom, where she’d gone to double-check the magazine rack they kept between the Jacuzzi and the toilet. “You’re always moving stuff. It drives me nuts!”

“I didn’t touch your things, Jack.” As soon as she said it, she felt ashamed. Her tone made her words sound more like a plea than a defense.

Jack’s face contorted into an ugly, malevolent scowl. “Then where the hell is the file, Grace?” Anger simmered in his voice.

“Right here,” she said quietly. And, kneeling by the toilet, she lifted a thin manila folder into the air.

She didn’t need to remind him that he was the only one who ever brought reading material into the bathroom, because they both already knew it. Realizing his error—even if he would never admit it—sobered him. He let out a breath that expressed both relief at having found the file and a sort of amused disbelief at being the one to blame.

Grace didn’t find it funny.

“Thanks,” he said. He took the folder from her, flipped through its contents to make sure it was complete, and then held out a hand to help her up from the floor.

Cautiously, she accepted.

Jack’s metamorphosis back into a calm, composed, even handsome man, was as sudden and startling as it had been in the other direction. It reminded Grace of the storm that had passed so quickly over their home not an hour ago. He kissed her on the forehead, and she resisted the urge to recoil. “I’ve got to head back to work with this now. But if I hurry, I might get enough work done in the next couple of hours to join y’all for dinner.”

She worked up a “Great” from some reservoir of automated civility inside herself, attached a faint smile to make it more convincing. He didn’t seem to notice her lack of enthusiasm.

Like a statue, Grace waited until she heard the front door close before she let herself collapse against the side of the Jacuzzi. Her breath came out in ragged puffs, as if she had been running, or were about to cry. She pressed her lips together and forced herself to inhale and exhale in a regular, steady rhythm. She was still wearing the skirt suit she’d put on for her court appearance, and though it fit comfortably, she felt constrained by the jacket. She unbuttoned it quickly and tossed it in the direction of the hamper. She slipped off her pointed black pumps and gently kicked them aside. Her hair suddenly seemed heavy and tight against her head, so she reached up and pulled out all the pins, letting them fall wherever they might.

Her hands, she realized, were itching for movement. She forced them to stop. She forced herself to hold everything perfectly still, as if that would hold everything inside of

her together as well. And there she sat, on the edge of the tub with her face in her hands, when Madeline walked in.

“Maddy.” Grace sounded breathless, surprised. Quickly she straightened and pushed her hair back. She tugged at her blouse and wished she hadn’t taken off her jacket or shoes, her professional armor. Madeline was watching her, and Grace wondered how long she had been in the house, how much she had heard. How much she, Grace, would have to explain and excuse.

Madeline opened her mouth to speak, and Grace braced for whatever her sister might voice—astonishment, anger, disappointment. Or perhaps one of the emotions that was currently coursing through her own veins: anguish, fatigue, shame. But Madeline closed her mouth again without a word, and all Grace could feel was gratitude.

It was enough to rally her. She stood and smiled while Madeline stayed uncomfortably in the doorway. “Did you have a nice afternoon out?” Grace asked.

Madeline shrugged. Her eyes remained wary, and Grace could see curiosity, and barely restrained frustration, swimming in them. She didn’t want to give Madeline any time to release that.

“Looks like you got caught in the storm, huh?” She swept Madeline back through the bedroom and into the hall. “Why don’t you change out of your wet clothes and I’ll throw them in the wash?”

Her voice took on the fake radiance that people used for one thing and one thing only: pretending everything was fine, including themselves. She had heard it countless times from her patients, most of whom were thankfully still too young and not damaged enough to have learned to mask it. Grace, on the other hand, should have been better,

more in control. She'd been trained to keep her voice neutral and her emotions at bay. In her profession, everything was about the other person; she basically didn't exist.

Madeline had walked to the threshold of her room but lingered there. Grace knew her sister was silently evaluating, judging her, deciding whether or not to obey. She thought of the way Madeline would have handled the situation, handled Jack, with a firm and equally assertive vigor. She had always been more of an eye-for-an-eye kind of person. But Grace preferred not to escalate matters, to wait until they could be resolved calmly and maturely through introspection and discussion. She wondered if Madeline would remember and respect that. She held her breath as she waited to find out.

“Okay,” Madeline said. “But Grace?”

She exhaled. “Yes?”

“We're not going to pretend this didn't happen.” As she spoke, Madeline began to walk back to Grace, who willed herself to ignore the itch to flee, the instinct to retreat to the safety of her bedroom and lock the door. “When you're ready,” her sister continued, “we're going to talk about this.” They were standing right in front of each other now, and her sister's eyes bore into her own. Madeline hesitated for a moment, then wrapped Grace in a fierce embrace. Her wet clothes dampened Grace's as she spoke into her ear.

“Remember, I'm your sister. You don't need to hide anything from me.”

Thin squares of paper lay across the dining room table. They were orange on one side, black on the other. Ma carefully worked one sheet, bending the corners into the center and checking where they met. When the intersection formed four perfect right

angles, she pressed her knuckle firmly against each crease and ran her hand from one end to the other. Then she set the square aside and picked up another, humming all the while.

She was making a tiger, in honor of the daughter who would be born next year. The daughter that Ma's mother had seen in a dream. A true American daughter.

With a smile, Ma paused her origami and put a hand on her stomach. The belly lay too flat, as it had with Grace. Ma frowned. She did not want another weak newborn, another child who would struggle to grow to the same size as the other children, who would be meek and introverted, who would creep along the wall like a vine rather than stand tall and proud like a sunflower. Oh, Grace was a dutiful child, and smart and pretty, but Ma could see that she would struggle. Some people always looked for an easier way across the river; a special few simply dove in. Ma would have to eat more, even when she wasn't hungry, to give her second daughter the strength to swim.

With a nod to her own philosophies, Ma returned to her work. Carefully she slipped the largest pieces of paper into each other to form the tiger's body. The smaller units she linked together to create a rope-like tail. Finally, an intricately folded orange head, which looked a bit like a crushed blossom, was delicately fastened to the rest. Ma leaned back and, holding it out in her palm, examined her origami wild cat with pride. "You will be a good daughter," she whispered.

Just then, a great pain seized her chest. The paper tiger fell to the floor as Ma clapped one hand to her heart and struggled to find support with the other. The table's polished surface slipped away beneath her fingertips, and for a moment her eyes went wide with fear, erasing the creases of age on her forehead. She exhaled forcefully—once, twice—as if trying to dislodge something in her lungs. She couldn't scream.

After one excruciating minute, the pain began to dissipate, replaced by a tingling sensation that made Ma feel like she was trapped in slow motion. But these pins and needles paled in comparison to the agony of before, and she managed to breathe again. Relieved, she sluggishly retrieved the origami animal from the carpet and set it on the table.

“Perhaps I was wrong,” she remarked with a faint smile. She moved her hand from her chest to her heart. “You seem too strong for me already, my little tiger.”