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## Trouble Comes From the Mouth

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Trouble Comes From the Mouth

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Fiction

by

Victoria Cho  
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## Alien

Liz Yoo was unhappy because the boy who bullied her was cast in the play alongside her. She had hoped the drama teacher would find no part for Jordan Pites in *Peter Pan*, but the teacher had cast him as Captain Hook. Liz couldn't even celebrate her role as the play's star. Not with the idea that she was going to be sharing the stage with the boy whose rumors and threats had made her cry.

She was examining the list outside of the auditorium and hoping she had misread. One girl came up to her and yelled "Congratulations." Another girl said, "Peter Pain isn't Asian" and continued walking. Not that Liz would have known how to respond if the girl had stayed.

The bell rang. She went to her next class, science, and wondered if she could request that the teacher re-consider Jordan. Liz wasn't sure she trusted this boy, a boy who spilled milk on her homework, called her "rice-picker" and "pig," and spread a rumor that Liz's family ate dogs for dinner ("because that's what they do in China") so that the entire sixth grade called her "Dog Girl" for months.

Jordan sat in the middle row in science, and Liz sat in the front. When they began to copy notes from the board, Liz heard Jordan whisper. The words rippled up towards her: "You're not Peter Pan. Freak. Ching, chong, ping, pong, suck me."

She used to tell teachers about Jordan, but they never did anything. She told her parents a boy at school was bothering her, and they told her to ignore him. Pretend he doesn't exist. When she mentioned Jordan to her older brother Kevin, who was finishing eighth grade, he suggested she tell the principal someone was making racist remarks to her.

"That scares me," she said.

"I'd like to help you more, but it doesn't get better when you're older," he said. "Why do you think I never hang out with people?" He went back to his room and practiced his trumpet, which he played for hours every day.

She wanted to cry when she heard Jordan's words travel up the aisle to her ears, knowing that no one in that line of kids stopped it. They all passed the message. She started to write "Jordan" on her paper instead of the word from the board. She caught herself and erased it. A few other people in the class snickered. She wanted someone to say something to him, but no one ever did.

That night, Liz didn't bother telling her parents that she got the lead role in the play. Her parents were discussing something about the trip they'd take next summer to Korea. Liz wasn't sure because when they spoke Korean rapidly, she didn't fully understand. What if a group of girls helped her push Jordan into a ditch or cornered him and forced him to apologize to Liz? They could tie his hands together with some rope from gym and scream curse words until he cried. She would use every name she heard, not all of them towards her, but ones kids had called each other at school: bitch, nigger, faggot, redneck, fuckface, and asshole.

\* \* \*

Even without Jordan's comments, Liz was unpopular. She was the fat, quiet girl. She ate a lot of packaged cakes when she was home alone. The girls she wanted to be friends with, other girls who were avid readers and whose opinions in English class Liz admired, told her she couldn't sit with them at lunch. So Liz sat with a couple of other quiet girls but instead of being friends, the three of them just sat in silence and didn't make eye contact.

A few days after she saw she was Peter Pan, she knocked on Kevin's door. He was in the middle of practicing his trumpet but stopped to let Liz enter. They had just finished dinner, and Liz was supposed to be doing her homework. She sat on his floor. He stood and fiddled with the keys of his trumpet. She was used to not getting much sleep because of the long, late hours he spent practicing. At first, she hated it. And him. It wasn't just the noise. It was that he was very good, and she knew it. His ribbons from marching band concerts hung above his Dell computer.

She had no ribbons though, and this made her wonder if perhaps she was simply the kind of girl who didn't deserve ribbons.

"How do you make friends?" she asked.

He stopped fiddling with the keys. "Why?" he asked.

"I want people to stop being so mean."

He shook his head. "I can't help you. When's the last time you've seen me hang out with someone?"

"I thought Matt was your friend."

"There's a difference between a friend and someone who wants the geometry homework answers."

"So you don't have friends either?"

"Liz, why did you come in here?"

"I'm trying to talk," she said.

"I'm busy," he said.

That night, she had a dream of an alien. The creature was tall and thin like a basketball player, made of blue slime, and had a small head with large flaps for ears. The face was full of holes: two small ones for eyes, one speck for a nose, and a ping-pong-ball-sized one for a mouth. Two long fingers protruded from each hand. Its feet were blobs that left slime trails.

They walked side by side in the Fashion Square Mall. She felt very comfortable around the alien, as if they had been best friends for years. The alien took her hand. They passed stores with window displays, except the models actually looked like Liz. Like Liz, they were thicker in the middle, had Asian eyes and flat noses and straight black hair down their shoulders with a part



on the right. They even slumped a little like her. People from school passed them: her gym teacher, the smiling girl who wore pink every day, the eighth grader who helped the music teacher, and one of the counselors.

“Hi Liz,” one said. They all had things to say: “You’re beautiful.” “Won’t you be my friend?” “Can I get your autograph?” “Can I buy you lunch today?”

They waved. The girl blew her a kiss.

Liz waved back, unsure if they were sincere. She and the alien stopped in front of the fountain. The alien bent towards her and said, “You’re a wonderful person.”

She looked at this thing and even though its mouth didn’t move, she knew it was smiling.

Nobody had ever described her as wonderful.

“There’s a boy at school,” she said.

“Yes, dear,” it said. Its voice was hollow and soothing. Some of its slime began to drip onto her hand. For a moment, she was repulsed and wanted to release its hand, but she didn’t. The alien could not help its slime dripping. It was simply built this way.

“He told people at school that my family eats dog,” she said. “I’ve never eaten dog in my life. He said that I can eat twenty Twinkies, and my whole family came here in a boat and work at a Chinese restaurant. We don’t eat Chinese food. My parents traveled by plane. My dad is a doctor.”

“You’re right,” it said. “Those are very mean.”

“I would like for him to break his leg, so he can’t be in the play with me,” Liz said. “Or maybe have the flu.”

The alien slowly nodded. It paused and then said, “I will be here for you. Let’s talk again soon.”

Before Liz could ask the alien more questions, it vanished. She woke up.

She wanted the alien to sit in her class, terrify everyone, and take Liz away to its universe, some place with blue people where everyone liked Liz. She woke up, got ready for school, and had toast with jam. Her mother scolded her.

“The jelly is dripping,” her mom said. “I made your lunch. Eat your sandwich today, okay?”

Liz had stopped eating her lunch because she couldn’t eat in front of the other kids. She worried too much they would make fun of her appetite. But then she came home and binged on potato chips, chocolate bars, and Oreos.

“I have to stay late at school today. It’s the first day of rehearsal.”

“What rehearsal?”

“For the play. I’m Peter Pan.”

Her mother’s brow furrowed. “That will take up too much time.”

Liz wanted to tell her mother that everyone in sixth grade wanted to be Peter Pan. That the music teacher had said Liz’s singing voice was beautiful. She didn’t think it would change her mother’s mind.

“My grades won’t drop,” Liz said. “If you don’t let me be in the play, then they’ll drop. The other kids in the play get high grades, and they can help me study during rehearsal. It’s like tutoring” This was only part of a lie. The other kids got high grades, but Liz would never study with them. She always studied alone.

“If your grades go down, you have to quit.” Her mother stood by the sink and washed dishes from Liz’s father’s breakfast.

“Kevin gets to be in band,” Liz said.

“Kevin has straight A’s,” her mother said. Her mother wiped her hands. She had gained some weight too. If her mother wasn’t washing, then she was folding, cooking, or dusting. “I want you to have a good future.”

She wrote in her journal on the bus. *I need people to help me, so Jordan won’t bother me so much.* And then she recalled her dream with the alien. If only such a friend existed. Really, she’d take *any* friend.

That day in school, Jordan yelled at Liz when they were in the hall. Everyone was going to second period. “Liz, you love me long time?” he asked. “Or maybe your mom?”

“You’re a pervert,” she said. “How disgusting.”

“Stop that,” her gym teacher told her.

“He was being gross,” Liz said.

“Change into your uniform and get to your spot.”

They played basketball, and Jordan threw the ball at her head. The teacher insisted he apologize, which he did with a smirk. She spent the rest of class on the bleachers, even though her head didn’t hurt so badly. The bleachers were better than the game, though. If only she could spend every class here, where she felt safer. She didn’t trust any class in which Jordan was allowed to throw things.

The two other quiet girls were already at the lunch table. The three of them only spoke to each other to ask about some practical matter, something about homework or their schedule. One girl was reading a *Goosebumps* book, and the other girl was doing her homework.

“Do you think Jordan bothers me?” Liz asked.

The girls looked startled and remained quiet for some time. Finally, both said no.

Today was the first day of rehearsal. Liz was petrified, but she was not going to leave the play because of Jordan. She had wanted the role of Peter Pan, had beaten several eighth graders for this, and this bully was not going to ruin this moment.

The students in the show convened in the auditorium. Liz realized everyone was looking at her. Of course they were. She was the star of the show.

And then one seventh grader approached her and said, “I heard you’re going out with Brandon.”

Liz shook with rage. Brandon was the student who often cheated on tests. He also smelled, was the fattest boy, and was known for not washing his hands after he used the bathroom. Students groaned when they saw him coming.

He was one of the few students less popular than Liz.

Liz didn’t hear much of what the music teacher said. Something about the rehearsal schedule. How many people thought Liz was going out with Brandon? How was she going to get revenge? How could she eradicate this bully from her life? She looked at Jordan, who was looking at the script. They sat on the stage in the circle and read the play aloud. All the insults Captain Hook gave Peter Pan sounded like insults Jordan wanted to say to her.

She went home and discovered her bedroom looked different: her pictures of Nicole Kidman, Claire Danes, and Kirsten Dunst were gone. Her mother occasionally removed photos Liz taped to her walls. Liz taped pictures of these three actresses on her binders and journals. When she flipped through magazines, she only looked for pale skin and blond or red hair. If she looked like this, maybe Jordan would leave her alone.

“Do not take down my photos,” Liz said at the dinner table.

Her mother frowned. “Do you think you’re an actress? How will you live if you don’t have money?”

Her father remained silent. He only spoke up when they were talking about expenses.

She went to her room. She finished her homework because if she didn’t, her mother would yell at her more. She wrote in her journal about a life without Jordan: *And people could forget about me. They would stop looking at me.*

\* \* \*

The alien returned that night. This time they were in a park. Liz saw other Asian people on benches, walking dogs, and taking photos of each other.

“Where is this?” she asked.

“I thought this place would make you happy,” the alien said. It was a brighter blue today, and it was smiling.

“Is Jordan here?” she asked.

The alien shook its head no.

“Then I’m happy.”

They held hands and passed trees. It was spring here, and the air was heavy with scent of honeysuckle. Liz was wearing shorts because the weather was her favorite: seventy-five degrees and sunny.

“Hey,” she said. “I know I won’t be here forever. Can you make Jordan disappear from the other place? Is that one of your powers? To make people vanish?”

“Why would you want to do this?” the alien asked. The alien made some of the trees bloom. A small boy ran up to Liz and gave her a chocolate bar.

“He’s attacking me,” she said. “Nobody else will help.”

“I have an idea,” the alien said. They sat on a bench. This looked like no park in Charlottesville. It was much quieter, had paved paths, and many more flowers. Liz felt the sun on the back of her neck, which she hadn’t felt in months. In her real world, it was February, and she was buried in scarf and hat. But now she could relish the warmth on her neck and enjoy the company of this creature who asked her more about Jordan than anyone else ever had. “You are strong,” it said. “You don’t need to believe everything he says.”

“I want him to hurt,” she said. “Maybe I can push him down the stairs, and then he won’t be in the show.”

A boy yelled. Liz looked down the path and recognized the red hoodie with the white Nike symbol. How did he get here? Jordan sprinted towards them. Liz was on the verge of tears. She took the alien’s arm and pulled. “Please help me,” she whispered. Jordan was holding something. He ran and ran until he was a few feet in front of them. The sun shone on his brown hair. He was sweating. It was too hot for a hoodie. He looked at Liz, only her.

He couldn't see the alien.

"I'm not going to let you be Peter Pan," he said. He threw something at her face. It was bloody, slimy, and red. It was someone's heart. The heart slid down Liz's chest and fell to the floor. She didn't know whose it was. She wanted to reply, but when she opened her mouth, nothing came out. The alien had vanished. Jordan looked triumphant.

Liz woke up in tears.

\* \* \*

She needed to make a plan. She couldn't hurt Jordan too much, or she would be in serious trouble with his parents and her own. But she needed to send him a message. Something that would convince him to let her have some peace. Something that would halt all the rumors. Something that would prevent him from taping notes that said "dyke" and "fat ass" to her books and backpack, knocking her milk over at lunch, and pushing her in the hallway.

They sat in English together. Because both were on the honors track, they had all their classes together. But it was while the English teacher was discussing *Watership Down* that Liz had an idea. Jordan was one of the few kids with a new CD player. Last week, he had bragged about listening to Smashing Pumpkins. The week before, he told everyone in class that he had spent four hours listening to Nirvana. His friends all got a chance to use the Discman, and everyone else whined when he said they couldn't. He had started trading time on his Discman for cookies. She watched him clean it before and after each person used it. She figured if he lost it, he would be so fraught that he would no longer have the energy to bother her.

He would be devastated.

She didn't know how to steal the CD player because it was always on him. But then she realized that during gym, she could ask to use the bathroom and go into the boys' locker room instead.

The class played volleyball that day in gym. Her team glared when she missed the ball three times in a row. She asked the teacher to use the bathroom, and she walked slowly in case anyone was looking. Then she looked around, saw no one, and ducked into the locker room. The smell of socks and sweat made her gag, but she moved ahead until she recognized Jordan's shoes on the ground. She opened the locker above them, found his backpack, and moved around his binders, half a ham sandwich in a plastic bag, and loose pencils, until she finally felt a cloth bag with his CD player inside.

She ran inside the girls' locker room, stuffed the player in her backpack, and ran back to gym.

When the class emerged from their locker rooms, Jordan started to scream. Liz smiled. The alien would be proud of her. She hoped Jordan would sob that night. She felt so happy and wanted to hatch other plans to make Jordan miserable.

Jordan told the math teacher. Jordan's lip trembled. He had never looked so devastated before. The math teacher asked the class: "Does anyone have Jordan's CD player?"

Silence. Liz felt a rumble in her stomach when the teacher looked her way. Jordan's head was down, and he shook. Liz didn't speak. She widened her eyes and studied other students, as if she needed to guess the culprit. She was good at lying, something she had tried when her mother asked her if she had consumed the remaining cookies, and she said no, or when her brother said



Liz hit him first, and she said no. Liz looked sad when Jordan cried. Her facade only began to crack when the teachers threatened to search backpacks. During lunch, she would put the Discman in the girls' bathroom trash beneath the wads of paper towels.

The search came in last period. They opened Liz's backpack. "I know you'd never do this," the assistant principal said while she unzipped Liz's front pocket. "We have to check everyone's."

They found nothing.

\* \* \*

They were in a clothing store at the same mall as before. Liz ran her fingers along racks of silk dresses too big and too adult for her. The alien followed.

"I hope he cried so hard his eyes swelled shut," Liz said. She stopped and turned. "That was fun. What should I do next?"

The alien had been silent. Then it said, "You're being cruel."

The alien had never disagreed with Liz. Everything she wanted to do — go to the mall, walk in the park, eat ice cream — they had done. Why did it turn on her?

"He started it," she said.

"That boy has feelings like you," it said.

Her dream ended. When she awoke, she was unsatisfied. The alien had not congratulated her. It defended Jordan. It wasn't real, anyway. She didn't need it.

Over the next two days, Jordan didn't insult her.

Liz wanted more. She began a rumor: Jordan called Elijah a nigger.

She whispered the news to the grade's loudest girl and claimed she heard it elsewhere.

The rumor spread so quickly that near the end of the day, the principal pulled both Jordan and Elijah into a room. They stayed in the principal's office for an hour. Liz saw them released when school finished. Elijah looked tired, but Jordan's face was red and tear-streaked.

Liz practically skipped to the bus.

\* \* \*

"Jordan is getting hurt," the alien said.

"I feel powerful. For once, I'm not the one crying." Liz said.

They were back in the park. She felt on alert. If Jordan approached her this time, she would retaliate. Whatever he threw, she would throw back. Maybe she would even throw something first. She looked around for objects she could use.

"You can't do the same thing," the alien said. "Come, Beautiful." Liz relaxed. She had missed the alien complimenting her. The alien took her hand, and they flew. They went over trees. They flew as high as an airplane and saw clouds and bodies of water beneath them. They landed inside Liz's house. Many kids from her school were there.

"These kids are mean and ugly," Liz said.

Her mother was also in the kitchen. "You look a mess," she said. Her father was tearing apart a corner of the house. He was lifting up floorboards with his hands and cursing with his back turned to her. He probably didn't see her.

“When will you be nice?” the alien asked.

“Tell Jordan that.”

The alien bent down, peered at Liz, and touched her face with a slimy finger. The alien wasn't happy with her, but she still trusted it.

“This isn't fixed,” the alien said. “Jordan will continue to bother you.”

\* \* \*

Liz got off the bus when Jordan was getting out of a car. Inside the car, his father yelled, “You better find it.”

“I'm trying,” Jordan said.

“I'll kill you,” his father said. “If you don't find it, you're going to be real sorry.” The man drove away.

Liz's father spoke like this at times. Once, he screamed when she lost her watch the day after he bought it. Another time, he told Liz he was going to kill her when she spilled a glass of water on a computer keyboard. Jordan's dad was the first time Liz heard another parent scream like her own.

Jordan walked down the hall. Liz followed. He stopped at his locker. When Liz approached, he looked angry.

“Go away,” he said.

The alien believed in Liz. Though it wasn't real, she trusted it. She listened to it more than her mother and father. She felt its warmth, so she wanted to please it.

“If you stop bothering me,” she said. “I’ll tell you where your CD player is.”

He froze. “Who did it?”

“Will you stop?”

He mumbled something.

“Stop calling me Ching-Chong. Stop saying I eat dog.”

“I don’t say the n-word, you know,” he said.

Liz shifted her stance. She never found out what the principal had said to Jordan and Elijah.

Finally, Jordan asked: “Who took my stuff?”

“First, promise.”

He paused and scowled. “Fine,” he said.

Maybe Liz could make something up or blame someone else about the CD player.

“It was Mark,” she said. Mark was Jordan’s best friend.

“You’re lying,” he said.

Liz wanted to agree, but she walked away.

When she hung out with the alien that evening, she asked it how she did. They sat on the walkway in front of the school’s main doors.

“I will never lie to you. I will never insult you. You never wanted to steal CD players or invent rumors. You are like Jordan.”

“I’m nothing like that monster,” she said.

“I love you,” the alien said. Liz’s tears came slowly. They dripped onto her shirt. The alien touched Liz’s arm. Nobody had said these words to her in a long time, maybe never. “I love Jordan too. You both deserve to be loved.”

The alien wrapped its arms around her. Liz didn’t want the alien to love Jordan, but she knew it did. It always had. If Jordan appeared, the alien would wrap its arms around him too. Jordan would never say the n-word. Maybe he would never bully Liz again, or maybe he would. Either way, the alien would embrace them both.

“I will hug you whenever you want, and no matter how many CD players you steal,” it said.

Liz couldn’t stop crying. Something in her had softened and become slippery.

She woke up and felt the blue slime still on her body. She felt it when she went to school, walked up to Jordan, and told him that she had thrown his CD player away. She felt the slime on her when Jordan called her a “chink-bitch” in response. She felt it when the school principal said they were both suspended for three days because Jordan had a history of calling her names and because she had stolen something and lied about it. She felt it when her parents found out and screamed. She felt it when she went to bed, closed her eyes, and the alien didn’t appear.

## Hot and Cold

My father flipped the air conditioner toggle from zero on the cold side to five on the hot side. I sat in the back of the VW van, the first car he bought when he came to America, and gritted my teeth. He waited nearly a minute and then flipped the toggle from five to zero. Then back. Hot. Cold. Hot.

“Why don’t you keep it in the middle?” I asked.

He looked at me in the rearview mirror and sighed. The man worked twelve hours a day and six days a week for most of my life. We paused at a stoplight. Dad slurped from his travel mug of coffee. He was dressed in a collared shirt and khakis because after he dropped me off for

my soccer game, he would go see patients at the hospital. His stethoscope, Martha Jefferson Hospital ID, and a pile of invoices were on the front seat.

“Liz, you have one month before the SAT,” he said.

My parents weren’t happy with my score of 1350 and had signed me up to take the test again the day after prom.

Dad stopped pushing the toggle and turned the AM radio to the stock reports. I ignored the program, though somehow, with the host’s advice, my father made tens of thousands. But he always told me and my brother it was never enough.

The fog hung low outside. Gas stations were open at this early hour on Saturday but not much else. We passed a green pasture with lazy cows and small, white homes. The sun was just above the Blue Ridge Mountains. Charlottesville looked like a National Geographic spread, but I fantasized of boarding a plane and never returning.

Four days ago, Dad whipped me with a pair of jeans. I had cut their legs because they were too long. He said I ruined the pants and wasted his hard-earned money. I had sat on my bed, arms around my head, as my father whipped me with the jeans. Then he stepped on the bed and picked me up. I shouted “No” and “Please” and feared he would carry me to his car, drive somewhere remote, and leave me. But he dropped me on the floor and whipped me again. Then he kicked my side. This man wanted to hurt me as much as possible.

We pulled into my high school. All my teammates were on the field and stretching. The weather was chilly, so they wore long-sleeved shirts under their blue and gray jerseys. I had forgotten my long-sleeved, and when I got out, I held myself and shivered in the breeze.

“You’re late,” the coach said. One girl smirked. None of the others looked at me. They reached for their toes and squirted water into their mouths from their water bottles. I put my bag under the bench, where I would spend the whole game.

I didn’t actually *play* much soccer. I so desperately wanted to be good at something, and I hoped that thing could have been soccer, but I seemed to repel the ball. Girls stole it so easily from me it looked like I gave it to them. When the ball was kicked my way, it bounced off my shin guards and escaped my control. Not only was I the only non-white girl on the team, but I was also the worst player and on the bench the most.

The referee announced time, and the teams got to their places. We were playing another public school in Charlottesville, one known for having more pregnant girls, kids who lived in trailers, and black kids than ours. The referee blew the whistle, and our team immediately pushed the ball to the other side, where it stayed for most of the first half. Finally, one of our forwards scored. The girls on the field hugged one another. The coach and I cheered from the sidelines.

Near the end of the first half, my teammate fell. A girl from the other team had run into her. Another teammate helped her stand up, and she limped off field. The coach looked at me.

“Liz,” was all he said. I bolted from the bench.

*I have a role.* My role was halfback, so I ran the expanse of the field. I intercepted the ball from a girl on the opposing team and kicked the ball into the vicinity of the correct goal. And the kick wasn’t terrible. I swelled. My world became a degree less mortifying. If only Dad were here. If only Mom saw her daughter’s gifts. The goalie returned the ball. I ran towards it, bumped another girl’s shoulder, and was knocked backwards. I put out my arm to brace my fall,



and all the pressure went onto my wrist. I sat on the grass and held my wrist, which was rapidly swelling. Something had snapped.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” It was the teammate who had snickered when I arrived. In the five minutes I had been on the field the whole season, I had gotten hurt.

The coach let me borrow his cell phone. Dad finally picked up.

“I think I broke something,” I said.

“Do you need to go to the hospital?” he asked.

“It really hurts,” I said.

I sat on the bench with a pack of ice on my wrist. My team played on like I had never stepped onto the field and made that kick. Dad’s van squeaked and sputtered before it appeared. I returned to the backseat, and Dad turned around, took my wrist, and studied it. I didn’t want to cry because if I started, I didn’t think I’d ever stop.

“You will need a cast,” he said, and then he turned, pressed the gas, and started to flip the toggle again. The hot and cold air made my wrist swell more.

Hot. Cold. Hot.

\* \* \*

Dad had asked the day after he whipped me if I needed to go to the hospital. We sat in the car outside of school. He was picking me up to take me to the S.A.T. study group.

“Where does it hurt?” Dad asked.

A group of girls walked past the van to their own cars. My father just bought a new Jeep, but he still drove this twenty-year-old piece of shit.

“Maybe you need an x-ray for your ribs,” he said.

I closed my eyes and felt the pain course through my ribs, where his foot had made contact, to the rest of me, spreading and blossoming in my muscles.

He asked again if I hurt, but I was too exhausted to speak.

\* \* \*

The hospital was loud and bright. My eyes hurt from the fluorescent lights and all the white. This was my second time at my dad’s workplace. The first time, I had sat in the cafeteria while he saw patients. Now I stood in front of the receptionist's desk while my wrist felt like it was on fire. A nurse escorted me to a room.

“Have them page me when you’re done,” Dad said and left.

The man who took X-rays had soft eyes and wispy, blond hair. He asked me to tell him if anything he did was painful. He took his time to make me a bright green a cast.

“I’m not very good at soccer,” I said.

The man laughed. He gave me instructions on caring for my cast. He sounded like he was telling me a story.

“You’ll be okay,” he said and squeezed my shoulder.

What would it be like to kiss this man?

I walked out with my new, emerald arm. It was some alien appendage. I waited for Dad for two hours. He looked satisfied when he saw the cast. “I’ll drive you home quick, and then I have to get back here,” he said, so we rushed to his van. We passed by stores, now open, and the sun was much higher. Had our team won the game? Were they all celebrating?

Mom saw the cast and said, “You need to be studying anyway.” She wore plastic gloves that she used to make kimchi, and her eyes, bigger than they were two years ago from the eyelid lift, looked at my wrist with concern. I walked past her into the living room, sat on the couch, and turned up *Seinfeld* as loud as I could. She washed dishes and sang some Korean song. I wanted to smash one of the dishes on the floor. I couldn’t even concentrate on the episode, so I turned off the TV, went to my room, and wished I had left the hospital with the man who made my cast.

\* \* \*

My father told us over dinner that evening he wanted to leave me and Kevin each a house and a car. The pain from my wrist was so sharp I didn’t have an appetite.

“Kevin will stay in New York this summer,” Mom said. She was putting more beef on my rice, which I hadn’t asked for. “You go visit him. He’ll show you Columbia. Maybe you can meet some of his professors.”

“Your house will be bigger than this one,” Dad said. “Maybe you will have two garages. Maybe you’ll have a pool *and* a Jacuzzi. Or a Mercedes.” He looked out the window at our pool, which we hardly used.

I shoveled in the rest of my rice because this was the only way I was allowed to leave the table, but I was using my left hand. Grains spilled all over the place.

“Your Komo wants to marry some Hispanic man,” Mom said. “What’s wrong with her? Her parents would be so ashamed.”

“You always say people should be ashamed,” I said.

“Oh my, oh my,” she said, but it sounded like *You think you’re so smart?*

My plate still had rice on it, but I got up.

“Where are you going?” Dad asked.

“I have to take the painkiller,” I said. My parents wouldn’t say no to this.

“Don’t lose your mind like your aunt,” Mom said.

I went upstairs, feeling relief with every step away from the table.

Dad opened my door later that night. He kissed my cheek. I pulled away, and he laughed.

“I love you very much,” he said. “Did you take the painkiller?”

I nodded.

“Good,” he said. “My sweet Liz. I am very busy making money for you.”

I didn’t care. No other father was like this. I wanted to go to boarding school or someplace far away from this man. I fantasized of shouting this at him, but I didn’t. I was afraid he would hit me all over again.

“The painkiller is working,” I said.

He laughed again. “I hope you feel better,” he said and left. I locked the door after him. That lock had saved me in the past when I had failed Algebra and when I had broken the CD player, and Dad pounded on the door and screamed.

I tried to sleep, but the pain in my wrist kept me awake. I checked twice that my door was locked. Finally, I fell asleep, and I dreamed of making that goal on the field.

\* \* \*

Nicole's house was much smaller than mine. We sat in her living room with her family and watched some movie about a couple traveling in France. She had told me in the car ride on the way over that Peter Sachs had asked her to prom. I had tried to sound excited, but really I was planning alternatives to prom. I didn't want to go anymore.

Her dad had made chili for dinner. We all sat around the table. They all used cloth napkins, "family napkins," Nicole called them, while I used a paper one. Her dad asked how I broke my wrist.

"Soccer accident," I said.

"Wow, I'm sorry," he said.

"How's school going?" her mom asked.

"Okay," I said.

"I'm sure it is," her mom said. "You're a bright girl."

I blushed.

"And what do you want to do for a living? Be a teacher, like Nicole?" her dad asked.

"I'd like to be an actress," I said.

"Incredible," he said.

“Liz was in the school play last year,” Nicole said. “She’s one of the best actresses in school.”

“I feel so free when I act,” I said. “But I’m not good enough for New York.”

“Nonsense,” her dad said

Neither Nicole nor I finished our bowls. Her mom wrapped them in saran wrap and said we could have them as leftovers tomorrow. “I love you,” both her parents said to Nicole and her sister. “Liz, good night,” they said to me. We moved to Nicole’s room and changed into our pajamas. The house felt quieter to me. They had a “no yelling” rule.” Nicole once asked why I never wanted her to spend the night at my house or eat dinner with my family, and I only said I didn’t mind coming to hers. In the years we had been friends, she had never had dinner with my family or spent the night in my bed. My wrist began to throb, and I groaned.

“How long is the cast for?”

“Six weeks,” I said. “I keep taking painkillers, but it still aches.”

I wasn’t going to tell her about the jeans. She wouldn’t get it, or she’d said I shouldn’t have cut them. Her father called her beautiful and told her he was proud of her. I bet she could cut all the jeans she wanted.

We spent the next hour looking at beauty magazines and talking about which hairstyles and dresses we liked. I always picked the blond ones, girls that looked like Nicole.

“That’s what we’ll do for prom,” she said. “Pin our hair up so it’s asymmetrical.”

“Right,” I said. But I wasn’t going to prom. I was going to rebel against the stupid date thing. At least until I could get a date.

\* \* \*

Mom drove me to the UVA library the following Saturday. She said I could study there. I sat in the back of the Saab. “You should have been going here all along,” she said from the driver’s seat.

Mom was dressed up. She dressed up every time she left the house.

I didn’t mind the library. It had couches and nice computers. It had a big selection of good DVD’s, movies and TV, shows I actually wanted to see. I could check out anything for free. I decided that today I would sit on a couch and watch *Friends* episodes.

“Remember, you only have a month left before the SAT,” she said.

We pulled into the parking lot. I got out and slammed the door shut.

The library was fairly empty, and then I saw a sign for adjusted Spring Break hours. All the students were probably frolicking on a beach. I walked past dark wooden tables and chandeliers. I heard this library was one of the oldest in the country. It was built Thomas Jefferson-style like everything else on campus. I felt like I was inside some Colonial house on a plantation.

The leather couches were downstairs. I collapsed on one, my cast hanging off the side. A man carrying a briefcase walked by. I had brought my journal. Maybe I would take a nap. The man walked by again. He looked somewhere between twenty-five and forty years-old. His hair was graying, but his face looked young. His clothes looked both casual and professional, and he

was slim. His stare with his small blue eyes made me uneasy. I could see his chest muscles through his shirt.

He stopped in front of me.

“What do you study?” He spoke slowly and softly, like the nurse who made my cast.

“I don’t know,” I said. My voice slightly shook.

He laughed. “I mean, your major.”

I laughed too. “I’m not a UVA student.”

“Really?” He leaned closer.

“Yes.”

“How old are you?”

“Almost sixteen,” I said.

“Almost,” he said. He stood up and looked unsatisfied.

I wished I had lied. “Wait,” I said.

“Why?” he asked.

“What’s your name?”

“Barry,” he said.

“I’m Liz.”

“Liz,” he said. “Have a nice day.”

“Do you come here every Saturday?” I asked.

He looked at the floor, waited, then looked at me. “You know, you’re beautiful,” he said and walked away.



Beautiful. I rolled the word around in my mouth like a candy, repeated it slowly, and let it wrap around me. Nobody had ever called me beautiful before.

I opened my journal and spent the rest of the time at the library drawing Barry's face.

When I got home, I picked up the phone. I wanted to tell Nicole about Barry. I didn't dial. Nicole might be disgusted. An older man had asked for her number at the grocery store, and she said he looked like her dad. "Pervert. Such a pedophile," she said.

I hung up. I would ask Barry his age next time.

I spent the rest of the day reading a book in which a woman time-travels to the Antebellum South and I wanted to have her power, so I could escape to another era.

Dad's van pulled up. He opened the front door.

"Dinner!" Mom yelled from the kitchen.

Dad started cursing, and then he and Mom were in another fight. If I didn't go down for dinner, he would pound on my door. I took another painkiller and opened my door.

Dinner was salmon. Mom had cooked all my favorite dishes this week. She helped me put things on my plate, as the chopsticks kept slipping from left hand.

My handwriting also looked like a child's. My feeble left hand infuriated me.

Mom and Dad spoke to each other in Korean, so I ate in silence. Where was Barry from? Could I take him to prom? I was slipping behind in pre-Algebra homework, but I didn't care. Only four more months until the end of this year, and then I wouldn't need to see anyone from school in months.

Dad shoveled in a few pieces of beef. He ate more beef than anyone I had ever met.

"Do you have a lot of homework tonight?" Mom asked.

“Yeah,” I said, hoping she wouldn’t ask any more questions.

“If you study hard and get a good job, people will like you,” she said.

Dad came to my room after dinner and sat on my bed. His tie was loosened, and his shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows.

“How is your wrist?” he asked.

“Okay.”

He looked at the corner of my room, where my cut-off jeans lay. I had worn them the day after he whipped me, and the next three days, right up until my soccer game. I was going to wear them all the time to prove I did not waste my father’s money. I was going to show him I was aware he worked three jobs so I could have nice things like jeans.

When he looked at them, I flinched. He didn’t look angry, but he didn’t look sorry either.

Dad opened his wallet and handed me a twenty-dollar bill.

“What’s this?” I asked. He never gave me cash.

He stood but was slumped over. An image of my father as a hunchback who struggled to breathe appeared. What if I became a hunchback who struggled to breathe? Or whipped someone with jeans? Something in me stirred. After he left, I closed the door and locked it behind him. I didn’t want to see him for a long time. I hoped I’d never be like him.

The next day, I went with Nicole to the mall, and I bought a twenty-dollar pair of underwear.

“What’s that for?” she asked.

“Just for me,” I said.

\* \* \*

I wore a short jean skirt the next Saturday even though it wasn't good for the weather, but I needed to show off my legs. I slipped a tube of lipstick into my backpack. I would put it on when I got to library. If I put it on now, Mom would ask me too many questions or yell that I needed to focus on my grades more and less on makeup and clothes.

After Dad left my room last night, I Googled "Asian people kissing" and found porn sites like "ASIAN HOTTIES XXX." I opened one and saw an Asian woman on her knees in front of a dick. I gasped and closed the site. What if Barry wanted sex at some point? I re-opened it. A large, white guy thrust his pale, veiny dick into a tiny Asian woman on her hands and knees. She screamed like a chimp.

Mom stopped the car in front of the library. "What will you study today?" she asked.

"History," I lied. Next to me on the seat was a backpack full of books I wasn't going to use.

"Do you want seaweed soup for dinner tonight?" she asked.

"Okay," I said.

She looked at my cast. In the hours after my father whipped me with jeans, she yelled at him: *You're going to kill her. It's just jeans. You'll kill all of us.* My father screamed back until she went silent.

"Maybe a UVA student can tutor you," she said.

"Stop bothering me," I said. I got out of the car.

Barry sat on the couch where we first met. He smiled when he saw me.

“So I didn’t scare you away,” he said and patted the seat next to him. I sat and hoped he didn’t notice the weird cowlick beginning at the back of my head.

“How old are you?” I asked.

His eyes widened.

“Come on,” I said. “I told you my age.”

He tightened his lips, as if he were saying, “You’ve got me.”

“Sounds like you want a conversation,” he said. “Why don’t we go on a walk?”

I nodded. He pointed at my cast.

“What happened?”

“I’m not a very good soccer player.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he whispered into my ear.

We stepped onto the grounds and headed towards the Corner, the small strip of shops for UVA students.

We passed other UVA buildings that looked like antebellum homes, courtyards that looked like they were still part of a plantation.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Do you want to come to my place?”

I made a high-pitched noise. He stopped.

“You want to know my age,” he said. “Okay. I’m thirty-one.”

“That’s old,” I said.

“I thought you were twenty-one,” he said. “If I don’t think about it, you still are.”

I blushed. We kept walking.

“What do you do?” I asked.

“I’m a student at the law school,” he said. “I moved here a few months ago. Where are you from? China?”

“Here,” I said. He looked confused. People never believed I was from Virginia. A group of Asian women went around us on the sidewalk, and I stepped away from Barry. They were laughing with each other. One smiled at me. I wished I knew them.

Barry stepped closer to me. “I’m going to tell you something,” he said. “You’re beautiful. Exotic.”

“Don’t you want someone your own age?”

He sighed. “I was married to someone my own age for a long time,” he said. “People my own age want marriage, kids, and mortgages. That’s the last thing I want.”

“Don’t you at least want someone legal?”

“You’re smart,” he said. “So, you can keep a secret. Right?”

\* \* \*

Right before my father whipped me with jeans, I had asked a boy to prom. He said he wasn’t going, and then I found out he asked another girl.

A month before that, I had asked a different boy to prom, and he said he would think about it. He then told Nicole to tell me, “No.”

“No boys at this school like me,” I told Nicole at lunch one day. “Am I ugly?”

“They’re looking for girls who they know will give it up on prom night,” she said.

“But am I ugly?”

“Stop,” she said. “It’s perfectly okay to go stag.”

*Why won’t you say I’m not ugly?*

I could hardly look at boys in the face at school. They thought I was gross. And when I got the cast, well... They all thought I was clumsy, too.

I couldn’t wait to leave this town. Maybe in New York, some boy would say “yes” to me.

\* \* \*

His apartment was plain and half unpacked. A rolled up rug in the corner, a black futon that faced a TV, and a stack of books on a small black desk took up most of the living room. In the kitchen, some appliances were still in their bubble wrap. The trashcan was overflowing with take-out containers.

“Sorry,” he said. “It’s been a rough semester, and I just moved.”

I peeked into his bedroom, where the covers were on the floor.

“Where did you move from?”

“A place on the other side of town,” he said. “I’m still pretty new to Charlottesville. Maybe you can show me around?”

I didn’t respond. I looked at the door.

We sat on his futon. “You’re beautiful,” he said. I smiled. “Beautiful and sixteen. I envy you.”

“Why?”

“You’re free.”

“But I feel trapped,” I said. “Smothered by this shitty town.”

“Then maybe you and I aren’t so different. I’m just starting not to feel trapped. Come here.”

I moved closer to him, and he kissed me. This was not how I imagined my first kiss. I pictured it with some guy my age at a party like on TV. We would sit by a bonfire while people passed a joint and danced. Barry’s tongue probed the inside of my mouth, and his lips sucked mine hard. He bit my bottom lip, and I pulled away.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll take care of you.” He looked determined.

“I need to be back at the library soon. My mom will pick me up.”

“You’re so fucking hot. Look at this body.” He rubbed my chest and stomach. He pushed me back on the futon.

“Maybe I’ll go — “

“I will make you feel good,” he said. “Better than any boy you’ve been with.” He lifted my tank top and kissed my stomach.

“No,” I said. I got off the couch. I grabbed my bag. “You’re disgusting.”

He was startled, but then he narrowed his eyes. “Why’d you come back to the library?” he asked.

I was speechless. I turned and left. Wasn’t this exactly what I wanted? Wasn’t this why I looked up sex sites? But I was scared.

When Mom picked me up and asked how studying went, I told her I didn’t want to go back to the library.

“It’s too crowded,” I said.

She started to hum something. “If you were in Korea, you’d be studying all the time. We went to school at night and on the weekends too.”

I didn’t bother arguing with her about studying. We had had that argument too many times.

“Why does Dad get so angry?” I asked.

“Sometimes your dad is so smart, and sometimes he is so stupid,” she said. “But don’t cut any more pants.”

“I figured,” I said. We were stuck in traffic. A lacrosse game was happening. I tried to see my parents picking this city and this house. They had debated between New York and Charlottesville and felt Charlottesville was safer.

“I’ll visit Kevin in New York,” I said.

“We’ll all go,” she said.

That night, I looked up the same sex sites. Then I lay in bed and wrote in my journal. Dad and Mom were downstairs arguing about how much she had spent on groceries in the past month.

*Dad would beat me if he knew about Barry. Mom might call the police.*

*Why does Barry want to sleep with me? He keeps calling me beautiful. Is he depressed? Does he really think I’m pretty, or is he just saying that to get sex?*

*Nicole would be horrified. If I told her about Barry, she might think I was disgusting. She might call the police too. Barry is thirty-one. I am fifteen.*



Nicole told me she might have sex with Peter after prom. Other girls had bought condoms and nice bras. Barry liked me. He didn't wear a mask and hold a knife to my throat. He asked for my age and where I was from. He called me smart. And beautiful.

*I want to have sex with him.*

I went downstairs to watch some TV. After a few minutes, Dad came down and sat in his armchair.

"I think Kevin has a girlfriend."

"He told you?" I asked. Kevin and I never told our parents anything about people we liked.

"You know how I met your mom?"

I didn't respond.

"She was a nurse at the hospital where I was a resident."

I waited for him to continue.

"She was the best nurse at the hospital. You will meet a nice man in college. That's why you have to go to a good college. Nice men will be there. Doctors and lawyers. And then, you'll have a happy life."

\* \* \*

Nicole approached me the next Monday and told me Alan had asked her to prom. "He was so embarrassed when I told him I was already going with Peter."

We were in the cafeteria and waiting for first period. I was exhausted from the lack of sleep; I had played over the scene with Barry in my mind, trying to decide if I had made the right decision to leave.

“Cool,” I said.

“Hey, maybe you should go with Alan?” she asked.

*I don't want your fucking leftovers.*

“He's boring,” I said.

“Want to go to a movie this weekend?”

“Busy.”

I was going to see Barry.

\* \* \*

I pretended to read on the couch at the library, but really, I was waiting for him. He appeared not long after. He looked younger than last time and was dressed in a T-shirt and slacks. The weather was becoming warmer. I wanted to kiss him.

He looked surprised.

“Can I sit?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Didn't think I'd see you back here.”

“Then why'd you come?”

“Good point,” he said.

I couldn't think of anything to say next. This man looked so attractive. I wanted him to tell me how badly he wanted me.

"Do you want to go to your apartment?" I asked.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded. "I was just surprised last time. But now I know what to expect."

"If you want to, let's go," he said.

My legs shook on the walk there. We went inside, and I sat on the couch and focused on calming my body. My breath was fast. My knees knocked. He put one hand on my shoulder. I kissed him. The kissing felt messy. I started to gasp. Barry pulled away.

"Are you okay?"

I shook my head and kissed him again, focusing on breathing through my nose. Barry massaged my shoulders. He groaned when I used my tongue, and he pushed his so deep into my mouth, I nearly choked, but I didn't want to stop kissing him. I had never felt something inside of my mouth that seemed so excited to be there. My eyes opened. He looked like he wanted nothing more than to be with me and touching me. Two photos of him and his family were on the desk behind him. His mother looked small and polite, and his father was in mid-laugh, like someone had just told him a joke. All three sat together on the couch together, heads leaning in.

I wasn't going to tell anyone about him. I was going to keep this older man all to myself.

Barry placed my hand, the one not in the cast, on his crotch. I rubbed it, and he moaned more. He touched my chest. I was afraid of making the wrong move and looking dumb. I touched his arms, shoulders and back with my left hand. He took off my cardigan off like he had all the time in the world, and then my tank top, being very careful of my cast. Then he took off

his shirt. His chest was ghostly pale, and his hip bones jutted out like wings above his pants. He pushed me back on the futon and kissed my stomach.

“You’re exotic,” he said.

He took off his pants slowly, as if giving me a final opportunity to change my mind, but left his boxers on.

“What’s exotic about me?”

“You know. You’re different.”

I took off everything. My cut-off jeans and my twenty-dollar underwear landed in a heap near the T.V. My body shook again. I stuck out my chest and hoped I looked like I knew what I was doing. He pushed me back on the couch and worked expertly. His kisses were gentle, but I was afraid he would find every part of me he kissed a disappointment: my breasts that I prayed would grow at least another two sizes, my gross, squishy stomach, the little bumps on my hips, my wrinkles near my ass, how my cast smelled, and my pubic hair that grew in stupid, weird patches. But Barry didn’t make any faces or stop. He kissed every part, even my cast. Then he stood and took off his boxers. There it was. That thing that speared into women in the porno videos. His thing was pale, and full of veins, and very big, like an alien between his legs. I started to cry.

“Change your mind?” he asked. He started to rub this thing.

I grew queasy. “I want to have sex,” I said.

“You want to be fucked?” he asked in a low voice.

The idea fluttered through me: lose my virginity. Barry sat on the couch and squeezed my right breast. He started rubbing his enormous thing with his other hand. “I’ll fuck you,” he said.

Barry wanted me so badly; he sat next to me, hunched forward, as if he wanted to devour me. He loved me.

I touched his thing, and it shook. “Go slow,” I said.

He found a condom. The teacher in health class had rolled a condom over a banana, and I ignored it because it was the stupidest demonstration, but now I wished I had paid attention more, or at least watched a YouTube video on it. Luckily, Barry rolled it on himself, tugging the end so that a little bubble formed.

He pushed my legs apart.

“Will this hurt?”

“You’ll get used to it,” he said.

He tried to push that thing inside me, but it wouldn’t really go in. He spit on his fingers and rubbed me between my legs. The women from the videos yelped and moaned when the men pushed inside of them. I moaned. Then Barry pushed harder, and then it *really* went in. Something inside of me felt like it snapped.

“You’re sexy,” he said as he pushed.

I closed my eyes and winced. One woman had squeezed her breasts while the man was on top of her.

“Thank you,” I said. He pushed more, and I clutched my breasts, waiting for him to stop.

\* \* \*

My whole body was in pain afterward. I was at dinner, and Dad was blabbing about stocks.

“Liz?” he asked.

He looked confused. I was desperate to go upstairs and get a painkiller, but I still had half my plate of food left.

“What about your stocks?” I asked.

“I asked if you wanted to go somewhere after you finish school. Maybe Miami?”

“Whatever,” I said.

“How was studying at the library?” Mom asked.

“I’m learning a lot,” I said.

“When you get older, you’re going to have a nice job. Marry a nice man,” she said. “Who are you going to the dance with?”

“No one,” I said.

She nodded. “Boys come after studying.”

I stabbed a piece of meat with a fork. At least one boy wanted me.

“I’m going upstairs,” I said.

“You haven’t finished your food,” Dad said.

I stayed at the table and stared at my plate. I forced myself to eat it and wanted to vomit with every bite.

\* \* \*

“I liked last time,” Barry said and scooted closer to me. His breath was near my cheek.

We were back at his place the following weekend. He showed me a bottle of lube he bought.

“You were good,” I said. “Really good.” What did not come out: My pussy hurts.

“Tell me about your parents,” I said and pointed to the photos on the desk.

“Not much,” he said. “They’re in Michigan.”

“What do you they do?”

“They’re both lawyers.”

“Did they want you to get married?”

“Sure. They ask about grandkids too.”

“Tell me about your ex-wife.”

Barry looked straight at me, like I had caught him in the middle of a crime.

“She’s in Michigan. She’s a lawyer, too.”

“Do you talk to her?”

“I could. She wouldn’t talk to me.”

“Why?”

“She called me ‘a piece of shit.’ She’s not exactly a fan of me.”

“What happened?”

“I cheated on her,” he said. “I was done with marriage.”

“A lot?” I asked.

He whistled and turned away. “What’s into you? Do you want to be my therapist?”

“How many times?”

“Five or six,” he said. “I was too young and rushed into marriage. But let’s not get into that.” He put his arm around me and kissed my cheek. “Let’s get into you.”

I saw Barry every Saturday for the next month. We formed a routine: my mother dropped me off at the library at noon. Barry met me, and we walked to his place, ate, had sex, and I returned to the library. My mother picked me up. This routine made me feel very adult. I fantasized about moving to Michigan with him, near his parents and far, far away from my parents. When my cast came off and Barry saw the wrinkled, pale skin, he kissed it slowly. He said it was precious.

I walked around school thinking, “I’m not a virgin. I’m an adult. A man is crazy about me.” I smiled more. Even Mom noticed.

“Your grades are up,” she said. “I’m happy too.”

Barry had started to help me with some homework after we had sex. One day, we were naked on his couch. Now I loved sex. I craved it. I pictured Barry’s hands on me during Physics, wanted him at the table instead of Nicole at lunch, and wanted his hand on my thigh when I was in bed. We would have a large house in Michigan, near his parents, and I would study acting at some school nearby. Barry would be a successful lawyer. My parents would be angry, but it didn’t matter because I would never see them again. Barry’s parents might object to our age difference, but once they got to know me, they would like me. They would think I was gentle and sweet.

A week before prom, we sat on his couch and ate bowls of chili.

“No guy has ever cooked for me,” I said. “Not even my dad.”

He smiled but didn’t speak.



“Hey,” I said. “Let’s live together this summer.”

He got all serious.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

But he put down his bowl and groaned. “So this is it,” he said.

“It’s what?” I put down my bowl and touched his knee. My right wrist still sometimes ached. “What’s going on?”

He looked uncomfortable yet sad. I wanted to hug him. No man had ever been as kind to me, called me beautiful, let me be on his couch, or kissed my cheek when he saw me like Barry.

“I love you,” I said.

I waited for him to say it back. Now he looked annoyed. He put his hand on mine, but it didn’t feel romantic. It felt like he was going to reprimand me.

“I’m not your boyfriend,” he said.

“Why not? You have sex with me,” I said.

“Because you’re sexy. You’ll always get guys.”

“But I don’t. And I don’t want other guys.”

He stood and looked exasperated. “I wanted fun.”

“I *am* fun.” I walked to him and put his hands on my chest.

“Liz.”

“I’m beautiful. I’m exotic,” I said. “You always want to fuck me.”

He removed his hands from my chest.

“You’re my boyfriend,” I said.

“I never planned to get involved with someone so young, but when I saw you at the library.... You looked like you wanted to talk to someone. You’re really sad.” He paused and sat back down on the couch. “But then, I’ve been fantasizing of about having sex with someone who looks like you for a long time.”

Pain blossomed within my chest and pulsed down to my wrist. I almost fell onto the floor, but I stood and wanted my father to come and whip this man with every piece of Barry’s clothing.

“You’re making me your porno video,” I said.

“It’s more than that. You put me at ease,” he said. “And don’t I make you feel good?”

I had thought that we might be married in a year. I was stupid, stupider now than when I was on the soccer field, taking the SAT, or cutting my pants. I had stumbled into the biggest trap of all.

“Such a fucking perv,” I said and left the apartment.

Mom wasn’t going to come for another hour, but I walked back to the library because I didn’t have anywhere else to go. I went into the bathroom and locked myself in a stall. I sat on the toilet lid. I couldn’t stop crying.

Mom asked what was wrong, but I refused to answer. We got home. I went to my room and lay on my bed face-down. I wanted to talk to someone, but I had no one. My parents would call the police. Nicole would say I was sick. And she would tell her parents, who would tell the police, and I would be on the news, and the town would think I was a horrible, stupid slut.

My father told me at dinner that a patient yelled at him today. “Do you know how hard I work?” he asked me. “Do you know hard it is to make forty dollars to buy you jeans?”

If I said no, I was ungrateful. If I said yes, I was ungrateful because I still did things like cut the ends of jeans.

“Stop,” Mom said.

Dad sighed and then threw a chopstick across the room. I didn’t look up from my plate for the rest of the meal.

I dreamed of eating dinner with my father and Barry. I dreamed of us around the table, laughing and passing each other food. Our plates were never empty, which was convenient because we were starving, but at the same time, it meant none of us were ever excused from the table.

## Farangs

It started when Nicole approached me in New York. She sent me a text one evening: *I have a wild trip planned. And I want you to come.*

When I got the text, I was in my bedroom in Brooklyn and trying to ignore my roommate having sex. I was looking online for a job. Nicole and I hadn't seen each other since high school years ago. But her invitation came at the moment when I wanted an exit. I wanted escape from waiting tables and from New York.

*Where?* I wrote.

My roommate moaned in the other room. I knew her sexual rhythms to the point that I could estimate when she came.

*I'll tell you all about it. Let's get a drink.*

I didn't really feel like meeting her because meeting her meant answering "How are you doing?" and the answer to this was something I didn't have. I didn't respond that night and tried to search online for jobs instead. Publishing and editorial jobs seemed like a match for my English degree, but no one had responded to my resume. My expensive college degree apparently wasn't enough.

She texted me every day for the next week. *"I'll give you a hint — somewhere warm."*  
*"What was the last trip you took?" "I miss you."*

And that was how, four months later, I found myself in Bangkok.

\* \* \*

My decision still took time. I was a little weary of the trip but mostly of Nicole. I agreed to meet at a bar and found her all chic, and elegant, and everything that was missing from me. She came in, turned heads, and sat across from me. She was wearing a blouse, pink skirt, and pink flats. Her make-up looked like some Sephora demo, and her hair was blonder than I had ever seen it before. I had on jeans, a hoodie, and shoes from which I couldn't quite remove a spaghetti sauce stain.

She hugged me. She smelled like a department store.

"Liz," she said. "Wow, finally."

"I know," I said, feeling guilty.

"You look good, Liz."

I adjusted my position on the stool. I wished I had changed before coming here. My hoodie smelled like the restaurant's eggs and bacon dish.

"You came from work?" I asked and looked at her clothes.

"I'm an editorial assistant," she said. "I started three months ago. Hey, have you ever thought about working in publishing?"

I made some noise. The bartender came, and we ordered. "What's this trip about?" I asked.

"Thailand," she said. "I think I'm going through my quarter-life crisis a couple years early. I want somewhere Buddhist."

Was this some *Eat, Pray, Love* venture?

"How'd you choose the place?"

"Oh, because it's cheap and the photos looked nice. And because it seems very, very different from New York."

"My whole life, I thought this place answered everything," I said.

"Did you say you're waiting tables?"

I was embarrassed. "It's just until I get something better."

"Are you still at the restaurant?"

"Yes," I said, embarrassed. "Until I find something I want."

"What do you want?"

I mumbled something even I didn't understand. "I don't have money."

"Doesn't your dad always have a bunch of miles?"

He did. Money wasn't the issue. The issue was that I didn't want to spend a week with another person.

"I'll tell you the truth," she said. "I'm too scared to travel on my own. My family has only gone on cheesy cruises and resorts. I don't even know anyone else who can do this. Who has the time or the money? You can get out of the restaurant, right? And I'll get a break from my stupid fucking publishing job. I didn't go to UVA just to create Excel spreadsheets."

Nicole finished her drink. A man behind her looked at her with interest.

"Do you have vacation days you can use?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's a full-time job."

She was so beautiful and polished. I didn't want to stand next to her. But still. When she spoke of Thailand, I saw monks, purple flowers, and beaches with waters that shone like prisms. Sunshine would relieve me from the last bits of a New York winter. Something inside of me loosened. Some kind of fist had formed in me when I arrived here, and Nicole's idea was making it soften.

"Maybe in June," I said.

She met my gaze. We both smiled.

\* \* \*

Work became more grueling now that a trip to Thailand dangled in front of me. One customer called me a "fucking chink" when I forgot his hot sauce and told the manager they should hire Americans instead.

“I’m from Virginia,” I shouted as the guy left, but he didn’t seem to hear me.

Maybe I’d hate publishing like Nicole. Maybe my skills weren’t relevant anywhere. I longed for a reset button. If I pressed this, I would’ve majored in something more practical. Something that made me more money, so I didn’t have to choose between an apartment with the loud roommate and the apartment with no windows.

The manager asked to speak with me. “Liz, what that guy said wasn’t appropriate, but you’ve been forgetting a lot of things lately. I’ve had complaints about you.”

“Like what?”

“Some people find you harsh.”

“I’m serving salads, not tucking them into bed,” I said.

“Look, you used to be one of the best. If you don’t leave your personal stuff out of here, you’ll have to go.”

I didn’t speak to him the rest of the day. I went about my job with a smile that hurt. That night, I responded to fifteen ads. I looked up photos of Thailand and saw glittering Buddhas, heaping bowls of fruits and spices, and endless, pristine coasts. I dreamed of screaming at every customer in the restaurant that I didn’t take out loans for college so I could serve them hot sauce. I took out loans because going to college looked like the only way to get a decent job, a job that wasn’t waitressing. So how did I end up here?

\* \* \*



Nicole and I departed for the airport from my apartment. She had a duffel bag plus an enormous, purple suitcase that made her groan when she lifted it up my building's stairs. I was using a large hiking backpack.

"What are you bringing?" I asked.

"I don't know what I'll feel like wearing," she said. "Plus, just some extras of stuff."

"We're going for a week, not two months."

"Oh stop," she said. "I'll leave it all at the hostel."

She was wearing makeup and a silk blouse.

"You look nice," I said.

"It's a special occasion."

We had a layover in London. The flight from London to Bangkok was full of old, white men. Maybe they answered ads or were on their hunt for a Thai princess. The guidebook told me all about prostitution, and I hoped no foreigner would see me in a bar and mistake me for a prostitute.

The guidebook also mentioned the word *farang*: a generic Thai word for someone of European ancestry, no matter where they may come from. This was what all the vendors called white tourists.

"You're a *farang*," I said. We were nearing Bangkok and had just eaten our airplane breakfast of some chicken, rice, and chili oil stuff.

"So are you," she said.

"No, I'm Asian," I said.

"You still have the money of a *farang*," she said.

We landed in the late afternoon. Heavy smog blanketed the city. We grabbed our luggage and stepped out, and I was nearly knocked over by the heat. The sun's brightness hurt my eyes, and the motorbikes' exhaust irritated my throat. We got a cab. Tin shacks, fruit vendors in dirty clothes, and stray dogs lined the streets.

I turned to Nicole and almost told her I was scared.

"Our guidebooks don't have photos of this," I said.

Nicole pressed her nose against the window. "I want to buy them all a sandwich," she said.

Traffic was severe in the city center. We reached roads that merged with others and hit five-way intersections.

"We're doing three days here and the rest on the islands, right?" I asked.

She nodded.

Wat Arun, a tall spire surrounded by four smaller spires, stood on the horizon. Small convenience stores and bigger food markets replaced the shacks. And then came malls with elevated walkways, luxury hotels, and movie theaters with gigantic, American movie posters.

"This is too similar to New York," she said.

Our hostel room was about four American dollars a night. It came with saggy mattresses, a dirty rope hammock, walls a few inches short of the ceiling, and a flimsy door with a padlock. Still, it wasn't my room in Brooklyn. We left the hostel in search of food. Men instantly whistled and stared at Nicole, this tall blond woman.

"I guess catcalling is global," she said.

We found a small, pop-up restaurant with an English menu and ordered. I had lived off of my restaurant's leftovers, pasta, and peanut butter for the past four months. Nicole got a green curry while I went with Pad Kee Mao. They brought our steaming dishes. Nicole and I took photos. Then we devoured. My noodles were very sticky. The sautéed basil tasted as if it was just picked. The dish wasn't all spicy like Thai I had at home but carried a sweetness and smokiness. I closed my eyes and chewed. The trip to Thailand had already been worth it.

"I feel like a queen," I said. "I can never have my restaurant's shitty poached eggs again."

She laughed. "This stuff was only a dollar." Nicole slurped her curry, which I tried. The coconut milk tasted of fresh lime and basil. I moaned with delight.

"And we just got here," she said. "Let's go to a temple next."

"Wonderful," I said before I stuffed another forkful of noodles in my mouth.

We went to a large, golden temple. Nicole and I dodged street vendors, groups of girls on their cell phones, and businessmen. Other groups of tourists passed us too. The sunburns that crisscrossed their faces and arms, sweaty faces, and enormous cameras made them look garish. Many Thai people wore long-sleeved shirts and looked cool and composed in the blistering heat.

"Konichiwa," a man said. I turned around to make sure he was speaking to me and not to someone behind me. He winked and walked away.

Nicole and I walked to the front and kneeled, like everyone else.

The food had inspired me, but now that I was surrounded by people with troubled expressions, I asked myself why I had come here. My credit card bill was now at four thousand. The city, though smelly, loud, and hot, was still beautiful, but I was broke. Was I stupid? I had used all my money on this trip because I didn't want to ask my father for miles because I didn't

want him to reprimand me for asking him for more money. And now, I'd not only have a shitty job and apartment when I returned to New York, but I'd be more stressed about money.

"What's wrong?" Nicole asked. She was studying my face.

I shook my head. "Jet-lagged." If I got into the whole conversation, she'd try to cheer me up, but talking about it would only make me feel worse.

The temple was bustling like a market. People bumped into one another and moved fast. The incense smell gave me a headache.

"How can anyone get any peace around here?" I asked.

We stepped out, and I was nearly hit by a family of five on a motorbike. They were in order from tallest to shortest, with the small child on the end. The child was holding a wooden chair. Riding the subway at rush hour was much safer than being near a main road in Bangkok.

"Konichiwa," a cab driver shouted at me.

"Why do they think you're Japanese?" Nicole asked.

"I wish I knew," I said. "But they don't think I'm American."

"*Farang, farang!*" a person at a stall with dresses shouted at Nicole.

Nicole took my arm. "I'm really glad you came, Liz," she said.

"I want to forget about all my problems here."

"Let's do it. Let's take a break from ourselves."

\* \* \*

Nicole tried to see me when we both moved to New York after college. I ignored her texts for months. I gave excuses: *Tired. Sick. Broke.* And then I stopped saying anything at all.

My older brother, Kevin, talked about New York all the time. *It's faster than any other place. You can reinvent yourself there. No one is weird there because they all are.*

He told me to hop over and visit him in Seoul after I finished with Thailand, but I couldn't take off too much time for work. My boss said he wouldn't guarantee my job would still be there after a week.

I had moved to New York with the secret dream of becoming an actress, secret because I didn't tell my parents. I told them I was waiting to apply to PhD programs in English. They were pleased with my move because they hoped I would attend Columbia University like Kevin.

But the auditions were few and far between. I received roles for "maid," "adopted daughter," and even one to play Woody Allen's wife. Other places told me the role wasn't Asian.

Nicole was the closest person I had in New York. There were other people from Boston University, but no one I knew very well, and no one who texted me like Nicole did. *Want to go to a museum? Can we try this restaurant? Want to go to a thrift store?*

She raised her hand in every class while I never spoke. She was homecoming queen while I didn't go to dances. I wasn't very good at keeping in touch with her in college, though I wasn't good at keeping in touch with anyone. But now we were in New York, and she didn't know many others in the city.

One night, she texted me: *My boyfriend broke up with me.* I didn't respond. She sent me more texts and emails about this boyfriend, some guy from college. Finally, she wrote, *Liz, are you alive?*

*I'd just like to be alone.*

*I'm tired of being alone,* she wrote.

*I hate you,* I wanted to write, but I didn't. She was always with people and was always dating someone. How could I explain myself to her?

\* \* \*

We visited a night market and walked among stalls of swaths of silk, Swiss army knives, backpacks, wooden elephants, and video games. The vendors were Asian while the patrons, except for me and a large group of elderly Chinese tourists, were white. I couldn't help feeling like I was supposed to be doing something else though and looked around me as if the answer were somewhere nearby. The sun was fading, and so was the heat. I had drunk from two coconuts that day and still felt parched.

An Australian man asked Nicole if she wanted to get a drink that evening. She smiled and looked at me.

"What do you say?" she asked. The man kept his eyes on her.

I shook my head. "You can go if you want."

She looked from me to the man and hesitated. Finally, she told the man she was tired.

That night, I turned in my bed, which squeaked and sagged, and looked in the direction of Nicole's bed.

"We came from a city, so let's do something new. Let's leave Bangkok and go to the beach tomorrow," I said.

“Can’t we do a few more touristy things? We didn’t even see the big palace and temple downtown.”

“And then we’ll leave?” I asked.

She didn’t speak for a few moments. “You don’t like traveling with me.”

I waited a few moments. “I’m tired of Bangkok,” I said.

“Would you have rather come here alone?”

“Yes,” I said.

We didn’t speak the rest of the night.

I rose early the next morning. Nicole wasn’t awake. I wrote a note that I was going on a walk.

The city morning was not much slower than the afternoon or evening. Breakfast carts served soy milk, skewers of meat, noodles, and fried dough. Our hostel was on a main stretch for young tourists. Empty *Chang* bottles littered the ground. A few people were on their way home from their nighttime adventures. If Nicole liked Bangkok, maybe she could stay here while I went to the islands. I wanted to snorkel among schools of fish. I wanted to be underwater, where it was silent and peaceful. The sun appeared over golden temples. Despite the smog and luxury malls everywhere, Bangkok was gorgeous. And surreal. Condos next to ancient temples. The city was building a new world on top of itself. It had pressed its own reset button.

I bought a bag of dried beans from a convenience store and wandered down an alley. A man sat on the ground. He was selling wooden keychains. He seemed too exhausted even to lift his head.

Nicole was awake when I returned.

“We can leave for the island this morning,” she said.

“It’s okay,” I said. “One more day here won’t hurt.”

She shrugged. I could tell she was hurt. I struggled even to make eye contact with her when we left the hostel and looked for breakfast. We talked about the food here and the clothes. We talked about ladyboys and “King” shirts, shirts Thai people wore to honor their King. Then we walked downtown towards all the government buildings. The sun was climbing higher. Our shirts were already stained with sweat. People in red began to surround us. They had red T-shirts, bandanas, and wristbands. They carried signs with photos of the King and Thai words.

“What do they want?” I asked.

“I don’t read Thai,” she said.

More came. They started to lift their signs. They chanted. We walked with them on the sidewalk, but they began to enter the streets. Their cries grew.

“Maybe we should leave,” I said. Few foreigners were in the crowd.

“We should definitely stay,” she said.

When we were kneeling in the temple, Nicole had asked if I prayed.

“I don’t believe in God,” I said.

“Don’t you want help with anything?”

“What do you pray for?” I asked. Nicole and her family went to Quaker meetings in high school.

“I’m afraid I’ll never figure out what I want,” she said.

Nicole sped up on the sidewalk. I quickened my pace. The protesters all carried small bags and water bottles filled with something red.



“Why do they have blood?” I asked.

She didn’t respond, but she looked like she wanted to stay here until the protesters were finished.

I had read a few stories about protests against the Thai government but heard they were over. What had happened?

I took Nicole’s hand. She shook it off. “I want a better view,” she said.

She ran ahead. I screamed at her to wait. Her tank top grew small and then vanished.

The protesters stopped, opened their bags and bottles and poured the blood. Droplets splashed on the pavement and on their clothes. Some blood hit my legs and the tops of my feet, exposed in my sandals. I couldn’t see Nicole. The protesters chanted again. I didn’t understand anything they said, but they seemed to scream at me. I began to cry. If I didn’t know what these people wanted and wasn’t part of their cause, I must be part of what they hated. I couldn’t think of anything I would spill my blood for, and perhaps this was the reason I wasn’t on their side.

“Down with the government!”

I turned and saw her on top of a car to my right. She had taken off her red tank top and waved it like a flag. I ran to the car and tried to grab her ankle.

“We don’t know these people,” I said.

She kept waving her shirt.

A bag of blood hit Nicole’s face. She yelled and fell off the car. Another bag hit her. Someone stood above her and poured blood. I ran, took her hand, and pulled her from the ground. Her body was slathered in blood. She limped. I yelled at the protesters. They yelled back

but made a path for us. I got my scarf from my shoulder bag and wiped the blood dripping from her face.

“We have to get out of here,” I said. Nicole was hyperventilating. I put my arm around her.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“I promise I won’t leave you,” I said.

She nodded, and we walked against the protesters and towards the hostel. I wiped more blood from Nicole and threw the scarf on the street.

## Special Needs

The boy was on the verge of tears.

“Mommy,” he said. His glasses with blue plastic frames slid down his nose. He ran to me from the other side of the classroom and hugged me. The teacher who was showing me around the school looked at me.

“Daniel, that’s not your mommy,” she said to the boy. “Go back to the group.”

That was my introduction to Daniel Kim, an eight-year-old boy low on the spectrum at Independence. He was the first person to hug me in months. Even though I had never met him and felt awkward that he thought a strange woman was his mother, the hug gave me some

warmth. It was my first day of work. I was terrified the teacher would realize I had no idea what I was doing and tell me I didn't have the job after all. Daniel helped relax me.

We continued the tour.

"Here's the fifth grade class," the teacher said and showed me a bright room painted turquoise. Children sat in a "U" and raised hands to answer questions about a comic the teacher showed on the SMARTBoard.

"They look happy," I said.

"They're incredible, right?" she asked.

"Sure," I said and smiled.

She smiled back and touched my shoulder. "I knew we made the right decision to hire you."

\* \* \*

When I finished college in Boston and came to New York, I had a plan. I was going to be an actress. I was going to do commercials, film, TV, radio spots, plays, anything I could get. I was going to wait tables to pay my way until I reached stardom or at least enough acting roles for me to quit serving people shitty, overcooked eggs.

Casting directors told me parts weren't for Asian people. They said my body type wasn't right. One suggested I lose twenty pounds and straighten my hair.

If the part were for TV, I'd watch the picked actress in the role and study her. The lean body and tittering giggle were there each time.

My friend's invitation to go to Thailand was exactly the break I needed from New York. I returned and felt I could keep going, just a little more, with acting. I was going to pursue my passion. I wasn't going to sell-out and work a desk job I hated, even if it offered benefits.

Two months after I returned from my Thailand, my brother swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills with half a liter of vodka. He was found dead four days later by his fiancée.

I stopped auditioning. I stopped going to work and plunged further into debt. I evaluated my life, as Kevin must have done to his. What was my life worth? What impact was I making on the world? What would nourish my soul? I was ashamed that I hadn't thought much about doing work to help others. When was the last time I hadn't cared about getting attention? I wasn't sure how it would feel to spend some energy on someone else for once.

My resume hit the inboxes of over a hundred nonprofits. I applied to everything from animal welfare places, to immigration rights centers, to gay senior citizens' organizations, to freedom of press associations. Independence offered to interview me for their paraprofessional position immediately. They seemed desperate, as the previous para had left with two days' notice for some reason I didn't know. Maybe they saw something else in me, just like the teacher who gave me a tour said. Maybe I seemed like I was good with children. Maybe I seemed kind. Maybe I seemed happy.

My job was to assist the second grade classroom. I had tutored some children when I was in college, but children with special needs? Children with mood disorders who took meds and worked with occupational and speech therapists? Children with sensory headphones, canes, and iPads with voice programs because they were non-verbal? This was what I learned during the

interview, and these were children I had never interacted with before. This was a role I had never had, and I didn't think I was ready.

\* \* \*

I observed the second grade classroom for the rest of the day. This is where I would spend twenty hours a week. The other para, an older woman with a pixie haircut, helped students write, read, and use iPads and flashcards. She also helped them tie their shoes and open their milk cartons. The woman seemed incredibly calm and gentle among the shouting children. I would trust this woman to draw blood from me.

"I'm Liz," I said.

She eyed me. "Welcome. I'm Mrs. Llanos."

Daniel was in the class. He didn't call me "Mommy," but he looked as if he wanted to speak or wanted me to come to his side. He was the only Asian boy in the class.

When snack time came, he approached and asked what train I took.

"For where?" I said.

"What train line? From home."

"I took the C to the F to Essex Street," I said.

"From where?" he asked.

"Bed-Stuy. Where do you live?" I hoped I sounded perky, though I had barely slept. I had been so nervous about my first day.

"I play the piano," he said. "And I sing. *Hey Jude, don't make it bad....*"

I laughed.

“Daniel, let’s get your snack,” Mrs. Llanos said. And Daniel walked off, still singing The Beatles.

That night, I lay in bed. It was past two a.m., and I was exhausted, but I couldn’t sleep.

I used to sit in Kevin’s room late at night after he practiced his trumpet. He tried really hard to get me to like jazz, but I couldn’t get into it, or I didn’t have any sense about music yet and clung to my pop.

He practiced his trumpet almost two hours a day. He even kept it up in Korea and started a wind ensemble. I dreamed of him on a stage, the next Wynton Marsalis. He had so many talents. He was a scientist and an artist. He was going to live a long, full life and show me how to do the same.

\* \* \*

Daniel and the other students worked on crafts the next day. We were three weeks away from Thanksgiving, and the students focused on tracing their fingers.

“Good job,” I said to them.

Ms. Llanos looked at me with approval.

I helped a student take off her coat, another student find his stress ball, and asked a third student why he came in with underwear on his head. Ms. Llanos intercepted.

“Come on now, not again. How do you leave the house like that?” She left the classroom with the kid.

Daniel continued to look at me. Perhaps I should mention this to Ms. Llanos. I wasn't sure if I made Daniel nervous or comfortable. He came up to me during snack time and asked if I had seen his pocket watch.

"I haven't. Where did you put it?"

He shrugged. Then he picked up his milk carton and threw it at the wall.

One girl shrieked. The teacher, Ms. Llanos, and I looked at him. Ms. Llanos knelt by his side.

"What was that about?" she asked. "Do you need some alone time?"

"I hate this place," he said. "Everyone is mean."

"Who's mean?" she asked.

"That girl smells like a dog," Daniel said and pointed to a girl who squealed and ran behind another student. She put her fingers in her mouth.

"She's a mistake," he said.

"That's very hurtful language," Ms. Llanos said. "We respect each other in this space."

Daniel sat down. He screamed and writhed. Ms. Llanos told me to go get a counselor, and I did. He came, picked Daniel up, and carried him to the counseling office.

Kevin once threw a sandwich at my face. I was eight, and he was eleven, and I had just thrown his favorite keychain deep into the parking lot. He was teasing me about a boy I liked. We hunted for that keychain for almost an hour. We found it and saw that it had broken into several pieces. Kevin stayed angry at me for a week.



Daniel returned to the class in half an hour with his face swollen from crying. He was calm, but he wasn't smiling. He followed the teacher's instructions during the rest of the class. At the end of class, he approached me, looked me in the eye, and hugged me.

"I'm sorry," he whispered and before I could ask him to tell me what he was sorry for, he ran out of the classroom.

\* \* \*

I asked Frank if he wanted to come over later that night. He texted me back that he would.

We had a routine: he came over and ate a sandwich at my desk, we had sex, and he left.

Tonight, he ate tuna. I lay on my bed. My room smelled from the incense I had burned while I did a little yoga from a YouTube video in my room. I still felt tense.

Frank chewed slowly. He helped set up lights on movie sets and was working on some crime movie. I met him when I was leaving an audition and he was loading equipment onto a truck. He mostly ate sandwiches for dinner, items stolen from the craft table at work. He worked twelve- to fourteen-hour days and told me on our fourth date he didn't want a serious relationship.

"Want to go to a museum this weekend?" I asked.

"I'm working," he said. He turned around and took off his sneakers by rubbing at the heel of each one with the opposite foot. "How's your new job?" he asked.

"Kids are like a different species," I said. "I don't know what goes on in their minds."

"Do they cry a lot?"

“Yeah. One reminds me of my brother. He’s moody. He has a strong will.”

“Isn’t your brother in New York?”

“He used to be,” I said.

Frank finished his sandwich, lay in bed next to me, and put his arm around my back.

“Where does he live now?”

“It’s complicated,” I said.

He kissed me. For two months I watched him eat sandwiches and had sex with him. I tried to hang out with him outside of my apartment, but he always had some excuse. I had told him I wanted to see other people, and he told me to go ahead, but I didn’t really want to. I just wanted him to be near me and hug me.

We never hugged.

We finished, and he fell asleep. I stayed awake for another two hours and wondered why Daniel called me “Mommy.”

\* \* \*

Kevin had lived in Korea for two years. He worked for Samsung, was engaged to a young interior designer named Sohee, and lived in a clean condo.

I saw him about two years ago when I first moved to New York. He paid for my flight to Seoul.

We ate at a nice restaurant, and he mentioned he might come back to New York.

“I thought you loved Seoul,” I said.

He shook his head and pushed around some kimchi on his plate. “It’s fun. Flashy. But something is missing here. I’m not sure what.”

“Would Sohee go with you?”

“Doubt it,” he said.

I had seen photos of him and Sohee kissing and from their trip to Japan. She was his first real girlfriend. Why was he willing to leave her?

“Do you want a different kind of job?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said. “In a company where everyone doesn’t spend all their time trying to ruin each other and kiss the boss’ ass.”

My parents had framed all the photos Kevin sent from Korea — Kevin in a suit for his first day of work, Kevin’s condo, and Kevin’s view from his office. The photos hung in Kevin’s bedroom in Charlottesville.

“What about you?” he asked. “You can’t wait tables for ever.”

“Maybe I’ll go back to school. Maybe be a teacher or a librarian.”

“Good luck,” he said. “You’ll be in debt forever.”

His body was found by Sohee, who had keys to the apartment. No note. Nothing packed up or put away.

My parents asked what happened. I had seen Kevin more recently than they had. They were actually planning to visit that summer, just a couple months after he died. They asked me what we spoke of on my visit. They wanted signs. I told them he wanted to come to New York, maybe without Sohee. He loved New York, but the Samsung job was prestigious and paid well.

“Why didn’t you visit him when you were in Thailand?” they asked. I said I didn’t know, but they asked again. They asked so many times that I stopped responding.

\* \* \*

The next day, my third day at work, I almost missed my train stop. I was nodding off. I hadn’t fallen asleep until three, and then Frank woke me up when he left around six.

The kids were bringing in canned goods for a food drive. They talked about Christmas presents or Hanukah. My parents had begged me to come back to Virginia for Thanksgiving. This would be our first year without Kevin. Mom had called and cried. She told me Dad barely ate.

I didn’t want to spend a holiday weekend at home sobbing with my parents. The alternative was to stay in New York. My roommates would be gone, and I would have silence.

Maybe Frank would be in the city.

We walked the class downstairs to physical therapy class. The kids sat on colorful mats and watched the teacher demonstrate how to use the swing and the scooter. It was after lunch, and some kids were falling asleep. One girl played with her feet. Another student was licking his fingers.

They were adorable.

The students became excited once they sat on the swing, except for Daniel. He sat away from the other students at the mat’s far edge, and when it was his turn, he refused. “That’s boring. I want blocks.” The teacher asked him again, and Daniel started screaming. Ms. Llanos

spoke to him in a low whisper, but he only screamed louder. The teacher talked about how safe the swing was, how Daniel enjoyed it last time, and how Daniel could play with blocks later.

Daniel looked at me and said, “I’ll go if Ms. Yoo helps me.”

I was startled. The teacher and Ms. Llanos looked at me.

“Sure, Daniel,” I said. I sat by the swing, made of a thick cushion and rope. I wrapped my arm around the cushion. Daniel walked over.

He kept his gaze on me while he swung. He didn’t look upset, but he didn’t seem excited either. Kevin must have been calm and calculated like this when he was Daniel’s age, but I couldn’t quite remember. He studied more than anyone I knew in high school. He once took apart a computer and built it back up just to see if he could. It took him days, but he didn’t give up.

“Good job,” I said.

Daniel nodded. He hugged me.

I blushed. I was embarrassed that child’s compliment flattered me so much. “Go back to your seat,” I said. I wanted to thank him for the hug, though it was discouraged to ask for children to show physical affection.

His hug stayed with me the rest of the day.

\* \* \*

Mom texted that night and asked me to come home for Thanksgiving. “We’ll buy your plane ticket,” she said.

A friend texted to ask if I wanted to go to a drop-in drawing class with her.

Frank texted to ask if he could come over again.

I crawled under my covers and tried to read a Philip Roth book, a book on all the bookstore fiction tables that had so much praise on the back it was like some kind of elixir. My eyes scanned but didn't absorb the words. I tried to write a poem, which became scribbles, which became scratches, which became the journal face down on the floor.

Frank texted again.

*Okay*, I wrote back.

I wanted to see him, but I was weary. Part of the reason he came to my place was that he didn't like to go home. He lived with his parents, who pressured him to quit the film set work. His dad still hoped Frank could become a professional soccer player, but Frank told me he never would. He said he just wasn't good enough.

He appeared an hour later with his sandwich. It was nearly eleven.

"Sometimes I hate my job," he said.

"What happened?" I asked.

"This intern tripped on a cord and almost broke a light. He's always rushing, never looking."

Frank continued to chew. He looked very handsome, even when he was stressed. He had seen me leave a building and asked how the audition went. When I told him it went terrible, he said he wanted to cheer me up. With a drink.

"This kid wouldn't stop crying about the swings," I said.

"The Asian kid?"

I nodded.

“Ever wonder if he likes you because you’re the only other Asian person at the school?”

I rolled onto my back and looked at my ceiling, which had some mold in one corner.

“Maybe that’s why he calls me ‘Mommy,’” I said.

“That kid sees so few Asian people around that he figures the one Asian woman must be related to him.”

I bent my arm to support my head. “Wow,” I said.

“Weren’t you like that?”

“I never called strangers ‘Mommy.’”

“The only Asian kid,” he said. “You always tell me how white Virginia is. Doesn’t sound like Brooklyn.”

“I haven’t seen another Asian person at Independence besides me and Daniel,” I said.

Frank finished his sandwich. He looked so weary; why did everyone in this city look so weary? Why did people stay here if it made them so weary? Even the kids at the school looked weary, though not always. They sometimes looked so refreshed that I forgot about everything else in the world.

“Why’d you come to New York?” Frank asked. “I never stop hearing you say it’s too *loud, expensive, and dirty.*”

I came because of my brother. I came because Kevin went to school here and because this was where he wanted to be when I last saw him. I came because when he came home from Columbia on winter break, he told me he was proud to be living in New York. He told me only really hardworking people make it in New York.

“It’s fun sometimes,” I said.

“Did you know anyone here when you came?”

“Just a few people,” I said.

“Like your brother,” he said.

I sat up. “Maybe you should get going.”

“What’s wrong?”

I had never asked him to leave before.

“I’d like to be alone right now,” I said.

“I don’t want to take an hour-long train ride now,” he said. “Your place is way closer to work.”

“I’m just your pit-stop,” I said.

“Give me more credit than that,” he said. “I helped you look for a job. I sent your resume around.”

“You deserve a medal,” I said.

If Frank stayed, I was going to start crying. If he saw me cry, he’d ask what was wrong, and I might start talking about my brother. If I spoke of my brother, I’d never stop crying.

“Why can’t I have some privacy?” I yelled.

He looked confused. Even hurt. He got his things and left. The moment he closed the door, I started to cry. I wasn’t sure if I felt better or worse that he was gone.

\* \* \*



Frank texted the next morning: *What did I do? Sorry, whatever it was.*

My parents left voicemails: “Come home,” “Come help us organize Kevin’s room,” “We’ll drive to D.C. for a few days,” and “Dad will get us tickets to a play.”

In today’s math lesson, Daniel raised his hand and answered most of the questions. At the end of the session, the teacher gave him a gold star. “You were very focused,” the teacher said. Later, the teacher said to me, “When he isn’t screaming, he’s actually brilliant.”

At lunch, Daniel sat alone. I sat across from him.

“What train stop do you take?” he asked.

I laughed. “Hi Daniel,” I said. “Can you say ‘hi’ before you ask some personal questions?” I asked.

“What train — “

“Ask me how I am.”

“How are you?” he asked. He gnawed on baby carrots.

“Fine, thank you,” I said. “I take the F. What train do you take?”

“The Seven,” he said. “I live in Flushing.” He raised his hand and screamed.

“Daniel,” I said.

He stopped, looked around the cafeteria, and then opened his milk carton.

“Go away, Mommy,” he said.

“I’m not your mother,” I said. “Call me Ms. Yoo.”

“Ms. Yoo, go away,” he said.

The teachers worried that Daniel had no friends. No wonder. He told everyone to go away.

“Bye, Daniel,” I said.

He didn’t respond.

\* \* \*

I hopped on the train after work. I had an idea of where I wanted to go but wasn’t sure until I was a few stops away.

I visited Kevin at Columbia when I a junior in high school. He showed me around the campus. We went on College Walk, stood in front of Low Library, and tried on sweatshirts in the bookstore.

The campus was thick with students tonight. I stopped in front of a bench.

One night of my visit, Kevin told me never graduated from Columbia. We were on his couch and watching some Korean drama.

My brother, who scored 1580 on his SAT, who was accepted to Cornell, Columbia, Dartmouth, and UPenn, had not graduated from college?

“Of course Mom and Dad won’t tell you that,” he said. “I stopped going to class. I was depressed.”

“Are you better now?” I asked.

“I have a nice job,” he said. “I got it through Dad’s friend.”

“Why did you stop going to class?”

“I don’t even really like physics,” he said. “My professors were just like our parents. All they said was ‘You can do better.’ I never got a break.”

“You’re the smartest person I know,” I said.

“Oh, Liz,” he said. “Who even cares?”

I walked off the campus and went to a shitty overpriced diner Kevin and I once visited. I sat and ordered the soup.

A friend from college texted me. *I’m in town for the next week. Want to get dinner?*

*Pretty busy with a new job,* I wrote. *Maybe next time.*

\* \* \*

Daniel was absent the next day. And the next. And then the next. On the fourth day, the news surfaced: Daniel was missing.

The principal announced Daniel’s disappearance at the staff meeting: “The family has filed a report. If students ask about Daniel, say he can’t come to school. Don’t make up an excuse.”

Daniel might be in a ditch. He might be on a bus somewhere. Maybe he was alone or maybe he was with someone, someone who had lured, drugged, or hurt him. Maybe he was wandering the streets and saying “Mommy” with the hope that someone would help him.

The kids didn’t ask about Daniel. I worked extra hard. I wiped and swept more than I needed to, organized student cubbies, called parents to ask for permission field trip forms, logged the teachers’ attendance a day early, and stayed after school to help the cooking club set up even though no one had asked.

The NY1 website said Daniel went missing when his family went shopping at a supermarket in Flushing.

I texted Frank, the first time I wrote him since I kicked him out. *I'm sorry*, I wrote. *Can I see you tonight?*

He replied after an hour. *You know I'm not looking for anything serious.*

*I want to talk to someone. I'm really sorry.*

*Why did you ask me to leave?*

*I'll tell you tonight*, I wrote.

He came over that night. He didn't have a sandwich, and he didn't sit down. He stood in my room while I sat on the bed.

"What —"

"That boy went missing," I said. I started to cry.

He sat next to me on the bed. "What boy?"

"The Asian kid who calls me 'Mommy.' Do you think he's hurt?"

"I'm sorry," he said and put his hand on my back.

I cried harder. "I hate it when people see me cry."

"You must have really liked that boy," he said.

"You talked to me about my brother. My brother is dead," I said.

"Oh, I didn't know," he said. "I had no idea." Frank hugged me.

"He was so smart. He worked so hard. He was so fucking gifted."

"You guys are a lot alike," Frank said.

I pressed my face into Frank's chest. I cried, wiped tears, and cried more.

“If Daniel doesn’t return, I will leave New York. I can’t be in a place that makes me think of two missing people.”

“You don’t know what happened to Daniel,” he said. “He might be found.”

We went to bed fully clothed. For once, I fell asleep before him.

\* \* \*

The staff became more and more upset. We started to snap at the students. We smiled less.

Daniel’s cubby was still labeled. I thought some kid said, “Mommy,” but nobody had.

My nightmares began. Daniel and Kevin chased me with forks in my house in Virginia. Daniel sat on the physical therapy swing, which became a gun, and shot the other students. The bullets missed, but Daniel kept trying. I went to the swing and tried to wrestle the gun from him. He fell in front of the barrel and pulled the trigger.

I took the train to Flushing that weekend and walked around the shops. I walked in the markets and looked at all the little boys in blue coats. I sat at a table in a food court and watched families eat together.

The next day, three days after Daniel went missing, the principal reported Daniel had been found. She didn’t know the details, but he wouldn’t return to Independence that year.

I took the train uptown to the diner and got soup. I texted Frank.

*They found Daniel. He’s okay.*

*What a relief. Amazing,* he wrote.

*I miss you,* I wrote.

*That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me.*

## The Sharper Image

I was three hundred dollars short of rent and out of ideas. I needed to ask my roommate again to hold off on cashing my check. I would have to. Even though she had already warned me.

“Liz, if you can’t pay on time next month, you’ll need to find a new place,” she had said last month. We were in the kitchen, and she had caught me while I was making instant mac and cheese. I had asked her to hold off on cashing that check too.

I nodded. She was on the lease, and I wasn’t, after all.

Next month, I’d have to beg. I would offer to pay interest. I had searched for months to find a room at this rate and had even given up my pet cat to take the place. Six-hundred dollars was the lowest price I could find within an hour’s distance from work by train. I refused to

sacrifice more sleep; I already felt so exhausted. And many other neighborhoods farther away were only known to me through their reputations for shootings. I didn't want to be in a neighborhood with NYPD skyboxes. Plus, I was tired of moving from one apartment to another. Couldn't I be in one place for at least a year? I was sick of boxing and unboxing, looking up train stations in new neighborhoods, figuring out where to put my bed and where to buy groceries, and filling out change-of-address forms.

I sat in front of my laptop and began the email: *Hey Sarah, I'm so sorry but could you wait to cash my check....*

\* \* \*

Today, I was assigned to re-stocking. I pushed the cart through the stacks. A patron approached me and asked for books in Spanish. I pointed to the aisle, and she went on her way.

Sarah hadn't responded to my email yet. I worried that she would still insist I leave. One day, I would be able to leave. I'd be able to have my own place.

But for now, I didn't have a grand to spend on rent. I didn't even have six hundred dollars.

"Ni-hao," a teenager said. He and his friend snickered.

I turned. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah, where's the history section."

"I don't speak Chinese," I said. They laughed. "It's at the end, on your left."



Was this what I had spent twenty-thousand dollars on my Masters in Library Science for? To put books on shelves and respond to racist teens? Did I really need to take out loans, write papers on archiving methods, and memorize Dewey Decimal categories for this? Yes, I had wanted to work with books. I had changed my mind from acting to library studies because library studies was a stable career that kept me in touch with books, my other love besides acting. Yes, I wanted to work at a small, community library like this one in Sunset Park, because I wanted to be part of a place that offered resources, that helped people. It was important to me that the library was in a low-income neighborhood of people of color. That satisfied me and made me feel like I was making a difference in the world.

At least, most of the time. Other times, I was a fool. I was in debt for decades, and I wasn't sure again if the debt, the stress, and the fear of being kicked out of my home, were worth it.

\* \* \*

My father shopped a lot at *The Sharper Image*, a store I later realized was for middle-class people who wanted to look like *Fortune 500* executives. I sometimes wondered if he was one of their most frequent customers.

The catalogue was full of flashy junk for the businessman. My father bought an electric stapler with a leather grip for a “more comfortable stapling experience,” gold-embossed luggage tags, pens made of plastic that looked like they were made of marble, a noise-maker with seven

settings that claimed to adjust to your sleep rhythm, and a *Zero-Gravity* massage chair that he used about five times. At least my mom, my brother, and I used it a lot. It cost nearly two grand.

My mother took me shopping in tenth grade for a Homecoming dress. I had selected a burgundy dress and just texted my friend a photo. We were at the register at Macy's when Mom's credit card was declined. The salesperson looked embarrassed.

We didn't get the dress. Mom said, "Stupid *Sharper Image*."

I got my dress the following week. But a few weeks after Homecoming, Dad came into my room, sat on the edge of my bed and said I'd need to take out loans for college.

"Kevin doesn't have to take out loans," I said. Kevin was my older brother and about to enter his freshman year at Columbia.

Dad made one-hundred and fifty-thousand dollars a year. He was a doctor at the local hospital, had a private practice, and was in the army. We lived in a four-story house with a pool and had four cars.

"We have so much money," I said.

Dad shifted his weight on my bed. His stethoscope was still around his neck. He reeked of beer, his after-dinner treat. He looked weary yet tense.

"Kevin is the oldest boy. Columbia is one of the best schools in the country."

"What if I go to Columbia?" I asked. My voice shook. I didn't have Kevin's 3.9 GPA. Kevin got four academic awards; I had zero.

"You should try for UVA," he said. "The tuition is much cheaper. You won't have to take out as much."

“I’m not going in-state.” In-state meant my mother would appear unannounced at my door and call my professors. In-state meant my parents would try to find Korean men in the area, the few there must be, to set me up with.

“I will try to pay as much as I can,” he said.

This man preferred my brother and bought junk, and now I had to take out loans. Mom had said Dad was one of the smartest people in his class at college.

“Why do you get that stuff from *The Sharper Image*?” I asked. How could a smart man believe all the lame claims of that magazine?

“That stuff is nice,” he said. “Liz, when you are older, you will want nice things for your family, too.”

\* \* \*

I was making pasta and frozen vegetables for dinner, since I didn’t have much else, when Mom called that evening.

“Liz,” she said. “When you come home?”

“Hi,” I said, hoping she’d hear my annoyance that she didn’t ask how I was doing.

“How’s your blood pressure?”

The last time I went home, Mom interrogated me about marriage, children, and going to law school. And Dad... I couldn’t tell Dad that I couldn’t pay rent. This man had spent over eighty-thousand dollars on my Boston University education with hopes I would study pre-med or law. I was another of Dad’s investments, another of his stocks, and the return looked abysmal.

“Good,” she said. “I worry about you. Do you have enough money?”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“What about boyfriend?”

“Stop it.” Even if I were dating someone, I’d say I was single. Otherwise, she’d ask about the person’s income level and what college he went to. If those answers satisfied her, she would pressure me to marry and have children. Thirty was too old to be single and childless, she told me last week.

“I don’t want you to be alone,” she said and sighed. “Kevin would have had nice children.”

“I know,” I said. Kevin died when I was twenty-four. We had no idea how depressed he was until we heard of his death. Mom often imagined what his children would have been named and how they would have lived in Korea.

“Is Dad in D.C.?” I asked.

“Yeah, for medical conference,” she said. “You meet nice Korean man. Who will take care of you?”

“It’s different now. A lot of my friends are single.”

“It’s not safe. You shouldn’t be alone. Come home soon.”

We hung up. I wanted to go to sleep. My mom’s concern over my single state made me feel anxious. Her questions about my financial situation did too. I had never admitted to my parents that I could barely pay my bills. Why didn’t I just take the money? They wanted to give it to me. But I couldn’t because that meant my father, who had come to this country when he was

not much younger than me with one suitcase and worked seventy hours a week most of my life so I could go to college, would feel his sacrifices were for nothing.

After dinner, I returned to my computer and checked an online dating site I had joined. A person, AleXtraGuac, wrote me: *You have a beautiful smile*. In his profile picture, he sat at a wooden table and held a cocktail. He had unkempt, brown hair, the beginnings of a beard, and wore a plaid long-sleeved shirt. His smile looked kind.

He was very handsome.

I clicked “details.” He was thirty-five, worked in marketing, loved sci-fi and ultimate Frisbee, was from Minnesota, and wanted to visit the Great Wall someday.

His income level was eighty to one-hundred thousand.

I wrote: *Thank you. I like science-fiction too. Want to talk about it over a drink?*

I still went on online dates despite many fiascos. One man showed up to our museum date in a full suit while I wore jean shorts, a tank top, and sneakers. Another guy spent the entire date talking about his exes. He texted me an hour after our date ended that he wasn’t interested because he didn’t think we “clicked.” One guy invited me to his art studio and asked if I could bring Thai food and a bottle of wine. I declined. When another guy learned I was interested in writing fiction, he told me I might as well give up because no one would ever be as good as Joyce or Borges.

But I still went back. I regretted dumping my last serious boyfriend, who was a workaholic but at least I could spend weekends in bed curled up with someone and watch crappy movies. It made me forget about other things, like Mom’s pressure. I went back to the dating site because I wanted not to feel so alone, and I was terrible at talking to strangers.

My primary goal that night was to look for a second job. Sarah wasn't in the apartment and hadn't replied to my message, but I hoped that if I told her I got another job, she would be less likely to kick me out. Waiting tables was an obvious choice because I had experience, it could fit my library schedule, and the money was pretty good. But doing a shift made me want to crawl into my bed and not leave for days. There were babysitting and tutoring jobs. I had some experience with children, so these were feasible, but would they pay enough? If I were paid fifteen dollars an hour, I would need to work twenty hours a month to make the extra three hundred.

Not bad.

An ad for an escort service appeared on the edge of the screen. *Girls wanted, easy cash, make up to one thousand dollars.*

I scrolled past the ad. Then I scrolled back up and clicked.

I had never done anything sexual for money. What if a man offered me a thousand dollars to give him a blow job? The ad had a phone number and the promise of "starting immediately." If I made a thousand dollars in one evening, I could pay off my student loans in the next year. I could live alone in a nice neighborhood.

I would never need anyone to take care of me.

No. I was going to be safe. I wasn't going to meet strange man and spread my legs for who knew what. I went back to the babysitting listings and started writing emails. This had to work. I was determined not to buy anything other than groceries and a MetroCard this month. I would bring my lunch to work every single day, even if it was only a granola bar and an apple.

Losing this apartment meant paying more for a bigger one. If I didn't cling to this place, I was going to plummet into much greater debt and then have no hope of surfacing again.

\* \* \*

Nicole texted me at work the next day.

*I miss you, Nicole wrote. Want to get a drink?*

My checking account had less than twenty dollars.

*I'm really tired. Maybe next week?* I'd be paid by next week.

*Oh, okay. Are you going to Aaron's party this weekend?*

*Maybe,* I wrote. I hoped I'd be babysitting this weekend.

I logged in returned books the rest of the day. A woman came to me and asked me for information on the ESL and resume classes. She nearly burst into tears when I told her they were free and they would start this weekend. When she thanked me, my world glowed. This was why I had come to this library. To help people read and to help people have better lives. The woman thanked me at least five times and walked away.

My cabinet had peanut butter, jelly, bread, tuna, salt and pepper, and some weird package of curry powder my roommate had given me. My fridge had milk and a molding cucumber. How I longed for sushi or a juicy hamburger. I wanted to eat artisanal donuts, binge on lamb vindaloo, and shop at Whole Foods. I needed to settle for a PBJ sandwich instead.

Over the last three months, I had spent about four-hundred dollars on books and three-hundred dollars on clothes. Each month, I spent almost three-hundred on food. I ate out four or

five times a week. I lived like I made sixty thousand dollars a year rather than forty, yet every time I spent money, the purchase felt essential.

AleXtraGuac had replied to my message. *Drink would be fun. Tomorrow or Thursday?*  
*Reading Kindred by Octavia Butler. How about u?*

His other photos showed him at a concert, with friends, and him on a boat. He looked like he would hold the door open for you or decide to pick up surfing. I wrote back that I would see him tomorrow. I would spend my last dollars on a drink with him.

\* \* \*

The summer before Kevin started Columbia, I hung out in his room and talked to him while he researched his classes for the first semester, studied New York's subway line, and listened to a lot of jazz.

"Why don't you have to take out any loans for college?" I asked.

"I guess I got to the money first."

"And you're a boy," I said.

Kevin often got to pick what we had for dinner. He got to use the car more than I would when I got my license. He always got more clothes than me.

"You know our parents," he said and shrugged.

"What are you going to study at Columbia?"

"Probably physics."



My eyebrows lifted. “Not music?” His two trumpets were on stands in the corner of the room next to piles of sheet music and a tower full of jazz and classical CD’s. He practiced hours every day, and I had never seen him look happier than when he played trumpet.

“I want to eat,” he said. “It’s nearly impossible to make it as a professional musician. And even if you do, you’re not paid much.”

“You could be Wynton Marsalis,” I said, mentioning one of Kevin’s idols. “I bet he eats really well.”

“I’m not that good,” he said.

Kevin was the high school band’s star. He was so good that the band had a concert in which Kevin stood to the side and played solos during most of it. The rest of the band was like back-up.

“I’m going to be an actress,” I said. “Or a writer.”

He turned his chair and looked at me. “And what’s your backup plan?”

“I don’t need money to be happy,” I said. Even as I spoke, I knew I sounded stupid.

“Liz. Everything requires money. You’re going to be in trouble if you don’t have a plan.”

“You owe *me*. If it weren’t for my loans, *you’d* have to take them out.”

“At least I’m going to do something with my degree,” he said. “Liz, don’t ever be an actress or artist. You’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

I stood up from the carpet. “I’m going to be happy. I’m going to make others feel good. I’m going to have kids and do something I’m passionate about. I’m not a robot. I’m not just some open wallet.” I left the room and slammed his door behind me.

\* \* \*

Alex picked a bar for us in Williamsburg, a neighborhood we decided was convenient enough for us both. He was already at the table and wore a shirt similar to the one in his profile picture. He was handsomer in real life.

“Liz,” he said. We had exchanged names when we confirmed the time and date. I stood by him, awkwardly. He got up and hugged me.

This man was not awkward. Relief washed over me.

“This place is fancy,” I said and sat. The bar looked like a vintage speakeasy with red velvet sofas, leather booths, long tables, and dim lighting. Candles peppered the place. We sat at a small corner table next to a booth.

“What can I get you?” he asked and handed me the menu.

Alex was an assistant creative director at an advertising agency with big clients. “Like the ones that are killing the world: Nike, Porsche, and Victoria’s Secret.” He helped make their commercials. He studied journalism at NYU and used to bartend. “I know half the bartenders in this city. And what about you?”

I hadn’t listed my job online. I only checked off my industries as “arts,” “education,” and “nonprofit.”

“I’m a librarian,” I said.

He didn’t respond. I sensed disappointment. “Did you think I was an artist?” I asked.

“That’s usually why people choose the ‘artist’ category,” he said, but he wasn’t bitter.

“I checked others too. I used to want to be an artist. But then I didn’t think I’d make a living.”

“I hear that. I used to paint. And now I work for corporations, so I could take pretty girls to nice bars.”

We flirted all night. He was very kind. But his world was so different from mine. He lived alone in a Williamsburg condo that must have cost five times my rent a month. He ate out — a lot — at very nice restaurants. He went skiing in the winter, to Mexico in the summer, and hosted oyster dinner parties. I told him about Virginia and Boston, which weren’t as sexy, but he looked mesmerized.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

“Bed-Stuy.”

“Oh,” he said and looked concerned. “Do you feel safe there?”

There was a shooting on my block last week, but instead of telling him, I said, “It’s okay. There are actually a lot of college students.”

“Huh,” he said.

He paid for my drink and asked to see me again. “Maybe dinner next week?”

I would be paid next week, so I could afford to contribute to dinner. Perhaps not as much as he could, but then again, I knew he was going to pay.

“Sounds lovely,” I said.

\* \* \*

The letters were hidden in back of Mom's closet. I was eleven and rummaging around for a pair of diamond earrings Mom kept there. I wanted to wear them in front of the mirror and pretend I was a rich and famous movie star. Mom was busy downstairs making dinner, so I had some time before she might come upstairs and catch me.

My hand felt the paper at the back of the drawer. The letters were written on blue, nearly transparent paper and in English. The creases were so strong and old that the letters might tear along them.

*Dear HyeJin,*

*If you marry me, I will buy you anything you want. I can buy you jewelry, clothes, or anything for the nice house we will have.*

*From,*

*Jai Jeong*

The second letter was a list:

*pearl necklace*

*rice cooker*

*wardrobe*

*piano*

*silk scarves*

*luggage set*

*diamond earrings*

*gold plates*

Was this why my mother married my father?

I walked downstairs with the letters and showed Mom. Her face contorted. She snatched the notes from my hand. “Where did you find this?”

“Why did you ask for these things?” I asked.

“I’ll call you when dinner is ready,” she said. “Go upstairs.” Her face was red.

I went to my room and opened my diary.

*Today, I found a letter my dad wrote my mom. He offered to buy things for her. Maybe if he didn’t buy them, she wouldn’t be with him. Then maybe I wouldn’t be here?*

\* \* \*

Mom called me that weekend when I was on the way to the new babysitting job. I stopped in front of a coffee shop to answer the phone.

“Liz, there is doctor who work with Daddy. He is thirty-five. From China. Can I give him your phone number?”

“Don’t.”

“Why?” She sounded pissed.

“I don’t want to live in Virginia,” I said. “I’m not getting married.” I didn’t know if the latter were true, but it infuriated my mother and sometimes ended the conversation.

I hung up just in case it didn’t.

This family lived in a two-floor brownstone in Park Slope. Their windows were floor-to-ceiling. They had a fancy mounted TV and speakers mounted in the wall, large blue couches with piles of pillow, and the adjoining kitchen was bigger than my bedroom. A chandelier hung

over their kitchen table, which had bowls of ripe mangos and avocados. The mother smiled a lot and looked like a *Lands' End* model. She introduced me to her daughter, who was grumpy, as if she had been handed off from one babysitter to another for most of her life. The dad appeared in business clothes. He was a surgeon.

The parents were going to meet friends for lunch. The kid started to cry the moment the parents left.

This was part of paying my rent. The girl and I watched a Pixar movie, which soothed her. She asked what I did for a living, and when I told her I was a librarian, she asked, “Where are your glasses? And your ugly shoes?” This made me laugh. Perhaps someday I would have a kid. But how could I afford one? Food stamps and Medicaid could help. I wanted to cry. I never imagined I would consider food stamps or Medicaid. My father would probably scream if he knew I did. Weren’t those services for people who couldn’t get a job, who just got out of prison, or people who had just experienced an earthquake? How many young women with six years of higher education and fulltime jobs used them?

\* \* \*

I visited Kevin in Korea the year before he died. He worked for Samsung, doing some product research thing I didn’t understand. He was dating an interior designer and lived in a condo in one of Seoul’s most expensive neighborhoods.

“I’ll pay for your flight,” he had said. I was twenty-three and had come back from a trip to Thailand. Kevin was hurt that I hadn’t made a stop in Korea, but I didn’t have money for other flights. I couldn’t take off any more time from work without getting fired.

“Don’t buy my flight,” I said. “You don’t need to spend that kind of money on me.”

“I have the money,” he said.

His condo was perfect. Really, his life looked perfect: well-paying job, closet full of fancy suits, kitchen with an espresso machine and new refrigerator, pretty girlfriend, and the ease to take weekend trips. I stayed on his pull-out couch and tried to guess the price of everything in the apartment. I stopped after just a few items, which together added up to more than my rent.

We had a Korean-style breakfast. Kevin was immersing himself more and more in Korean traditions, and I was admiring it, though both of us had protested every Korean tradition our parents forced upon us as children. We sat before small bowls of seaweed soup and rice with fried egg and kimchi. We drank barley tea.

“Are you happy?” I asked.

“I have everything I could ask for,” he said. “I don’t see myself leaving here anytime soon.” He was looking at his soup. “What about you?”

“I never saw myself as a waitress,” I said. This was before I abandoned acting and went to grad school in search of a steadier field that depended less on my appearance.

“Time to focus,” he said.

He wanted to say he told me so. He could have emphasized that he was the wise, older brother, and I was the naïve younger sister finally learning my lesson.

He didn't. I loved him even more. "Liz," he said. "You're welcome to stay here anytime. You could stay here and try to get a job in Korea."

I had looked at the men in Korea on my way to Kevin's apartment. Could I marry one of them? A man as rich and dapper as Kevin? Exactly as my mother wanted? A man I would cook for. A man I would have children with. I would stay home with those children while he went to his nice office and boring meetings. A man who would buy me anything I desired.

"I'm not done with New York," I said.

"And acting?"

"Maybe," I said.

"You were interested in nonprofit work. New York has plenty of those."

I finished my soup and played with the expensive-looking pair of chopsticks on the table.

"When are Mom and Dad visiting you?" I asked.

"Next summer," he said.

"They'll be proud of you," I said.

"Well, I did what they did. Except, when I have kids, I'm not going to yell at them so much."

"You'll take care of them," I said.

"That's the plan." He smiled.

That was the last time I saw him. I never guessed he would commit suicide because I never guessed he was unhappy. He had done everything we had been told to do, but it wasn't enough.

I didn't want to make the same mistake.



\* \* \*

I met Alex for dinner at a sushi place. He suggested this spot, too. It was very romantic and expensive. He had come straight from work and was more dressed up this time: collared shirt, khakis, and glasses. I had also come straight from work and was tired from dealing with a patron upset about her overdue fines.

“Why don’t we go to Bogotá?” he asked.

I had started to eat my salmon roll but dropped the piece.

“The weather is perfect this time of the year,” he said. “I have a client there who owes me a favor.”

“You’re spontaneous,” I said, unsure if I liked it. I barely knew the man.

He smiled. “Come on, life is short.”

“Do you do any pro-bono work?” I asked. “Since it’s such a big firm?”

“What do you mean? For charity?”

I nodded.

“No,” he said. “Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering if our industries collide.” *Our desires too.*

The conversation lagged after this. I laughed at his jokes and participated in a discussion about books and movies, but my interest was already gone. At the end of the night, he kissed me on the cheek and said he had a nice time but didn’t suggest a future date. I was partly relieved

and partly horrified. Had I just made a serious mistake? Had I felt this man was going to lead me to misery because he had so much more money and did work he didn't seem to care about?

\* \* \*

On the subway ride home, I took out my journal. I made a list of things I wanted.

*bookshelves*

*a new laptop*

*reading chair*

*printer*

Hell, I was going to go big: *a studio apartment*.

What did I need to do to get these things?

On my last night with Kevin, I told him I would pay him back for the flight. He told me not to worry about it.

"Remember, I didn't have to take out loans. I owe you," he said.

I started to pack my suitcase and looked at all my clothes. They were all cheap and so worn.

"Am I stupid not to have a real job and live in New York City?" I asked.

"You'll need some way to take care of yourself," he said.

When I got off the subway and walked into my room, the space felt very small compared to the large sushi restaurant and to that family's nice brownstone. It was packed with things and

messy. I wanted more, just like my mother had. Maybe I would have written the exact same response to Dad's letter if I had been her.

## VITA

Victoria Cho is a Korean-American writer who was born and raised in Virginia. Her writing has appeared in *The Collagist*, *Perigee*, *Luna Luna Magazine*, *Quarter After Eight*, and *Word Riot*. She is a workshop leader for New York Writers Coalition and a VONA/Voices alumna. She lives in New York City.