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Anna, Dolly and Kitty: A Novel Excerpt and Two Short Stories

Sarah Lawrence College
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May, 2016

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(Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Fine Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College, May 2016)

Bedtime Rituals

Allyson reads Dickinson in class today. She parts her hair in the middle and wears a long-sleeved black dress she picked out last night. She decided to start with Hope Is the Thing with Feathers but goes for Because I Could Not Stop for Death instead as it seems only fit for the drizzling outside. Allyson loves reading aloud. She savors the moments when her teeth rub and grind into the tenderness of tongue while lips fly open waiting to be chased, and when the tongue flutters up and down teasing the insides of her mouth. As she walks down the aisles, Allyson taps gently on the kids' lined-up desks and halts to Emily's rhythms. She should pause to ask the students what they think of the poems, encourage them to volunteer reading, or at least seeking eye contact of appreciation and understanding. She doesn't, not any more. Adulthood seems a lifetime away for 10th graders and literature is even further away. At one time Allyson cared and tried to build something out of her career, as if babysitting a bunch of teens counted at all as one. She even shared one of her favorite books, Winesberg, Ohio, with them. And she was hurt, deeply, when parents started calling questioning her choice of a book about a pedophile. Allyson gets emotional like that over these tiny things, or so she has been told. Not by Saul though. He gets her. Sometimes when they think you are crazy, it could be because the rest of the world is insane and scheming to choke the sanity out of you, he once told her.

There is still some time left when she finishes her lesson. She asks the class to keep reading and files among them as a formality. Only a handful of kids have paid attention and even they put on a show of nonchalance so that it doesn't undermine their pilgrimage up the ladder of popularity. Allyson finds it almost entertaining to observe the students' identical

movements sliding phone screens concealed in the bellies of their desks. She doesn't fuss over it now. One way or another, you get through the day. Saul is such a good consoler.

Class always ends sooner than expected when Allyson puts on her good mood. The assignment she gives the class is to look for a poem they like and read it next week, extra credits if they can remember it by heart. She knows no one would bother to remember a poem, though, and she bets the ones they pick would be the shortest ones. Nonetheless, she sees them out with an almost motherly smile.

Classrooms after school are bleak, but quiet. Allyson decides to stay for a while there. She hates walking or driving in the rain, but revels in reading on a rainy day. Better if it is storming. She closes the door, puts on her earpiece and picks up the warmed-up Dickinson anthology. And she reads to the music. This reminds her of the first time she went to Saul's place. The rain was heavier and the couch cozier. Allyson always gets clumsy and awkward meeting new people. She wasn't sure what to do at Saul's house and decided to bring a book to read. She read all the narration and they took turns to read the dialogues. They had sat opposite each other but Saul moved next to her on the turquoise couch to save the trouble of passing the book. The background music Saul chose was the sound of sea waves. Allyson remembered she hadn't felt that warm and safe for a long time, like being quilted tight and tucked in. Like she is at this moment. She is almost certain she can sleep without any aid tonight.

Liam is already back from work when Allyson makes it home through the rain. Slices of pizza are left on the dining table for her. Liam sticks his head out from the bedroom door,

his body stationed in the swivel chair, a set of those ridiculous-looking earphone around his neck. He's been at his games.

“Oh, you are home. I was just about to call and pick you up from school. The rain was pretty bad.”

“Sorry. I should have called. There's a kid in detention. Besides I need the car tomorrow.”

“Oh. Tomorrow? What for?”

“Got the appointment.” Allyson sits by the table drying up her hair with tissue.

“Right, right. I have some work tomorrow. I'll be home for dinner, though.”

“Uh huh.” Allyson washes down the pizza with some soda.

“We can go out for dinner, or we can cook at home.” Liam comes out, walks up to her and starts rubbing her shoulder. “Whichever you want.” He adds, before disappearing back into the room.

Allyson stands up with her plate. “Dinner out sounds fine. I'm going to grade some papers.” She yells into the bedroom so that she is heard over Liam's earphone.

“O...kay. I'll be in here if you need me.” Liam yells back.

Allyson throws the plates into the sink and decides to do the dishes later. She walks into the study and climbs onto the pullout bed. It's still early and there are no papers to grade. Life gets so much easier with a few petty lies. Maybe she can finish the Dickinson. She turns on her laptop and randomly clicks open a sitcom on Netflix. She's had this habit since she was a little girl. Her parents weren't around much, even when they were at home, it felt like they weren't. She had books and TV. She learned to get through days and nights reading with the murmuring of TV in the background. It didn't matter what show, as long as there were

some sounds for company. She quit the habit after moving in with Liam, afraid he wouldn't understand it like her parents at first when she had started. He didn't. After the miscarriage three months ago, Allyson started doing it again. Liam intervened. He turned off the TV in the bedroom and made an exception by hugging her at night. Liam has strict sleep rituals. No hugging. No spooning. No touching. He says he tickles so easily in bed that he has to place one pillow between him and the blanket, and another between him and the person beside him just to buffer the friction. So it seemed a big gesture when he offered to embrace her, at a designated angle to avoid all unnecessary touching. But it didn't work. Like her mom's occasional lullaby stopped working after she had formed her own sleeping routine. Allyson didn't want to seem ungrateful and accepted Liam's help. But she ended up sneaking out to the living room and falling asleep in the couch with the TV on. Then she moved herself into the study.

One day at breakfast Liam suggested she talk to someone. He tried to veil it but Allyson had gone through too many psychiatrists to miss his point. She hates it when people just decide for her there's something wrong. She didn't even know about the pregnancy and was hardly in a position to grieve. But she nodded in agreement. She'd rather not fight.

Allyson finishes the book around midnight. Liam butted in a few times to check on her with genuine concern in his eyes. Each time she gave him a reassuring smile back. She goes to the bathroom to wash up and get ready for bed. Noticing the light still on, she pushes open the bedroom door. Liam is already asleep, positioned in his fortress. She thinks about climbing in beside his pillow, but picks up the power adapter for the laptop from the floor and turns off the light. Soon, she thinks. But not tonight.

Dinner is at their usual place. Liam has been waiting, with his two colleagues, at a window table when Allyson arrives at the street across from it. It takes three street lights for her to recall little hazy memories of the two. Kyle and Linda. Or is it Lyle and Kayla. Remembering names is a taxing chore for Allyson, especially those whose owners easily blend into a crowd. She might have met them on one of those company parties Liam dragged her along. Or not. There have been a lot of events and gatherings with Liam's friends and colleagues. Before Allyson can match their faces and names, there comes a new batch waiting. Still it's better off than just the two of them.

Kevin and Clara clearly have forgotten her name too. Liam tries to warm up the awkward time freeze with what seems like an inside joke from work. It's not funny in the slightest. But the smile is almost mandatory, both as a pardon for her not greeting with the right names and a ticket out of their catching-up for a significant amount of time. Allyson often wonders at such occasions what on earth is there to talk about, with people six feet away eight hours a day. Somehow they manage to carry out an engaging conversation among themselves.

Sometime after the entrée and Clara's compliment of her blush, Allyson lets her soul float on its own out of her sling-back and cocktail dress. Looking at the three of them talk about the latest merger and golfing plans while nibbling their smart orders of food in their sophisticated outfits, Allyson feels a spurt of maternal affection, like a mother would watching her loved little ones having make-believe tea parties. At a certain point in her life, Allyson has come to terms with the fact that most people never graduate from childhood; they just update the toys and play house with other grownups. While up in the air, she has to be sucked back to the table from time to time. But she doesn't mind. These dinners are much

more fun than thinking to herself while Liam dates his cellphone, most of the time checking on hot sales of electronic gadgets. Sometimes it's neighborhood crimes. Never sports, though. It's only with his friends and colleagues that he's suddenly a sports fan. She doesn't blame him on that one, peer pressure.

The restaurant is moderately lit, hiding oily faces that have weathered the long days and concealing repulsion that lurk around the smiling eyes. The band is playing delightful jazz. Allyson feels dizzy from something deeper than wine. She took the bus here as the mere thought of looking for parking in the rain gave her a headache. Surrounded by strangers and loud phone calls, she let her cheeks keep burning and urged the fleeting happiness to linger while she recalled her meeting with Saul earlier today. She had bought the dress a month ago and today she wore it to see Saul. She was afraid Saul would read too much into it. But she talked herself into it, using the dinner as an excuse. Besides, even she herself wasn't sure that was anything to read into.

She has been seeing Saul for three months now. Every time Allyson goes to his place. They talk. Sometimes they read together if Allyson brings books with her. His reading voice is anchored fast with a firmness and soaked with sentiment, like he's been admiring the writer all along. It tickles and dries out her throat. Occasionally, they do nothing but lie on the two couches listening to music. It seems there is no need for words and dialogues to fill the void.

Today he played the Mozart requiems while Allyson recalled some of her childhood memories on and off. He barely said anything. Saul is a very private person and Allyson respects that. There have never been any expectations out of these meetings anyway. It has sufficed as a complement to the holes in her life. He laughed though, when Allyson talked

about how her parents were called to school because she kept drawing genitalia in the painting class, after which they sent her to a psychiatrist every week instead of every month. What were they like? Saul asked. Nothing you've never seen. I guess I just thought they were beautiful and I preferred drawing them than the stupid fruit plate. They both laughed. I meant the doctor's visits. Saul said. Allyson didn't say anything but an "Oh..." She regretted bringing forth the topic now. Those appointments were an ugly brand on her memories. They were fine in themselves. It wasn't difficult to fence with someone who pretended to know about what others were going through. It was the self-evident implication of being sick that bugged her. She was furious with her family. If she could settle using TV and a little art diversion as companion instead of family time with her busy parents, the least they could do was allow some grace time for her to grow up and get used to being alone. But they had to think of her as some fragile doll and ship her to a stranger to dissect her dark mind.

She wasn't ready to talk about it. She doubted she would ever be. Her heart was almost curling into a frustrated ball when Saul suggested Allyson draw something. We'll both draw on these legal pads and shred them when we're done. You are safe here.

All these dinners share a similar ending. They finish their meal with an ultra slow speed. The sauce and spice has long lost their peak of perfection due to the conversations stretched thin and saliva invading the plates. They stay half an hour or so after dessert before heading home, convinced they have had a good time and would definitely go out again soon. They hug, kiss each other goodnight and go home to their real lives. They won't meet again until their self-assurance of a full and mature life runs out and they need a dose of approval from their peers. And that normally doesn't take long.

Allyson and Liam come home both tipsy. They sink themselves into the loveseat couch, intoxication simmering into an overpowering drowsiness. The sudden quietness is a little unnerving. Allyson turns on the TV. Some kind of game is on. Basketball. Liam grabs the remote from her and turns it off. Allyson lets out a protesting grumble and stretches out her arm fumbling on Liam's side. Liam snatches her hand and locks it with her other hand. However Allyson wriggles, he won't let go.

“It's been three months. It has to stop at some point.”

He is sounding like Allyson's parents again. They were always so impatient. So discontent and incredulous because she refused to fix herself. Just like those students' parents making a false conclusion about a whole book when they went no farther than the first chapter. Her parents must have gone for therapy themselves while she was “acting up”. There was some vague memory of them being there when she came home from school. They took turns telling bedtime stories and sat with her when she watched TV. But it was no good. They didn't know what stories she liked and they always talked over phones. When she didn't improve as she was expected to, their eyes burnt. She wished they'd let her be. And in time they did.

Slowly, Liam unlocks his grasp and strokes one of her wrists.

“If it's not working, we can always switch to another...”

Allyson steals a look at Liam. He's looking at her hands and won't finish up the sentence. She doesn't remembering talking about her doctor's visits with her parents either. They sent her over and picked her up. Never waited outside the room. Sometimes she had to cater to their schedule and arrive early. She felt really small when other parents in the waiting room looked at her, questioning and pitying.

“I’m going to wash up.” Allyson gives a squeeze on Liam’s palms, lifts up his chin and pecks on his forehead.

Looking at herself in the mirror, Allyson unclasps her hair and starts combing. She was wearing it down on her shoulders with Saul earlier today. She had hidden her eyes behind it while examining and sketching him. She traced every line and curve, marked every dip and bulge and replaced the chair he was sitting on with a jagged boulder. She could hear her breath over the stereo and by the time she finished, the meshed fabric was stuck to every inch of her entire back.

Allyson feels her pulse throbbing inside her ear and her heart is pounding its way out of her chest cage. The draping chiffon can hardly hold the attack. She gives out, pushing her way out of the bathroom, and lands on Liam’s laps. She figures she’d start kissing from his neck and work her way down. She would spread her legs along the subtle flare of the dress. She’d halt when his breath thickens and follow his rhythms from there. He’ll know there is nothing under her dress and forget nothing has come out of the doctor’s sessions.

The weather clears up the next day. Allyson hears birds chirping before waking up. She doesn’t have to open her eyes to know she’s been stripped of her share of the blanket and Liam has rolled off far away into his side of the bed with a pillow standing guard between them. She didn’t need the accompaniment of Lucy shrieking to Ricky or Raymond that everybody loves whining on the screen to sleep last night. Allyson guesses that’s good. For the both of them. She has slept soundly but decides to sleep in.

Liam spends Sunday moving Allyson back into their bedroom and his work stuff to the study. They decide to eat out again, the two of them, and go for a walk in the park after dinner. She doesn't think of Saul at all the whole day.

Class on Monday turns out better than Allyson anticipated. Most students have, like she imagined, picked out a poem randomly and ravaged the few miserable lines with willful pauses. There is one kid reciting a Shakespeare sonnet beautifully. Allyson feels grateful but tries to withhold her happiness. She decides that publically acknowledging a student as "teacher's pet" won't do him any good. And then a girl, one of the popular ones, comes up with a poem by Elizabeth Browning. It makes Allyson's day. Grief. A seemingly melancholy but overwhelmingly powerful piece. "Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet: If it could weep, it could arise and go." She doubts the girl has any grasp on the gist. She might have broken up with her boyfriend and googled grief as the keyword, mistaking the poem as a lover's lament. Allyson doesn't care. She loves the Brownings. She extends her satisfaction to the whole class and dismisses them without any homework.

Maybe I'll read some of the Brownings' letters with Saul this weekend. Allyson thinks to herself while collecting her things. She notices her phone blinking. A voicemail from Saul.

A month has passed since Allyson stopped going to Saul's. When she first listened to the voicemail left by him, informing her that he was about to move and relocate due to a family situation, she thought it would set her off and the insomnia would start all over again. She doubted whether Liam would be okay with her falling off the wagon. There was in the

voicemail a lot of apologies and something about a final appointment. She remembers her standing alone in the classroom until the custodian appeared out of nowhere asking repeatedly if she was okay. I don't know. She told him.

She wasn't, for a while. And then it got better.

Allyson takes a carton of milk out of the fridge and opens the cupboard. Liam was really happy with her recovery and bought a set of milk mugs. They were black and white and cow-shaped. Liam decided they would both start having a glass of warm milk before going to bed.

Allyson never got to read the letters by the Brownings. She hasn't read out loud for a while. She goes to work and hangs out a lot more with Liam and his friends. She has almost forgotten Saul.

The last time they met was a Wednesday. Allyson had to go to his place directly from work and there wasn't any time to change. She was wearing a yellow cotton dress and a lavender cardigan over it. Saul's driveway was packed with cars. Outside the room where they usually hung out sat a few people. She assumed they were his friends here to say goodbye. Just like she. Everything had seemed static and jumpy at the same time since she stepped out of the car. She felt like she knew all these people from a very recent dream and the house she'd been calling on every weekend looked different and strange.

The other people had come in and out and left. She wondered why Saul didn't just throw a party and arranged to say goodbye to his friends one by one. And those friends didn't talk to each other among themselves. They were all waiting by themselves with their heads hanging low, like she did when waited for her therapy sessions with her psychiatrist when she was a kid.

Allyson was the last to go into Saul's room. She didn't want to feel rushed or interrupted, so she switched turns with the girl that was supposed to go last. A proper farewell was in order. Her dreamy state was still in effect when she saw Saul. The whole room was like a hangover. The white walls screamed with hysteria. She steadied herself, brushed off the imprint on the couch and sat down. Once she was seated, Saul started apologizing for the short notice. Sickness had struck one of his family in a different city. He talked a lot that afternoon, more than all he had said combined before that day. He suddenly seemed so eloquent and together. All the time they were sitting in their own couch, with their backs straight and eyes lined up. Allyson tried to take all in and remember the way Saul looked. But he was wearing a white coat and she couldn't tell the color of his top. She didn't remember seeing him wearing tops of any other color actually; funny it had never occurred to her. The stereo was off and there was no book to read. And yet it was difficult to make out what Saul was talking about. His voice was different too. It lost its velvet-like touch and sounded all cold and stiff. Throughout the meeting Allyson didn't say anything. She didn't want to leave him a rude impression, so she smiled a lot to Saul's words that failed her apprehension. She thought there would be a hug goodbye; Saul gave her a handshake. Sorry I had to leave just when we were going somewhere. He apologized again.

As Allyson stood up and made for the door, the dizziness started to wear off. She was almost lucid when she was outside the room. She held out her arm to close the door behind her and found everything in the room was steadily in place now, clear as day, and quiet. The turquoise couch was worn to a grayish blue. The shredder had been emptied. The bookshelves had been packed into a couple of stacked cardboard boxes. And for the first

time, she saw Saul clearly for what he was. And inside her head, the line between lucid and insane was then erased off.

Allyson pours the milk into the mugs and puts them into the microwave. She opens a bottle labeled women's vitamin and takes out two pills. It was the sleeping pills her doctor (She had realized, when standing outside Saul's therapy room three months before, that she had mistook Saul for something other than a doctor.) prescribed her. He also suggested she follow up with the doctor he referred her to and left her the pills just in case. In the past month Allyson has worked out the right amount of pills and milk to wash it down for both her and Liam. She took her pills by the whole tablet first, and then crushes the tested amount of pills and puts it into Liam's mug. Pills are running low. Allyson figures she should go to her new doctor soon.

She times her watch while reading in the living room couch with TV on. Twenty-eight minutes. She closes the book, goes to the bedroom and climbs into bed. She breaks down Liam's quilt shelter, straightens his left arm under her neck and wraps the right arm around her waist. She fumbles on him looking for a comfortable spot to place her arm and legs. Liam frowns a little and it spooks her. But he relents, tightening his grip on the hug and moans slightly out of his nose. Goodnight, sweetie. Allyson turns off the light and drifts off to sleep.

911

Hannah wants to see the sea today. The sea that she's been living so close to but failed to see. It has to be today. Nothing else matters, not her husband, not the baby. Not to Hannah. She is going to see it. She will see it. The blue foamy sea. In the red 911. With Kim. Beautiful Kim with hair dyed purple. Together.

Hannah has always known this day would come. Maybe before she was born. Like how the omniscient chubby babies in Mr. Nobody know their entire life journeys, before they are kissed by the sendoff angel. She thinks about it in earnest. While picking out a durian in the grocery store. Drying the dishes. Walking the baby. The latest version was inspired by the wife in Gone Girl. She pirated the movie online, with a bundle of New York Times bestsellers. Hannah only pays for high-budget animated movies and classic books. Days after watching the film, she imagined herself driving with one hand resting triumphantly on the wheel and the other ticking items off her running-away-and-setting-up-the-hubby list, hair dancing in wind. She decided against it eventually. She'd always hated being made a fuss of. And she wouldn't walk out on Glenn and gloat over it. She just wouldn't. Even though she knew for a fact that he was cheating on her, too, like the underdog professor in the movie.

Glenn is a nice guy for a husband. He has a boring job. He works in a state-owned travel agency as a tour guide. Most people think it's a fun job. Hannah knows he's just an escorting waiter. He speaks okay English and that makes him eligible for overseas travels. Hannah thinks that makes him an international busboy, with a ridiculous English name he picked out for himself. He's been with at least three other women. They all have dried-up

hair with split ends but have very different tastes in perfume. Chloe by Chole. Cliche. Or, underage. Hermes Kelly Caleche. Bossy pants. Jo Malone, with a tricky combo Hannah has yet to decode. He has a dozen striped shirts in different shades of blue and half a dozen pairs of decorative eyeglasses. He is a husband worthy of the title, with his clothes tossing and TV watching. Not around much. He isn't an ideal choice for most women. But for Hannah, he is, the very best. So no, however THE day pans out, she is not going to screw him over. Not any more than she has.

Hannah was glad she didn't go to the movie theatre. Fincher is supposed to be one of the good ones. And now he's directing TV shows. Kevin Spacey being the lead in the show doesn't change the fact that it's just TV. She likes the wicked smirk of Spacey; but god knows which play he is scraping money for with what he's earned being a fictitious president. Most times she hates critics. But at the end of those futile housewife TV afternoons, she'd die for a filtered list of the contemporary writers and directors and painters and singers worth spilling time over. Hannah is hyper sensitive to the passing of time. She hears it. Loud and clear. Like a pulse. Only it kills you bit by bit with every tick. Soft and merciless and poetic.

That's why. Why she was the way she was. And why she is here where she is.

Hannah examines herself from time to time in the rearview mirror and is satisfied with what she sees. She packed lightly. One scarf. Two pairs of sunglasses. Three dresses. And the entire Tom Ford lips & boys collection, a gift from Kim. She is going to pick up guys. She is going to wear a different color for each of them, substitute their square Chinese names with the hot Latino ones the lipsticks are named and do unspeakable things to them. Together, with Kim. Hannah wonders why Kim hasn't called her back. She should have

called by now. Maybe she's packing. Kim has a lot of stuff; packing won't be as easy. Hannah regrets not spending more time packing now. She should at least have brought a spare pair of heels and her memory stick. She is on the last track of the Frank Sinatra in the CD slot. She left her music library on the memory stick at home and can't find a second CD in the car. There used to be loads of them in the glove box. They listened to all kinds of stuff on their afternoon car rides. She and Kim.

Hannah turns on the radio. It'll have to do for now. She checks her phone at every red light, in case she's missed Kim's call or message honking. She must be packing. Maybe she is packing music. There was a lot of screaming and crying and yelling on the first three channels Hannah flipped through. She's not interested. She doesn't do news. Online, TV, or paper. Too much going on nowadays. She doesn't want to exhaust her days growing old reading news. Glenn likes it. He makes sure he has his phone glued in his palm before going to the bathroom. She doesn't want to grow old reading news with men like Glenn. The Beatles comes out on her fourth try. The Beatles are never wrong. The Beatles will always do.

Another red light. Hannah picks up her phone again. It's Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. The one playing on the radio.

“Sad huh?” The gas boy asks her.

Hannah has no idea what he is referring to and nods tentatively, managing a placating smile. She doesn't want to stand out. Be invisible. In case she is reported missing. Not that it's an easy job being invisible in a handsome blood-red car like this.

The boy keeps shaking his head gently and sighing as if in disbelief. He sighs some more when he hooks up the nozzle before striding back into the convenience store.

The car didn't have to be fed yet. It could have run on for another couple of hours. But Hannah decided it would be a good idea to stop and wait for Kim to catch up a little more with her. That's how it's always worked for them. They each have a key to the car. One of them gets bored and yearns for an outing. She checks the car out from the airport parking lot and drives towards the coast. And the other one catches up in a taxi and joins in. The furthest they've gone so far is half way to the sea. They don't always make it. Sometimes one of them gets entangled in life and then the ride is shorter. Hannah wonders what's caught Kim this time. She could be hung over. Or the old man walked in on her leaving. That's not good. They had an understanding, the old man and Kim. She was supposed to wait till he got tired of her. When that day came, he was going to empty the safe but leave the apartment and the Porsche to Kim and move on to the next young thing. He was the one that would leave her. Not the other way around. Hannah closes her eyes and prays against the idea.

The gas station looks deserted on a Monday afternoon. Hannah thinks she might get some beef jerky and gum. She walks into the store and picks up a shopping basket. There is a crowd at the counter. Four clerks in yellow-and-orange uniforms are straining their necks towards the TV set hanging in the corner above the counter. The gas boy is among them. None of them pays Hannah any attention. Good, she thinks. She can take her time and not be suspected.

She makes two rounds among the shelves and hardly fills up the bottom of the basket. Beef jerky and gum like she wanted. Two bags of chips. Two sodas. A cup of questionable melon cubes. It's always difficult to tell if the melon is freshly cut. It doesn't show. Anyway,

Hannah thinks she just needs the fruit to assuage the junk food guilt. She might not eat it after all. She picks up an ELLE while the cashier inches towards her with his eyes still fixated on the TV screen. Kim likes fashion magazines.

From the fragments of information Hannah picks up, there has been a plane crash somewhere. Singapore. Or maybe Kuala Lumpur. Something like that. It must have been a major crash. Usually around this time in the afternoon so many channels re-run the national corruption bust news from the previous evening that she has to search quite a while before finding some lame cartoon to pacify the baby after its nap. There must be an alarmingly big casualty count to have squeezed out the political witch hunt.

Hannah wonders whether Glenn is refreshing the news feed on his phone right now. In the gaps waiting for texts or calls from his girls.

“Nice ride.” The middle-aged cashier says to her while bagging the groceries. He doesn’t even grant her a look as long as he does the car. Hannah doesn’t like it. He is supposed to droop over her plump lips and young body like the asshole does Thelma, and her Louise side will roll her eyes at him and give him the finger. He is too polite and she wants to slap him. Hannah smiles back instead and gets out of the store. The car looks like it’s on fire under the sun. It is a nice ride. A perfect ride for this one-way journey. They will be an alluring view wherever they go. After they’re done with the sea. The three of them. She. Kim. And their 911.

Hannah leaves the car engine on when she looks into the glove box again. Insurance papers. A compact toolbox. Various packs of cigarettes and a decent supply of lighters. No CD. The Beatles channel has also given in to the plane crash now. She could go in the store again and pick up some pop junk. But a couple of cars have pulled in and so she drives away.

It's only been a little more than an hour. No more than two. Yet, already it's getting lonely. She's got to call Kim again. And maybe make a backup plan if Kim can't make it today. She can stay in a seedy inn for the night and wait for Kim to join her tomorrow. But by then her phone might have died. Died crammed with phone calls from home but none from Kim.

Again though, maybe none of that would happen. Kim could have dropped her phone in the rug among her clothes and muffled the ringtone or buzz. That's typical Kim. A little more time and patience is all she needs, Hannah decides, lighting a cigarette and rolling down the window. She overthinks. It helped in the past that she has now dumped behind her. But from now on, she's got to change. Loosen up. Live a little. Live a lot. It's okay now. She's out. The sea is getting closer and closer. And the spring wind smells like fresh honey and sweet hormone. Everything is going to be all right. Dozens, possibly hundreds of people died in the plane crash, but she is more than alive in a dreamy ride heading towards any kind of life she desires. Everything is going to be fucking awesome.

It's from Moby Dick. The sea thing. Like for some people, they have to go to Tibet, or an Indian guru, like one of the Beatles, for their spiritual cleansing, it's the sea for Hannah. Ishmael told her so. She doesn't remember when she read it now, or if she ever finished it. But she doesn't have to reread it and write book reports on it to establish the fact that it's a good book. Good books, immortal books, are self-sufficient, every page and line of them. It had her at the first paragraph. The first sentence, the call me Ishmael.

Hannah hates her name being called out aloud. Nah, one of the most common and plain given names for Chinese girls. It blends into a throng. It belongs to those unclaimed

Jane Doe bodies on CSI. It has no vibe of adventure. It's a voodoo spell cast on her by her parents so that she would be the humble and obedient girl they wanted. The good girl. Or it could be even worse, they didn't put any thought into it at all. They didn't think the tag that would stick to her for her whole life was worth one or two days out of their mundane working days to polish over.

Wrongfully named. Hannah has included it on the hate list she started some time in junior high. One day, her mother walked into her class, called out her headteacher Mr. Chen and talked him into switching seats for her because word on the street had it that her desk-mate Lynn was a bad influence. Hannah was speechless at the blatant disrespect. Worse still, she couldn't place any blame on her mother for being right about Lynn, who was a bad girl, by their family's standard. And that made Hannah furious. It was like getting all worked up about swallowing a fly. It won't understand her nausea; it probably thinks her mouth is a playground. It wasn't Lynn's fault that she was having sex with the boy she fell for. It wasn't Hannah's fault for being a good friend and not telling anyone about it. But the others didn't agree. Hannah was grounded for a month for not being forthright with her family. And in a week with rumours flying, Lynn was picked on and isolated. They, Hannah's family and the kids and even teachers at school, all seemed to act like the justice police when there wasn't any wrong to be righted in the first place. Hannah was crushed. She felt her first shred of despair in her world when she saw a profanity post-it on Lynn's back and wasn't bold enough to peel it off. She was desperate because she couldn't speak fly and the flies were choking her.

After that, the hate list was created. She put her disagreement with her name first and the unfortunate incident with Lynn last and spent many a night filling up the space in

between chronologically, hoping one day to have enough evidence to sentence her parents and rebel against them with all the justice in the world. The list kept growing over the years but Hannah's hope died away entry after entry. Their crimes against her had such justified camouflage that most of them won her a pout, a slam of the door and the like, a reclaiming of her phone privileges at most. They were standup people in their world and the best lawyer on the planet wouldn't be able to guarantee Hannah a satisfactory verdict. It would be tough. In a parallel-universe court.

It took Hannah a while to figure that out and then she quit the list all together. She had to resort to something else. She would have to live undercover and do things right until she found a loophole and got out for good. She would have to find a loophole so perfect that it would exonerate her and even make her look like a victim to be sympathised with. Until then, all she could do was dream. About the get-away. About the day. This day.

She did everything right in real life and dreamed all conceivable wrongs in her fantasies. She fantasized she was to find out that she was adopted and her biological parents came looking for her. Nice people they were. Her people. On the bad days, she sat in her study doing homework at midnight while picturing her parents killed in a car accident. She would be shocked initially, sad sincerely, and freed at last. She felt sorry about these extreme fantasies.

Sometime between graduating from the college her parents picked and starting her first job, secured through family networks, she figured out the plan. She would work hard, as she had been doing throughout high school and college, go on blind dates that started almost immediately after college and marry the guy chosen by her family. Then she would wait

some more. She would wait for the guy, her husband, to screw up. Gambling. Abuse. Sleeping around. They all do. He would, too. That would be her cue.

Hannah can swear she smells fish in the air. She just exited the turnpike and that means she is already half way through. Not far ahead there is a nice little coffee shop. She and Kim have been there once, the time they went farthest. She will pull up, order a caramel macchiato and wait for Kim there. It's almost three now. Kim must have gotten up and she doesn't need to wait too long. She is glad she can get out of the car and listen to some good music. All the channels are running the same news now. AM and FM. She was mad at first. A road trip without tunes loses all the charisma. But she decided after a while news was better than silence after all, so she left the radio on. She needed the noise. The information came uninvited. A Malaysian flight to Beijing. MH something. Apparently nothing has been found out about the accident since its crash around one this morning. It has intrigued her a little that the plane has vanished into thin air, but only for a minute or so. She entertains the idea of Glenn disappearing like that, with a crisp finger snap.

It all seems like ancient history now. The hate list and the plan. Everything. She is glad Glenn was a committed and sloppy adulterer. She has all the evidence she needs to crucify him and all the reasons to be left alone and pine for her life and be the happy widow with no strings attached. It's been hasty but it's all worked out. Calculated. Glenn is returning from a tour somewhere in Southeast Asia and won't get off his flight until early noon. Then he will have to take a train from Beijing to the southern city they live in. By the time he gets home she and Kim will have reached the shore. The sitter will tell Glenn she is out running errands and not coming back until late. They will toss a coin, and drive all night in the destined direction. Glenn will be too tired to check up on her and won't notice anything

unusual till tomorrow morning. She will call home tomorrow afternoon and play her just-found-a-cheating-husband-and-need-time-off part. There might be a little hassle back at home. But a little dramatic effect is mandatory. At this point, she is so grateful that Glenn favours adultery over the other commandments. She can't imagine if he were a drunk, or a sadist. It might still have worked out. But it would have been much harder on her part.

Hannah hopes the baby gets cranky. It's not an easy baby to please. No, it won't do, if Glenn simply gets out of the picture. Then she would be stuck with it. Better leave it with him. She hopes Glenn gets a migraine and gets hysterical. She needs his villain side as a backdrop to her vulnerable image. After all, he's had his share of fun and now it's her turn.

She wishes Kim were here in the car right now. So that they could laugh at their ignorant men together. They looked up the word together. Misandrist. Didn't sound right. Misogynist had a ring of disgust to it while its equivalent merely sounded melancholy. Not enough consonants, they figured. But they wouldn't call themselves misandrists anyway. They didn't hate them. Men were invaluable to them both materialistically and pragmatically. In a sense they were like the 911 to them; a ride, to an end. Hannah thinks they will have to discard the car in the near future too. Her heart aches when she thinks of it. Its iron engine. The plush seats. And her blown up ego that comes with it. She is most certainly going to miss it.

But it's too hot to stay on the road too long. Aside from the little trips Hannah and Kim took it on from time to time, it just holed up in a corner in the airport. Before going on the drives, they had to take taxis to check it out. It was how she met Kim in the first place. Hannah was being the good wife and seeing Glenn off and Kim was checking the car in for

its first long term there, under the directive of the old man. They were neither in their best moods and there was only one blueberry muffin left in the Starbuck counter. They ended up sharing the muffin, and a lot more later on.

Kim is a professional mistress. She shacks up with government officials for a living. A lucrative trade. And Kim thinks it suits her perfectly: a simple beauty, easy to look at and easy to read. Those guys, the slick G-men, the ones that keep mistresses, are constantly worried about their station and wealth. They need simple-minded women to relieve their bodily and mental stresses. The more sophisticated types won't do; as long as they find out the women demand more than money, they move on. In their minds, it's a straightforward business. No guilt or conscience involved. And Kim thinks she's both simple and smart enough to do the job. Hannah liked her for her integrity; that was difficult to come across these days.

Before her mother shipped her off to a provincial music school, Kim didn't have any plans for her future. Everything she learned in high school seemed to be obsolete the minute she graduated. She guessed she was good at dating boys and hating her father, a relentless gambler. But neither came in handy when it came to getting a job, or into college. So she didn't put up any fight when her mother paid off a professor at the music school and got her in. She even dressed up gaily before going to the professor's for an audition. A private one, her mother had gloated. Kim figured it would be good after all that a career was picked out for her. She didn't play anything for the professor, or sing. She wasn't any good. The piano in the professor's living room intimidated her, like window-shopping a Van Cleft & Arpels necklace. It turned out she wasn't expected to show the professor anything, but herself. She didn't care for it. He stank of middle-aged-men grease. He didn't even have nice fingers.

Kim thought all piano players had long slender hand-model fingers. His were thick and short. But she remained submissive and silent all the way. She kept it from her mother too. She didn't want to feel any shame. The piano, and the 911 the professor drove her back home in, said something to her. Something of an invitation, and she RSVP-ed. She decided she would get a red one, though, the car, not black like the professor's.

When Hannah and Kim got together, they talked about men. It was a weird thing; no matter how much hatred women claimed toward men, men were all they could talk about most times. Hannah was usually the listener; she had too little of a life to last a single conversation. But the listening part had been the height of her life for the past year. Better than TV. Kim had gone through more than a dozen before the current old man. She addressed them by their profession, the tax man, the police guy...She held dear the code of professionalism in her line of work, like doctor-patient confidentiality. She changed her companions mostly due to the anti-corruption-oriented government. Sometimes because of a jealous wife. Occasionally simple swapping. Somehow she always got pimped to the next guy seamlessly. She never knew or heard of any kind of middleman.

Anyway, the men. Oh, the anecdotes. Hannah felt like she was listening to a stand-up comedian sometimes when Kim was talking. Their round bellies that prohibited them from holding too long a certain position in bed. Their funny lines while answering phone calls from work and home. And their paper-white faces when seeing yet another familiar face handcuffed in the papers. There was never a lack of laughing stock. There were times when Hannah talked about her grand scheme and Kim would enthusiastically pile on. She said she had enough for her early retirement. The necklaces. The piano. The 911. And the cash.

It just hits Hannah why Kim is so late. She must be figuring out a way to pack her money. Hannah remembers them, stacks of them, stashed in Kim's closet. She had to hide in there because the old man made a spontaneous visit and interrupted their get-together one day. The old man was under close scrutiny over suspicious proceeds, Kim had told her, home guests were frowned upon. So Kim had to hide in the closet and wait it out. And the money was just there, with the Birkins and Monolo Blahniks. Stacked here on the rim of a gigantic hat and there crushing mounds of sunglasses. Sitting pretty, with pink glowing Mao on them. Hannah tried to count them but gave up and spied on the bedroom. The old man came in to stash away some gold bars in his safe. And he decided a quickie wouldn't hurt. Hannah didn't see his face but heard clearly his panting. The word-less heavy panting. It wouldn't go away no matter how far Hannah retreated into the closet. Imagining listening to a whelk shell, which usually helped her when she was in bed with Glenn, didn't do either. She wanted to dismantle the cash bundles and bury him with them and muffle the sounds. But it would probably excite him some more.

Hannah decided that day she would definitely bring Kim along, and after the old man left, they sat down and made plans about it. She regrets now not making specific plans about Kim's luggage. There was too much to fit into the limited room in the car. They should have considered it.

Hannah has arrived at the coffee shop. Calls from families started a while ago. She thought they were from Kim and almost answered them. She silenced the phone, running the risk of missing Kim's call, and figured she would sort it out over the coffee break.

Two caramel macchiato. Two muffins. A blueberry and a cranberry. The *ELLE* magazine unfolded on the table. And Hannah starts to skim through the missed calls. Two from the home landline. Another two from Glenn's mother and three from hers. None from Kim.

This is not good. Kim's going to have to call her. She has to. And then Hannah can turn off the phone for good. Maybe she'll throw it out and run it over. Maybe she'll keep the phone and toss the SIM card out. The way it's done in movies. Anyway, she will have to wait until Kim has called her and until they have set the time and place to meet up and until they have worked out how long it will take for Kim to catch up with her.

They've discussed plans. Plenty of them. But all of them were for the life they would lead afterwards. None of the specifics. And even Hannah didn't know it was going to be today until she was in a taxi heading to the airport with a carry-on sized suitcase on her lap.

A minute before that she had been feeding the baby. The baby. Hannah hasn't thought about it that much along the way. But now her breasts have started to swell. She had wanted to feed the baby formula from the beginning. She wasn't going to share her bodily fluids with it. Not to something that came out of the blue and dragged her down another nine months. But it hurt too much. The breasts. They turned into stone. Then steel. And over nights horns grew out of her flesh. She held on as long as she could.

Today when she was feeding the baby, Hannah had this horror that the baby was going to suck her dry. It was going to drain her breasts, and drink her up to her toes and fingers. And then it was going to bite off her nipples to crown its victory. With its tiny roots and pale gums. There would be no blood dripping; none was left. They would roll under the couches and into the crevices in the floor planks and disappear. The nipples. She would be

thin as a piece of paper. No one would believe her story. No one. They would glare at her grotesque chest, snatch her up and throw her into a loony bin. They would all laugh, everyone, the baby too.

When the sitter came in, she thought Hannah was ill. Hannah sent her out for a brief errand run and packed the suitcase with the baby wailing. She stashed her luggage by the back door and waited for the sitter to come back. She was shaking all over and couldn't press the numbers right when trying to call Kim. She jumped in the taxi without looking back.

She is still shaking a little. Some coffee has spilled on her dress. Nobody heard her curse. Everyone in the coffee shop is watching the screen on the wall usually used for football nights. And the music was some lousy pop crap. Hannah is beginning to hate this plane crash. It seems to be tailing her, giving out nothing but ominous vibes. It's tainted this beautiful spring day and it's claiming her spirit. She doesn't know why all these people are watching. Still nothing has been found. The news is all about the families of the passengers, broadcast in the monotone of the anchorman. The blue stripe of the flight information at the bottom of the TV stings her eyes and Hannah moves to the opposite seat at her table.

Her phone keeps blinking; the battery is running low. She decides to make a list after all. She wants to make sure the math she did earlier was right, about Glenn's travel itinerary. She digs out the messages Glenn sent her before flying out. He always does that. Out of suspicious caution. Hannah double checks everything. She seems to have calculated everything right. The flight number. MH370. The arrival time. 11:30. (There has been a delay, according to Glenn's text this morning.) Baggage claim and the train ride. He should be barely arriving home by now. What are all these incessant calls about then? Could it be about the baby? No, it can't. It was all right when she left. Or was it? Hannah can't recall

checking on it now. Something is off. Maybe Glenn's flight was cancelled? Hannah even suspects it was Glenn's flight that was in the crash and laughs at herself. The stares and catcalls she has got in the car have somehow convinced her that she is the center of the universe today.

It's officially afternoon now. With the three strikes of a clock hidden somewhere in this town. But it doesn't show. Everything outside the window seems to be oblivious to the tragic mishap. Tress. Flowers. Breezes. Birds. Kids. Skirts. Ice cream. Hannah wants to be out there, among the not knowing and not caring, instead of sitting in a stained dress sweating over the phone calls that should and shouldn't have been there. She debates the possibility of leaving Kim behind. She doesn't think she can do it alone at this point. The plan has been weighing on her and her alone for so long that if there isn't another person present, it doesn't feel real. Kim is her validation of its execution. Hannah needs her and she thinks Kim needs it no less than her. Kim told her how disgusted she had gotten with her life and how she wanted to know what else there was to fight for now that she had literally everything there was to have. It needs to happen. These calls won't change anything. She just has to clear her mind, shake it off, and get in the car, and it will be okay. She just has to make it to the car, her shelter and sanctuary. Even if there isn't music. At least she won't have to see the troubled faces of the cafe dwellers. She will get in, push the gear, and get to her destination without stopping this time. She will wait for Kim by the sea. There it will be easier.

Hannah collects everything into her purse and makes for the door.

She will, in the future, regret the glance. So brief. It's infinitesimal. A dot so tiny on the canvas of her life that no one would take any notice, until it jumps out at you, and alters the tone of every other hue. Ruthlessly.

It says, the blue title strip, on the screen, *Flight MH370*.

Glenn's flight.

Hannah just keeps pushing the gas. She doesn't know what else to do. She didn't know what to do before getting in. She crossed the lot to the car, and just stood propped up by the hood and went through cigarette one after another. She doesn't even like smoking all that much. Her addiction is gum. She is always packed. But she went through all she got from the service station, and the other Macchiato fell from her hands while she stumbled out of the coffee shop. Cigarettes were all she has. She must have killed half of the pack when seeing a weird uniformed man walking towards her. He could be one of the city order patrol. They are a mean pack, Kim had told her. Kim had been with a supervisor in that department and knew they were infamous for tearing people's houses down for real estate tycoons and persecuting illegal street peddlers. Hannah wasn't sure what she did to warrant his attention. It could be the coffee container she left on the ground, or maybe the stranded cigarette butts. She didn't want any confrontation, so she slid into the car; and once she started the car, there was indeed nothing else to do except keep it true and drive.

She hates the uniformed man. She hasn't thought everything through. She hasn't thought anything through. She didn't even want to get into the car. She didn't want to get into the car with a messed-up head. The car, the pretty car, has been the one thing that's sure about this one-way journey. It's her ticket to the sea. It's her travelling telephone box. It

shuts the noises outside. But now she's got too many rude visitors crammed inside with her, backseat driving.

What now? Hannah asks herself over and over. Does it change things? What does this mean? Do they all know? They must have. The load of phone calls is now accounted for. That's a relief. Or is it? Is he dead? Probably. But what if she cancels her plan and he is found alive after all? The ocean is vast; they might find the surviving ones later today.

What do people do for funerals without the body?

And the baby. If she doesn't double back, it would be orphaned today. In Hannah's world, this is the dream start of a life, otherwise she wouldn't have spent nights dreaming about it happening to her. But if she has learnt anything in the past, the majority of the world usually doesn't agree with her.

Hannah has run two red lights. She saw both lights but couldn't figure out at that moment what they stood for. She didn't know what to think. She keeps changing lanes and overtaking cars as if the answer is out there for her to claim. She thinks of those cliché lines where people say you never expect accidents like this to happen to yourself. She is laughing at herself while thinking that. She never watches those video clips where they teach you how to unfasten the life jacket and put on the oxygen mask. She wonders whether Glenn does. He probably knows everything about it. The man travels for a living. Then if there is one person alive, it should be him. Maybe if she holds out long enough, the calls will stop and everything will fall into their place, as she has planned.

Well, maybe.

In any case, he can't be dead. That's the last thing she wants. If he dies, his cheating would matter little. It doesn't matter all that much in the first place and that's why she waited

patiently for him to turn into a serial cheater. So that she would have enough bullets. But it all would have been moot. If the perpetrator is dead. Who would care, then, about the widow's weak and inappropriate allegation? The plan. THE PLAN. It sounds ridiculously flimsy now. Hannah has never imagined it to be this fragile.

It must take a lot to want someone dead. Hannah is now seriously questioning the revenge of black mamba bride now. She won't do that for her own baby. She won't go through all that much to want Glenn dead. Not even out of an accident.

Though she would kill for an original sound track of *Kill Bill* right now. It might single-handedly correct this derailed ride.

Hannah thought she didn't know what to think; but she must have been thinking a hell of a lot more than she imagined she was capable of, because the next time she looks ahead with actually comprehending eyes, it's there. The sea. Right in front of her.

Her phone is completely dead now. Before it blacked out, Hannah made two calls.

The first one she made it to Kim. Facing the sea. She dialed the eleven numbers as slowly as she could, and every ring sounded like a prolonged siren crying into her soul. She counted. One. *She picks up, reports her whereabouts and chides her hesitation.* Two. *She answers, consoles Hannah, and vacillates.* Three. *She still can't be reached.* Four... There wasn't a fourth ring. A robotic voice announced that the number was no longer in service. That was the one scenario Hannah hadn't considered. She was going to put the sea waves on the phone. The tides were in. She was going to describe the view to the other end of the call.

She crawled back into the car and called home. She had prepared to lie about her phone connection. Nobody cared. Glenn's mother answered and told her Glenn's company

had called their house. She didn't even ask Hannah's whereabouts. She sounded like a dying person. So frail that in the dead silence, the phone dropped. And Hannah couldn't get through again.

Funny how Hannah felt then. She was supposed to have such mixed feelings. But all she felt was relief. She was closed in. Cut off. Stranded. Besieged. But it was like getting pushed into a tourist crowd on the Great Wall; you don't have to navigate yourself anymore. It felt strangely safe. Not having to make decisions. Not having to break through.

It's not a good beach Hannah has ended up in. Rocky. Barely any sand. The sea is grey. Not at all blue. It's foamy all right. But it was the suspicious kind that resembled a pot of broth sitting out too long. But it could be the dusk. It's getting dark. Even the 911. It's not red anymore. Maroonish. And with every passing second it's turning into a grotesquely dirty purple.

Hannah just sits there. On the beach. Pebbles branding her. Nobody around but her. A dead phone. And a carry-on sized suitcase. She wonders whether her disappointment is shared by Ishmael and the whole crew. Or maybe the salvation lies not at the shore, but deep in the ocean. And she just hasn't gone far enough. Maybe just a little farther.

She slips out of her shoes and, lugging the suitcase in one hand and holding the phone in the other, walks into the sea. The March sea is unbearably cold. No residual warmth of the sun remains. Hannah wades forward as far as she could, until the case starts to float. She wants to taste more of the sea but simply can't move her feet along. It's cold, and dark. And she is afraid.

Leaving the suitcase floating, Hannah dismembers her phone, extracts the SIM card and throws it into the water. Piece after piece, she tosses the contents of her luggage to the

sea. And then she just stands there, surrounded by the drenched garments and tube after tube of lipstick bobbing up and down.

Motionlessly, she stands. For a good while. Until her stomach grumbles. She doesn't hear it at first against the tide. But then she feels it. Her empty belly. And her body screaming of fatigue. Longing for a soft mattress.

So long, she says to herself.

It's true what they say. Everything looks better under a camera. The sea on the TV screen is much better than the sea she saw. Clear and calm seeing from the chopper in the sky. Hannah bets it looks even more grand without the searching party disturbing its peace. And the restless baby in her arms. The girl is gaining weight every day. Soon Hannah won't be able to carry her.

Glenn is home a lot now. He didn't die. He wasn't even on the flight. He had lied to Hannah to get away for the birthday of one of his lovers. Or the one fling, as he has insisted. He had a coworker fill in for this tour and had hidden as long as he could before coming clean to his company and the whole family who have made plans to hire undertakers. He knelt on the floor and kowtowed to his and Hannah's parents, slapping himself. But his mother stopped him almost immediately. They were too happy to take into account his lie. They fight for turns to hug him, rolling into a sticky flesh ball with their limbs, snot and tears. Happy tears.

Lucky bastard. That was all Hannah thought of to say.

It's strange how fast you forget something if you have the will. It's been a little shy of a month and Hannah already has trouble recalling the details of the trip. She remembers the

radio, the news and the sea. Everything on her way back, though, has become a blur. All jumbled up. Sometimes scattered and flying in all directions like mosaic tiles. She thought she had the car key kept safe in her dresser but one day she couldn't even find that, either.

She saw someone on TV that looked terribly like the old man. Kim's old man. From certain angles. But he was cuffed and guarded in court and wasn't allowed to speak, so there was no way to be sure.

She went to Kim's apartment once. A little boy answered the door. Hannah peeked inside a little before a woman appeared abruptly, a housewife, and slammed the door in Hannah's face. In the brief glance inside she didn't recognize a single piece of furniture. The piano was gone too.

Glenn has sworn off affairs. And for the past month Hannah hasn't smelled any perfume on him. Or come across any women's hair. With or without split ends. Hannah can't tell if that's supposed to be good or bad. She isn't sure if it matters at all. But now he helps with her housework, so she guesses it's more good than bad after all.

She doesn't think of Kim all that much now. The girl with money and purple hair. But occasionally she recalls the car. The beautiful monster. She looked for it once after seeing Glenn off at the airport. It wasn't at its usual parking space, where she dropped it off that night. She walked floor after floor looking for it, carrying her baby in her arm. The baby didn't like the darkness and was squirming a lot. There were silver and black 911s. She did see a red one, but its headlights had cheesy, huge eyelashes installed over them.

The sun was really big when Hannah walked out of the parking lot. In the bright daylight, what was left of her memory seemed like all but a disturbing dream.

Hannah wonders what to do today. She might go to the store and get some fruit. Do the dishes later. The baby needs some air and has to be walked before dinner. Or she might take advantage of Glenn's guilt while it lasts and get him to do these things. Then she can just remain on the couch, and see some more of the sea on TV, the sea pregnant with a plane full of dead bodies. She wants to follow the news until the search is called off. It could be any day now.

ANNA, KITTY and DOLLY

1-1

“So...why are you here?”

I blank at the first question posed by the TSA agent, a large, bearded man. I'm the last in his line and he checks his watch before fixing his gaze on me.

“Miss, why do you come to the United States?”

Still, nothing manages to ooze through my locked teeth. So much for an uneventful evening. Just a moment ago, I was feeling cheated out of the thrills of moving to a strange country and restarting my life. The landing was so smooth it didn't even shake me out of my nap. I had expected to see a grander airport, which I didn't, and fewer people, for which I had yet to learn there was no such thing in New York. But here I am, possibly on a jumpstart to an intensive interrogation I heard about conducted in those scary little immigration lockups hidden somewhere. I tug closer my backpack that contains the extra two cartons of cigarette I smuggled in from the duty-free shops.

“Miss? You are entitled to an interpreter if you want.” The agent, afraid I don't understand him, upturns his hand quickly close to his mouth. He seems like a gentle guy after all. The heavy lines on his forehead look almost chiseled in. Breath comes out of his nostrils slow and loud. Seeing no reaction from me, he removes his right hand from my passport, leaving a circle of sweat on the maroon cover, and lifts his brawny arm in the air, forming his fingers in the gesture of a snap.

“Co...college! I’m here, um, for graduate studies in creative writing. Sir.” My stiff mind finally decides to show mercy on me and defrosts itself. And my thin voice is almost drowned out in the humming hall.

The agent takes back his hand and leans in. He alternates his looks between me and my travel documents, nodding with pursed lips, and then asks, “Really? Creative writing, huh?”, eyebrows arched.

“Yeah. Really.”

By the end of our brief interview, I’ve started to like this teddy bear of a man. He is evidently happy that I’m not going to prolong his shift and gives me apologetic smiles that reveal his big buck teeth when the fingerprint reader flunks. I smile back, before leaving, and wish a good weekend to him, Jorge, the first man I’ve talked to on this foreign land. If it were not for the high counters of the booth, I probably would have hugged him.

I wait with a light heart and my luggage cart as suitcases are spat onto the carousel. They charge you for the carts here; I don’t think twice about getting one, but I make a mental note. There are more things like this that I need to learn every day now.

Half an hour in, people become giraffes.

I, on the other hand, am enjoying this moment of nothingness. I count the suitcases floating by as I stroke and smooth out the goose bumps on my arms. You can always tell a thing or two of the owner by looking at their luggage; they are the vessels of their travelling souls. Our travelling souls.

My luggage consists of two suitcases, one black and the other bright red. They are adorned with straps of a neon rainbow, picked out by my mother. I drag them down in the throat clearing and murmuring of the grumpy giraffes.

Here we go, I say to myself.

Our bodies find their way to each other but our arms get in the way, clashing in the air like they want to waltz. Neither of us take notice of the minor setback and with a little adjustment, clasp tight. It's been three months since we last touched each other; it takes some getting used to. The height, the curves, the scent. James is excited. I feel it in my ears and in my pelvis. And that makes me drowsy; it reassures and relaxes your whole being, to feel needed. He smells like cucumber and he's grown out his stubbles. Other than that, he is almost the same person.

We hug and kiss for a good two minutes and wait another two for James to regain control over his numb feet. He's been here for over two hours. But he doesn't look it. He maneuvers my two giant suitcases adeptly toward the parking lot and bombs me with one question after another. I fight through my fatigue and answer them one by one. There were moments like this in my life that I knew everything from here on was going downhill. We are now at the summit of bliss. It doesn't get any better than this.

My buttocks argue otherwise as they are caressed by the plush leather seats. I rest my head on the neck pillow as James loads the luggage into the car. I'm almost knocked out when he gets in. He holds out his left arm and arranges my tangled hair, staring into my eyes, a clear invitation to make out. But he doesn't press, sensing my reluctance and sleepiness. Instead he gives me a hair tousle and starts the car.

“What’s that?” I point my nose at the piece of paper he rams into the glove compartment.

“Yeah, I didn’t buy enough hours. That, and the diligent NYPD. Seriously, I’m only here for a month, and I’ve already got a decent collection of their handiwork. You’d think they have something better to do than busting my ass.”

I peck him on his cheek and close my eyes. He’s going on and on about how I’m going to love our apartment and will be disappointed in the city. How he dragged all his stuff in a U-Haul from the Midwest and found bargain furniture on Craigslist. And how he missed me for the past three months. His bass-like voice is like a massage for my sores and I just listen. As we cruise through the darkness into the warmly-lit Holland Tunnel, I fall asleep.

I wake to a sweet summer breeze on the Manhattan Bridge. We are caught in the traffic. The window is down and James is singing to the radio. I stick my shoulder out to see the bridge. It looks smaller and dirtier than on postcards and screensavers.

“So...?” James yanks me back into the car before he steps on the gas and inches forward.

“So nothing.”

“We will go sightseeing tomorrow. If you feel up to it. Oh, here you go, you must be famished.” James produces a takeout container from the backseat. It has a red pagoda drawing on it. I dig into the fried rice. It tastes surprisingly good.

“Good, right?” James gives me a smirk, “Picked it up earlier on our way. First Chinese restaurant I went to in the city.”

I mumble my agreement with my mouth full of food.

“Our future fancy ass writer comes into town. Ha. Sweetie, I’m beyond happy for you. I’m just... There’re no words for it.”

I spoon some rice into his mouth as a token of thanks. “Hey you wanna hear what I’ve been working on?”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.”

“Okay okay. This is an idea I just cooked up on the plane. So, there is this girl that’s run away from home. Whenever she feels bored with her life, she tunnels through the planet, which is golden and cubic, with six planes of flatlands each claiming a continent, to live on the other side, or hikes to the edge and see the sunrise. Yeah the edge is a hot spot in her world. Well, that’s pretty much everything I have so far. But I have a good feeling about this.”

“Wow. I mean, wow.”

“Yeah? You like it?”

“I like? Wow. I mean...”

“Oh, you know what? I might need your architectural expertise on the tunnels too, Ha.”

“Yeah sure sure. This is all very, um, um, ANNA?”

“Hmm?”

James doesn’t say anything when he parks his car. On our way up to the apartment, I ask what he was going to say. He says, “Nothing, hon, it’s just a really good story.”

It’s a lovely studio apartment. James shows me how he constructed a sliding door out of two folding screens to separate the bedroom with the living room and kitchen. And I tell him it’s all very smart and nice.

While he runs me a bath, I call my parents. I tell them James picked me up and just left. And that I’m sharing a two-room apartment with another girl. And everything seems very nice. I can hear dogs barking in the background.

James is still in the bathroom when I hang up. I hear the water running and him singing. I think of myself a week ago, a month ago, a year ago. That gives me a chill. I can't believe I'm here, thousands of miles away from an unwanted past. I should feel happy, I tell myself. I should feel happy that someone is here with me to go through all this. I think of my most recent story, and of school in two weeks. Everything looks hopeful. I tell myself.

The bathroom door opens and I see an arm pushing it from inside.

There is a smell of peach and lime and grapefruit. I undress.

1-2

Subject: XXX wanted

Entry: *My name is KITTY. First thing you need to know about me, that is, assuming you want to know me at all, is that I'm a weird person. Or as my previous therapists concluded, disturbed.*

There is major difference between the two. As an obvious weirdo, you get to act however you want. Lick the windshields. Mirror others' movements. Talk to your hand on the metro. People leave you alone out of sympathy. You leave yourself alone, unknowingly. However, for the less obviously weird, like I am, we see a problem out of everything inexplicable, however tiny and negligible, and we pester ourselves with it. Some of us are lucky; they are officially deemed sick by the medical world and are prescribed specific medication to alleviate their conditions. The pills don't always work; but it's soothing to know

that there's an explanation. But for the unfortunate ones, suffering from an unnamed disease, and yet still having to live life like the normal, is a real pickle.

I've had many psychiatrists before and I fired them as soon as they started repeating their own words and passing over Xanax as a solution to everything. They always did, eventually. The quacks. And the really expensive ones, too.

I'm able to afford expensive therapists with Harvard diplomas on their walls because I make good money writing children's books. And some of my friends say that's why I overthink. That I'm a writer and that I read too much. But, I say, I write children's stories, reading is minimum. And then they would say that I imagine too much. Well isn't imagining a way of thinking and don't we all think? I challenge them - give me an instance where you don't think at all. Well, maybe you should just take a break and get away, they suggest, filling up my drink.

And I do. I did. But wherever I went, it stayed with me, the weird feeling. I climbed the mountains, dived the oceans and flew helicopters. But what was there is still there.

*To know what exactly it is, you have to watch *The Truman Show*, the movie. It's not my favorite movie; nor do I like Jim Carrey, I think he's often much too over the top. It's just a vehicle I use to explain my condition.*

So the hero Truman lives in this make-believe town where everything is staged to shoot a reality show with him unwittingly playing the star. To put it simply: inside, faked, outside, real.

Now let's come back to me. I play, or at least I believe I do, a similar but not exactly identical version of that movie. I feel like living in a small real world inside of a faked bigger

one. That's where people get confused. I don't know how to explain that better. You'd have to live it to know it.

Like right now, I'm in this bathtub, with a bath bomb melting into rich foam. Pink, green and burgundy. Steams build up and blur my sight. But I feel the water, see my hair products, and hear the noises of the street outside the window. But I don't remember how I got here from the bar where I was hanging with my friends talking about my condition. I don't know why I'm in a bath. I hate baths. I mean, I love baths but I hate taking baths in rented apartments. You never know what former owners did in the bathtubs.

And my life is just like this moment, plus multiplied. I jump in space and time in oblivion. And I hate it.

Some would say, and did say that it's some sort of memory blackout, or maybe early stage of Alzheimer's. I've looked these up and I think I'm neither. Unlike victims of either diagnosis, I have full control of my whole body, mind and flesh, until I'm jolted out of where I was a moment ago and inserted somewhere else.

Sometimes I tell myself that's how life is, putting on shows willfully directed by the puppeteer. The Almighty. That is when I'm drunk, or on some substance. I'd never think like that sober. I'm not a religious person. Not Christian, Catholic, Islamic, Buddhist, or Hindu. Occasionally I put the god/goddess stuff in my children's stories, but that's just to get out of explaining the complicated world to kids. I don't need that kind of crap for myself.

Anyway I'm leaving this post here to find someone to talk to. My shrinks are dumb and my friends are only going out with me because I'm buying. Secretly I believe they speak evil of me behind my back. And I could really use a listener.

I replace the X's with LISTENER. That's the word for it.

This would probably attract a bunch of perverts. Good thing I'm smart, I think to myself, shut my phone, and drop it onto the rug. The bathroom is getting too hot now, and my thighs are red. But I still don't get out. One minute, one more minute. With the unpredictability of my life, I've grown to stay within a space, preferably with a door that I can shut myself in and forget for a while that my own world is beyond my control. You never know where the door leads you and it's just safer to stay not knowing.

I guess that's the difference between me and Truman. He wants desperately to get out because he can't make sense of his town. But I prefer to be left alone and live in my small world. Because to think there is something supernatural that can manipulate me, jerking me around, is simply unbearable.

It gets blurry, the line between the real and false. I was typing fast onto my phone earlier, but now I'm seriously considering was that of my own will? Is that something I would do?

Sometimes I dream, when my sleep isn't interrupted, that they finally have a name for my condition. And even if that means I'm to be diagnosed as crazy, it wouldn't matter. At least I would have an answer.

Other than that, I'm generally a happy person. Not half bad looking. Got a sweet deal of a job. It pays well. And I get adored, too, I get so many oohs and ahhs when people learn of my profession. I've been around and settled down in NYC, center of the world. Honestly, I can't complain much, as my friends tell me. I guess so, you know, except for the fact that I'm borderline crazy.

My phone beeps. Got replies already.

I pick up my phone and start reading.

2-1

“Why are you here?”

The blind man said, icy cold. I wasn't happy with his tone; but I, well not me, my parents, did pay five hundred for this. And I was going to sit through it. Not that I could get out any time soon anyway. My folks were waiting outside. I was grateful to the man for this, though. He demanded the room cleared. But my mom being my mom, I wouldn't be surprised if she was eavesdropping. The woman had no regard for privacy.

“What can you tell me? Don't you have my birthdate and eight horoscope characters?”

He remained silent for a brief moment, and I immediately felt bad. Something about this room felt sacred. Could be the smoke of the incense snaking their way through the air. Could be the volume after volume of scriptures on the bookshelves. Mostly it was the man. He had an air, of, if not omniscience, wisdom. I wasn't going to believe any of what he would say to me, but not believing didn't seem right, either.

He straightened the rim of his sunglasses and said, “It doesn't work this way, kid.”

My name was ANNA and I was twenty-six and I wasn't going to be treated like a child. I was going to tell him that. But he somehow sensed I was about to interject and stopped me with his palm stretched out toward me, “There is a pact between me and the gods. I'm merely their messenger, to caution their people. I'm not allowed to reveal everything they've planned

for you, just the overlapped portion of what I have the clearance to have known and what you think you need help with.”

Before coming here, I had done my research. Most people came to fortune tellers like this to speak with the dead. That and marriage. And apparently some of them were really good. But I doubted whether they had their own secret advertising agencies to leave those comments.

“Most girls came to me for the future of their marriage. But anything else, as long as it’s something that’s weighing you down, is okay too. But think carefully, you get one question and one question only.” He adjusted his sunglasses again, pushing it up the bridge of his shiny nose. The glasses were of the darkest shade of black; you couldn’t see a thing behind it. I doubted he was really blind. Maybe he just had glaucoma. And this thought suddenly made him more like a clownish fraud.

But I did have a question to ask.

I made my way into our car while my parents stayed behind shaking hands with the man and his liaison. It was 7 a.m. and they were only opened until noon. There was a long line, and some of them were going to have to visit again earlier another day. Looking at their anxious faces that were about to get badly burnt by the August sun, I felt sorry for them. I was glad that I wasn’t like them. I didn’t believe. I asked the question and he answered it. But I wasn’t going to believe it.

I didn’t wait for my mom to ask me the obvious question to tell her everything. I told her the master, that was how the man was addressed, said I was a late bloomer in life. I would have to wait patiently for the blessing to knock on my door, which would be in my late twenties.

I would have a decent career and a happy family. And that a better marriage was promised if my future spouse was younger than me.

I said everything I knew they wanted to hear. So that they wouldn't object my dating James, who was two years younger than I. And so that they would feel better about me leaving them for graduate school in literally the farthest country away from them, when I had perfectly good job opportunities back home, even with a previous one-year sabbatical.

Watching their satisfied faces, I felt like a bad daughter. But it was washed out by the excitement over the flight in a week. I told myself, I'll make a better daughter away from home.

It wasn't just for my own sake though; they needed it, too. To hear something positive. To feel good about themselves again. After what had happened a year ago. After the death of my grandpa and grandma, three months apart. After the exhumation of our ancestors. And after the missing muscle on my dad's hand.

It hadn't been the best year for the Cheungs. There had been so much funeral stuff, the graves and corpses and tears and feasts, that honestly, I was grateful I got to get away now.

My grandpa died of a stroke. Quick and quietly. A clean death, they said, a good blessing for the offspring. We cremated him and he was so small, it only took forty minutes. Grandma was crying so hard it nearly broke her bony hunched body. I didn't get it. She wasn't treated with any respect as a wife. Repeatedly cheated on and occasionally abused. But she cried her heart out anyway.

After the funeral, grandma lived a happy three months. I lived with her, in the country. We had a grand time, planting our own vegetables in the little garden and ambling into the woods after dinner every day. By then I had already heard from the schools I applied to and

had persuaded my parents into loaning me the tuition. So I had no worries in the world. I read English prose and poetry to her in the morning, as she prepared lunch for the day. She didn't understand a word of it but she said she enjoyed every minute. It was a glorious spring, until word came that the government was going to tear down grandma's house, one of the many dozen old houses in the village, for railway construction. They wanted us to move the graves of our ancestors too. They didn't think the ancient dwellings and spirits went with the modern world.

By the end of spring grandma died in her sleep. Again, they said, a clean death. But I knew she died of anger. We mourned for her and kept sleep vigil; she was the more loved grandparent. Grandma left half what the government paid her for her house to my dad, her only son, and half to me. That was how Chinese parents showed love, dead or alive. My dad isn't the crying type, but he cried like a baby.

It was in early July that my dad found the muscle missing, the one between his thumb and index finger. The doctors were reluctant to give a final diagnosis. They wavered between cervical neuratrophia and MND (motor neuron disease), the former of which is operable, though risky, while the latter is untreatable. They were either not very good doctors and couldn't tell one from the other, or merely didn't want to be the ones to issue the notice of a quick death.

Sometime that month my mom changed her mind and started strongly protesting my leaving. I didn't fight her like I usually would have. It didn't seem right. I didn't know which would be the right decision, to go with a guilty conscience, or stay with a restless heart. I was in despair. And then one day I woke up with a flight ticket and a deposit slip, my half of grandma's inheritance, on my night stand. I knew it was my dad. It was a relief for me,

interlaced with a sense of loss. But I wasn't going deep into it. You can't expect an answer for everything in your mind; it's an abyss.

They sent me off at the airport. I wore slacks for the flight while they dressed formally. It felt like a ceremony, to give me away to something none of us yet had any idea of.

Somehow, when I waved goodbye to them, I guessed they knew. That I lied to them about the fortune telling by the blind master. But it would be just as well, if living with lies was easier for them than with truth. At least they had their dogs.

It was a complicated kind of love.

But they loved me and I loved them.

2-2

He said, *call me the doctor*. Almost corny. And plagiarizing, too. From the British TV show.

He stood out from what amounted to two hundred people who replied. That was after I cut out my name, which suggested my gender, and the part where I said I was sort of rich. Before that, there had been too many messages for me to sort through, ranging from light flirtation to hardcore porno. I didn't have anything against those; it was just not helpful to me in my specific case. Besides, it's heartbreaking, to see that many lonely people out there, seeking comfort from the wrong person.

I arrive half an hour early, at the Chinese diner we agreed to meet at. I felt like I should show some kind of appreciation because I was the one who asked for help. But when I pull

open the door, at 9 p.m., he's already there with a felt fedora next to his elbow. It's one of the hottest days this summer, he's wearing a black trench coat. His face is pale with carved features and he has a pair of black shades on. There is a classic feel about his look, which, in the backdrop of three full walls pasted with dollar bills, makes a good picture.

We didn't exchange photos before setting up the appointment. I just assume he is my guy. Plus, he is the only customer there. (I would later learn, as I frequent the diner more later, that it opens from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m.) So I walk toward him without any hesitation.

He stands and nods gently when I approach his table. He doesn't take off his shades though. But I figure that there has to be a thing or two off with this guy, who agrees to meet a self-alleged mental case late night. And his shades are really nice ones, too.

"Hi, I'm KITTY. You are the doctor?" He smiles and sits down.

"You have to order salt and pepper chicken wings here." That's the first thing he says to me. Dictating but prescriptive. Instantly I feel like he could be much more than I expected from a silly post on the Internet. So when the waiter comes with a glass of ice water for me, I order the chicken wings, though I'm not hungry at all.

"Oh, they must have forgotten your water," I say.

"Oh, I don't eat out."

"Ha, wait, then how do you know the chicken wings are good?"

He dismisses my question with a smile. He smiles a lot. Which is good, I guess.

And I don't press on.

The chicken wings really are good. He watches me eat. Like my father used to when he still saw me as his little girl.

I'm really not hungry. But I'm not sure how to get the conversation ball rolling, and the doctor doesn't seem like the talkative type. I guess that's why he chooses a diner for us to meet at, even though he doesn't eat out; at least I can find myself something to do during the silence.

Finally, I address my biggest but totally legit question, "So are you really a doctor?"

"Not that it matters," I add, a disclaimer.

"In a sense. Yes," he says.

"In what sense, exactly?" Hmm, it occurs to me that maybe my friends are right after all: I do think more than I should, regardless of the situation.

"I fix people's problems."

"So, a hit man. Or, a god." I try to lighten up the mood and squeeze more words out of him.

"Are you religious?" There goes his sense of humor.

"No, I mean, I was...well, no."

He smiles again, and tilts his head a little to his right, "Everyone is faithful to a religious standard of something."

I feel like taunting back, but then realize he is more or less right.

"What's the moment that you feel closest to a god?" He asks.

I feel like we are not going to cover my issues on this initiation night.

"Do you know what temperature it takes to burn up your body?"

569 degrees Celsius.

And it takes exactly 38 minutes for a 100-pound corpse. I watched them burn up my grandfather. You get to choose a regular or a premier stove, the difference being with a premier stove is that you get to watch the process and pick the bones you want for the cinerary casket. My father, the only son of his father, chose the premier stove—not to watch, but just in case the staff at the crematorium didn't pick out the bones as carefully as a son would have.

But I watched. From beginning to end. I saw how the body was licked and enveloped by the fire. And I was the first at the exit where the burning tray slid out. The body was now a mere shape structured of white bones. They gave us, the closest kin, a brush, a dustpan and a pair of fire tongs.

I guess whatever god ruled my country, or that very crematorium, must have been close then, at that moment. You know, to collect their souls, or whatever.”

It's amazingly easy to talk to him once I get started. If it were any other doctor, they would be jotting down everything as if somewhere within my words there hid my cure. But he, the doctor, just nods.

“But that was just for a second or two.” I carry on talking, “You know what I thought after that?”

I don't wait for his response, “I thought, wow, one thing off my to-do list. This stuff is golden for a writer. I need to remember everything going on in my mind right now. It's not like I'm going to be a children's writer forever. Someday I'll get to write about this moment.

So, yeah. Atheist, through and through.” I laugh, mockingly.

There is again that fatherly air about him. He tilts his head, this time to his left, and says, “Give it time, just give it time, kid.”

That's how we begin our first meeting. It's short. And we talk on and off between my chewing, though we haven't even touched upon my issue. But for a first time, it's not too bad. At least there are these delicious chicken wings.

He stands up with his hat in his hand—I still have one wing left on my plate—and tells me he has to go. He says to meet here again at 9:30 p.m. next Friday, and every Friday from now on, as long as his company is needed. And I thank him.

He doesn't pay, not even extending the gesture. I find that not quite gentlemanly. But again, he doesn't eat out and clearly I need him more than he, me. So I let it slide.

Strangely, I feel better. To just talk. To someone who shows actual interest.

I feel anchored, for the first time in a long while.

3-1

All my life I've thought of myself as a writer. I don't write anything down on paper; I compose everything in my head. I have a full cast of characters, spanning the demographic and professional spectrum, all lodged in the back of my mind. During the night, sometimes on long train rides and flights too, I pick out a few and have them act out a new story. I didn't have a lot, if any, friends when I was a kid. Both my parents used to be addicted gamblers and they locked me in our apartment when they went out. Playing house was the easiest way at my disposal to pass the day. The world seemed to be tangible but inaccessible for the better part of my childhood. I heard the frolicking of kids outside my bedroom window, but they were

always two locked doors away. Two locked doors beyond reach. So I played with myself and my imaginary characters. It was not half as bad as it sounds.

My parents unlocked the doors when I was too big to be contained in a room for an entire day. And then we moved to a house with front and back yards when I started middle school, with what money, I had no idea. They weren't very smart players, whether it was poker or mahjong. I knew this because they fought a lot back when they used to lock me up and go out, mostly over lost money. So I just guessed they made good money doing what they did, my dad a government official, and my mom in sales.

It was a beautiful two-story villa. We had thick stone walls around the house with a brass gate that shimmered under the sun. Within the walls, a fine garden looked after by professional gardeners that came twice a month. There were osmanthus trees and rose bushes. A rich selection of orchids and cactus. We also had plenty of fruit trees, pomegranate, apple and orange. Between the three of us, we had three bathrooms, two living rooms, four beds and five TV sets. It was a big improvement from our old apartment, a leap really. Oh, we had two dogs in the backyard, too. But for the most time, I stayed in my room and wrote stories by myself.

And then one day, my parents quit gambling all together. It could have something to do with my dad's demotion, or a teacher's note that said I might be autistic. I didn't know which, but that teacher was a moron. I wished I could invite her on a trip into my head and watch her jaw drop. Anyway, after that, my mom quit her job and became a full-time housewife. It was supposed to be for my sake, but honestly, by that time I was pretty much set in my ways and it didn't really make any difference with her there. If anything, it made everything worse. She had a voice that matched her height and girth, with which she yelled instead of knocking

on my door at lunch hours. She assigned house chores for me, of which I hated most cleaning the intricately carved legs of our mahogany furniture, and collecting dog hair during shedding season. Her priority was keeping the house clean, and me, happy. We tried setting up play dates, which dwindled because I always acted like a party pooper. The kids, they were far less interesting and manageable than my story crew, and we just didn't get along. So with me being happy a lost cause, my mom put more efforts into housekeeping. And I chipped in as much as I could despite my aversion, to get her off my case. Besides, I could write my stories regardless what I was doing.

All kinds of stories, I wrote. Things I didn't get to do. In places where I didn't get to go. Sometimes I rewrote my day the way I wished it had gone. But eventually, I always returned to this one story. About a girl. She was the perfect girl, living the perfect life. I liked writing that story. It gave me delight and hope.

So it was only natural that I decided to change career paths, after my one-year leave from work, to being a writer. James was an essential impetus. I wanted to go as far away from home as I could, and getting to know him during my off year, when he was doing his internship between college and graduate school, was a titillating invitation to me. He told me stories in his undergrad years in America and I loved it immediately. I figured if I could write my stories in my head, I could write them anywhere else. So I made the preparations, to leave.

It was not until the last minute, when the only thing left for me to do for the application was the writing sample, that I realized just how hard it was to put your thoughts into words. I worked on it for weeks. Nearly missed the deadline. It was a story about my perfect girl at a friend's wedding. It took me days to get down the first sentence. The smooth scenes in my head turned bumpy on paper. It was like a poorly constructed dress in which I could see the

uneven stiches and crooked plaits. I made the deadline; but I was not happy about the story, I felt it didn't do justice to my perfect girl. James said I was giving myself a hard time and it was a perfectly good story. And that, given time and guidance, I would have made a wonderful writer. I chose to believe him. Whatever it took to start a new life.

I didn't write anything else after that.

I had plenty of excuses back at home. The year of deaths was sucking me dry of sentiments and the will to do anything.

But now that I'm enrolled in a program where you pay for your own time and a place to write, I feel like it's time to get restarted. Before I came here, I thought I could get some serious and regular writing done right off the bat. I thought I was here to learn a craft, like painting, or carpentry. But it didn't take me long to realize I was wrong. Teachers here don't exactly teach you how to write; it's your job to figure it out. On school days, you go, sit round a big wooden table, and basically just talk. You discuss the reading materials assigned that are either esoteric, or quirky, or both. And then you lean back comfortably tearing apart your classmates' writing, though offering advice starting with "if I were you..." is strictly forbidden, with the writer him/herself hushed until the very end of the discussion. So at the end of each class, more often than not, you are exactly where you were, or maybe you have gone backwards. By the end of each semester, I'm going to have accumulated one or two piles of printed-out manuscript with comments in the margin, depending on whether you get to go one or two rounds in your workshop. They are going to take up my bookshelf space for a long time and then get left behind when I move. There are some good classes, though, where the teachers do teach you real stuff, but then again, they tell you it's probably not going to sink in immediately

but surely you'll benefit from it in the long run. I like these teachers and I believe them. So I wait, for that stuff to kick in.

On the days where you don't have any class, which are usually more than the days you do, most of my classmates work. But as an international student, I'm not allowed to get any paying job. So there is nothing else to do but write. I figure there's not going to be a better time to finally put the story that has been hovering my mind into real words. But I don't write them to be workshopped. For that, I have written other shorter pieces. My own story, I think, deserves to be stashed and protected before the time comes for it to be out in the open to be lashed and spit upon.

The story with the runaway girl and the tunnels in the cubic planet was thrown into the trash a month after school. Those things, I feel, are more of the American kids' domain and I don't stand a chance competing with them. My mind has been wired a certain way from Chinese school, starting from kindergarten to college, that I can only be so imaginative. So it's wise to stick to the real stuff and exploit my international edge. Since I'm not learning much in school, I've turned to the old masters. When I read Tolstoy and the like, questions pop up. Why do you have to come here to do what you've already been doing at home? Or how many books can you buy with the eighty, ninety grand you spend on tuition? And I try not to dwell on them. Or I answer myself that the quiet you buy is alone worth the money, or that it's always gratifying to see other people struggling just like you, over the same matter. You rarely can buy that, and when you do, you savor it.

I've named my major piece *The Wondrous Life of Kitty the Magic Writer*. I took the name Kitty from Anna Karenina. I was going to pick Anna, but I didn't feel cocky enough to write a namesake story. And I'm happy with it. The title, not the writing, which comes to me

excruciatingly slow. You'd think after all these years nurturing it, it would just flow out from the tip of your pen. But I guess not every baby gets born to the world hassle-free. So I just keep writing. Keep writing, that's by far the most valuable and practicable teaching, although the question remains whether it truly needs to be taught.

But I'm not saying I hate the writing process. It's bumpy, true. It's like any idea you have in your mind has to travel mountains and oceans to get where you want them to be. And you get distracted so often. Like just then, I was writing this short part where Kitty goes to this lunch date with her agent and her illustrator, Kitty the Magic Writer being a children's book writer, and I was cut off twice. The first time I needed to go to the bathroom, and the second time James asked me to order takeout food for the night. When I used to write in the head, I can easily keep going on the loo or browsing menus. But for the past month of writing, I've been interrupted more than I had in all the years before it combined, probably. And what I have scraped together seems patched up. I'm sinking. But your baby is your baby, however it hurts you in birth or unattractive it turns out to be, you love it nevertheless. And I hold dear my learning at school, and I've just kept going.

At least I still have James and our lovely apartment.

It's not always peachy though, the life with James. He wants me to get baptized, like he did when graduating from his Christian college. I repeatedly tell him I believe in science more than anything, and I'm not caving in to any superstition. And he gets silent. Silently smoking the cigarettes I smuggled in from the airport. His passive aggressive way of dealing with conflicts.

He wants me to think further into the future, too. *A writer*, he would say with strong accent and prolonged sounds on the word in Chinese, *is good and all, but you need to be realistic. Realistic like how?* I ask. *Like get a second degree in journalism, or a PhD in literature or whatever, something that can actually land you a job after graduation*, he says. *Writing...I mean it's not something anyone would do full time until it starts paying real bucks.* I've secretly come to realize that's not such a wrong idea over time, but I don't want to come off like a pushover. So I pretend to be adamantly against the idea. Taken aback, or grossed out even. So on this one, I silence him out.

They don't last, the fights and silence. I dismiss them thinking he's saying this stuff for my benefit. So we manage. At least, I still have my stories. The ones I keep to myself in my mind and the few of them that get transferred into words. Not the ones I put down on paper for everyone to print, mark, and take apart, like chicken in a slaughterhouse.

Days don't pass by quick enough. Sometimes I want to be Kitty.

To leap in time and get to the part where I'm a real writer and a brand new person already.

3-2

Of all the people I know, Jeff, my agent at Walker & Pendleton, is the one who opposes my self-diagnosis the most. He called it an "artist's syndrome" and claimed he'd seen it in a handful of his clients. The good ones, he added. Less booze, weed or uppers and more writing—that's his prescription to me, now and then. As if he knew my life from inside out.

Issey, my illustrator, despises Jeff and restocks my inventory of booze, weed whenever I run low and makes it a mission of bringing me new stuff to sample. I like the two, for their existence as two constants in my life, and appreciate their own way of helping.

I'm meeting both of them at Hakata Tonton, a Japanese hotpot place close to where I live. It's been three years since our first collaboration. The first year we met only in the agency office located in a decent midtown building. The second year, in light of Issey's indignant allegation that all the bureaucratic contact was killing off his creative spirit, we migrated to parks and coffee shops. And for the past year it's solely been fancy eateries. In a way, it kind of resembles a growing romantic relationship; as you venture forward, the hormonal air you breathe in and out liquefies and deposits, and therefore you need the material matters to fill in the emerging and ever-expanding crevices. But again that's just me babbling; little do I know about relationships, never having held on to one, what with my perturbed memories and everything. It's just something I say occasionally to sum up life in a pretty way. In essence it's the whole breakdown of my job. The real world is too much for kids to swallow and digest. Hell, it's too much for me sometimes. At times like this I sketch it up and keep it down in my Moleskine 8.25-inch planner. The truth to this one is that the three of us have been doing exceedingly well and Jeff, having started out as a nobody in the industry, has been awarded an expense account and he uses it to the fullest to fight against poachers.

I arrive first. I usually do. Appointments are important to me no matter who I meet. Doing what I do, you easily slip into a disorientating mess and you rarely wake up knowing what day it is. And that's why I carry my notebook around. I need written evidence to mark up the differences among each day. I've gone through a lot of them now. A single page is on most days not enough to contain my thoughts and I just let them spill over onto the next page, and

the next. I choose a different color when I pick up a new one. My current one is violet. This must be my third or fourth violet one now. They don't have enough colors for me to go around. I thought about changing to another brand, but the thought of the new notebooks not matching my old ones gave me a headache. So I pushed it far down my to-do list.

Saturday. Scorching hot. The idea of hotpot grew increasingly ridiculous on my way over until I walked into the restaurant. Air conditioning was so strong as if the owner fear customers will forsake hotpot for other less steaming but relatively cheaper dishes. They specialize in pork. And every table is occupied. Pork is my favorite kind of meat, with fish a close second. You don't exactly feel sorry when you consume them, unlike with rabbits or venison, probably because they are not used often as cartoon avatars. And of the two, pork is even better because of its mild disposition; seafood cools your stomach and boils up your blood, so says Chinese medicine.

Those are the words I jotted down between the time I sat down and Jeff arrives. My planners are rife with stuff like this. Ideas for new books is never a problem for me because of these random notes. Today we are going to choose among three stories to pitch to our editor. When I say we, I mean Jeff and I. Issey was encouraged to be included in the initial formulation of a book. But his ideas were usually the opposite of Jeff's, and with each rejection, he showed up a bit later for our meetings. By and by he was phased out of the process altogether. It suits us better. For me, I don't really mind which idea gets picked. And Jeff likes to have the final say. As for Issey, doing illustration is merely a means of living anyways, a way to support and maintain his more serious art creation on the side. The kind that doesn't play cute, doesn't entertain. I admire him for it and insist keeping him on although Jeff suggested a few times we cut him loose. I understand Jeff's worries about Issey's drug indulgence and addiction that he

squanders most of his money on. But he is the closest amongst my acquaintances to a confidant, when he is in between two drowsed-up highs, before the doctor, that is. Although I'm not even telling Issey about the doctor, who is now too fragile a bubble to prick.

“Hey KITTY darling, how long have you been here?” Jeff sits down with a big grin as he removes his sunglasses. Sharply dressed as always. Cuff links. Dress shoes. Manicured hands and moisturized fair skin. No exception even for a weekend meeting. You can't tell he's nearly thirty.

“Just a while,” I cup my hands on my warm ceramic tea cup, “What's with the smile?”

“Well, I was going to tell you last night but you didn't answer my call.” Jeff feigns a pout that soon gives way to his brimming happiness. His golden hair has a sheen of sunlight residue on it and it shines on even in the dimly lit room. “That's...a lot of pigs ha.” He points to the bar, doing his suspense bit, withholding the announcement.

Following his gaze, I turn my back and see the cabinet with five shelves behind the bar that's decorated with pig figurines made of various materials. The image is so busy it strains my eyes, so I turn back to stare at the wall and Jeff's fidgeting hands that are taking turns caressing one another. “Yeah...ha ha.” I don't contribute to his act; I used to, when I was a small-time writer and felt genuinely grateful for every single effort Jeff made for me. Now I understand it's for the both of us, if not him first. And the smallest gratitude feels like obligation. I'm hardening up, I think to myself. I remember what the doctor said, give it time, just give it time. And I'm now thinking, given time, I'm walking away from believing, in anything, rather than the opposite, it seems.

“So,” Jeff claps his hands to summon my eyelevel attention, “Our four books are doing outstandingly, thanks to Mulberry.”

I was recently shortlisted for the Mulberry Medal Award, a month ago. “That’s hardly news, is it?”

“Well, this is, two of them are back on the *Times* Top10, and...” He takes a gulp from his cylinder cup and gurgles a mumbled yelp. He fans his mouth, wiping the matcha stain off his hands, and I push my glass of ice water toward him. His face is now the color of liver and he looks like he’s about to chastise the waitress who has run over apologizing for her neglecting to bring the ice water. But he doesn’t; he just dismisses her with a nod. Jeff doesn’t swear. Or argue, or even raise his voice in public. It’s not in him. He’s from old money. He knows his manners.

“Where was I? So yeah, we sold five foreign copyrights between the four books. Germany, Switzerland, Britain, China, and...wait what’s the fifth one? Shoot...I can’t believe it slips my mind. Huh. Ok, just think we were worried forever we’d never push them beyond the States. But anyway, when it rains, it pours huh? How about that?” He holds out his hands in the air in excitement and one of them brushes the elbow of the waitress serving the forgotten water. Jeff apologizes and holds his hands back out again.

I want to say something to match up with his enthusiasm just a little, but I can’t make myself heard. I know what this means. In my last conscious split second, I think of the doctor and all I want to do is grasp this moment as well as I could, so that I can brief it to him next week. Nothing. Except that the walled-up tiny world in the diner dims down frame by frame. Although I think I catch a glimpse of a neighbor at the table next to ours turn his/her head and there is nothing on this face. No eyes, or noses, or lips. But it must be my head tricking me, because it’s already too dark to tell anything now.

When I come to, I'm nudged over by Issey, who has snatched the water just served to Jeff and is pouring it down his throat. Jeff hasn't noticed and keeps on talking. And it takes me a while to realize he's talking to me. I turn and scan the neighboring tables. Boys and girls are whispering and laughing. I can't see their faces. I strain my neck, pushing Issey's head out of the way, to get a good look. At what exactly, I have no idea. There's some kind of importance associated with one of these people's faces. I just don't know what it is.

"Helloooo..." Issey breaks off my contemplation with a string of crisp snaps, with his eyebrows dramatically arched. He is obviously grumpy and I guess he's at the moment not on anything. He's wearing a navy blue shirt and distressed jeans. There are holes and cuts all over his outfit; it's hard to tell which ones are intentional and which are accidental. He stinks of sweat. I sit back holding my breath without pinching my nose. "Sorry, where were we?" I shoot Jeff a smile. He doesn't show any sign of surprise. Our waitress brings over three menus and Jeff shoves them all to Issey's side as he picks up our conversation. "I thought you saw someone you knew. Anyway, as I was saying, this new release is going to be monumental for you, for our team..."

So, it was a frighteningly short time span of maybe two, three minutes, between when the waitress served the water and brought the menus, during which time Issey showed up. I remember what Jeff was saying before the blackout and the moment my mind cleared up. But I recall nothing of these two, three minutes. It's an abyss. It doesn't matter if you throw a ball of yarn or a block of lead into it. They won't arrive at anything. It's a bottomless hole. It won't answer any of your questions however you try. I'm just glad I didn't leap a lot of time and there is just a slight headache.

I'm barely present for the rest of the meeting, but we've had so many of them I know fully well how it goes and which story Jeff would choose. The one with the runaway girl that tunnels through her cubic planet. No doubt. He has a thing for fragile girls and he loves the idea immediately, with a suggestion that we make it less science fiction, more of a magical salvation in a fallen world story. Issey snorts when he hears and Jeff doesn't seem to mind. Magic and dystopian. And my near award winning. This book also is going to sell. Jeff knows his stuff.

Issey orders too much food, like he always does, but none of us shows any appetite. Jeff is still talking about the trajectory he's laid out for the future couple of years when we stand up to leave. It sounds like a good one. And I don't have the heart to tell him that the runaway girl story is going to be the last children's book I do. It's a decision not fully cooked yet. Medium rare at best. It was made initially after my meeting with the doctor. I felt like then that I needed some sort of personal change to go with my new therapies. And Jeff surely is not going to take it well, with me being his biggest client so far since he left his journalism tycoon of a father to start out on his own. So not today. Not now.

I go to the bathroom before leaving. I take the opportunity to look at the faces of the customers I pass by. But they seem to be so fixated on the food: their heads look like hairy lids on the plates. I don't make it to the restroom. I faint with a loud snap from the direction of Issey and a close stare from a plastic pink piggy bank on the shelf behind the bar. The bar is lined with customers but there is no bartender to be found.

I wake up the second time with a litter of stray puppies licking my toes. Issey is squatting over them while unpacking the leftover from the hotpot place. We are by the Hudson.

People speed walk pass us. Jeff is gone. It happens. Having two blackouts in one day. Three even. Sometimes not a single one for a streak of weeks. But it does seem to be occurring more frequently, this past month.

Issey is speaking to the puppies in cutesy English mixed with short Japanese phrases. I know some Japanese. He's asking how their day has been so far and promising them a hearty meal. His gentle voice tells me he's popped some pill on our way here. Or maybe in the restaurant, considering he was responsible enough to have packed up the leftovers.

I squat beside him. He looks like a giant child with his head dosed up and his eyes softened. Beads of sweat drip from his two-inch long dark hair down his cheeks. He is more like a brother than a friend sometimes. A surly teenage with unpredictable mood swings. "How did we get here?" I ask.

"Anywhere door." He winks. The meal is spread out and the puppies are going at it. They are a bunch of mutts, but from a certain angle they look like old English sheepdogs, the kind you see in paint commercials. Issey makes a fake food toss, messing with the little guys, and says, "Jeff offered to drive us home, well, you, you know, with the look. I told him we were taking a walk and here we are." He pauses and turns to look at me, "Another one?"

I make a loud sign, spooking the puppy closest to me. Issey doesn't comment. He turns back to the puppies and tells me he's fed them twice before. I haven't seen these same puppies, but over the years I have fed other stray dogs and cats with Issey. Rarely did we see them a second time. You wonder where they all end up. We could have adopted them, if we were not our unreliable selves. "Then we are going to have to name them now. Third time is a charm." I come closer, "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe..." I end up with a quiet female one, who's standing

in line waiting for her turn to enjoy the braised pig feet, and I name her Shizuka. Issey nods in agreement.

Summer is at its peak and the beautiful New York fall will be here.

I'll have finished the runaway-girl book and started my first real story. One that's not a fairytale.

4-1

It keeps coming to me.

The yellow paper cabin.

Sitting on a riverbank. Claiming a carpet of grasses and butterfly orchids. Dwarfed by rows of cubes of grey apartment buildings on both sides of the river. One story high. Seven yards wide.

When it first hit me, I woke up on the fleecy soil downstream. In a trance that usually occurred after a long nap where it was impossible to tell the time or whereabouts. The only tipoff was the mustard yellow rooftop of what seemed like an out-of-place shed. I climbed, or rather, floated, snatched up by a gentle but determined force, toward it. The grassy lane shed itself like an emerald velvet curtain off the cabin as I closed in on it. Squares cut off as windows. A balcony protruded in the upper middle. Door unlatched. A fence ran around the front porch. Crimson charms patched here and there. I had seen things like this before. Three times. Or maybe more. Back home, after five weeks of a family's demise, you send their spirits

off with the burning of a paper cabin that's glued together and decorated within. Cabins like this are supposed to house your dead families in their afterlife.

I was scared. Terrified. But when I was plucked out of the reverie by the lawn-mower outside, somehow a disappointment swept over me. I didn't know, then, that I would have plenty of chances to pick up from where I had left off.

Oftentimes after that, I found myself in one of the apartments, which all resembled one another, with the same uneven concrete walls and identical layout. They were stripped to the bone; all that was left were broken bowls, plastic wrappers, and sagging couches that might collapse any moment. Even without the cabin in sight, I never doubted I was in the same place. It always had a tell, something in the air that alerted my mind and electrified my body hair. And the smell. Of dead fish and over-flourished waterweed. Sickeningly sweet. Every time, even the first time when I didn't know what was to happen, I would try to escape. But however I closed and reopened my eyes, I was still there. And my body wasn't mine. It was drawn to the cabin. I didn't know how voodoo worked; I guessed this was something like that.

I have been revisiting this place since this September and now it's almost winter. But here it's always summer. Some time in the abandoned late afternoon. The sun casts a shadow twice the height of everything. Sultry wind blows sometimes, but the cabin, though glued together, never makes a ruffle and looks like a real little house painted yellow. Once, I came close enough to get a peek inside: I saw little people with tiny figures sitting in the back at a dinner table. Or I thought I saw.

James thinks I should go see a doctor. But I tell him it doesn't take an expert to interpret the dreams. It's all the deaths, all the unwanted bad memories finally catching up with me. And

I tell me running away is only going to make it worse. But he says it's just me being a stubborn Chinese, thinking of psychological therapy some flamboyant decoration of the western world. I'm not. I want to show him Kitty's cool therapeutic session with the doctor, a weird self-appointed therapist who I named after one of my favorite TV characters. But I don't. English is not James' strong suit, though it's the fifth year he's been in the States. And in the days to come, I would witness beyond belief how badly some Chinese speak English. So bad I wonder how they stop from killing themselves everyday living in an English-speaking country. And so would I learn how you can refrain from speaking English and live in a purely Chinese circle in a magical city that is New York. James's talents lie in the art, painting, photography, interior and architectural designing and I admire him for it. I envy him for it, as a matter of fact, thinking of all the alternatives he has to make a living if he can't make it as an architect. But I know only of words. This is all I have got. But somehow it stings him. That I have an upper hand to him, and it's something as basic as words. It's the macho side of Chinese men that I know well and I can't really blame him for it. But I am growing increasingly impatient when he bugs with the religion thing. Like right now, he is nagging me about it again.

“It won't kill you, you know, to go to church once and see for yourself what it really is.”

“I don't see you going even once.” I honestly haven't.

“You see how crazy school gets and I will go with you for sure, if you want to check it out.”

“Maybe.” I relent. It's really not worth the fight if I can go once and shut him up forever. And maybe I can use the material in my writing.

“Well maybe is good. We’ll go this weekend and you’ve heard how Emily got her green card for religious persecution right?”

Seeing I’m rolling my eyes, he adds, “I mean, it’s not something we definitely wanna pursue, I’m just saying. You might like it. Personally, I think you will like it. Sometimes I feel like I know you better than you do.”

“Right.”

“Seriously. I mean let’s just go and you can decide then.”

I throw the door shut and kick off my pumps hard, into the disarray of shoe pool, “There’s nothing to decide. Period. If you want me to go, I will. But that’s it.”

“What’s with the attitude? It’s a good thing you know. It gives you peace. And you don’t have to worry about that thing, you know Christianity is different from Catho...”

I cut him off, “You need to shut up now.”

And he does. He knows that’s off limits. Something that cannot be talked about. Not to him. Not to a fortune teller. Not to a deity. Now that I think about, it could be the biggest cause of all those bad dreams. He braces me on the couch and strokes my hair. James can be pushing and subjective, but he is also forgiving and nurturing. And to me the latter triumphs the former. I love him for it. I have faith in him instead of religion that he is the one that I can rely on to remake myself.

And we make love. When we lived together back in China in apartments on short-term leases during his summer and winter vacations, we made love like every day was the last day we would see each other. Any tiny indication, like a hair toss, or a deep growl, was enough arousal for us to fornicate like wild rutting animals. Now that we’ve settled down and declared romantic ownership of each other, things have gotten quieter. We need more outside stimulants

now. Stockings and garters. Corsets and heels. Dramatic noises. And there has been talk of getting toys from the naughty store. I don't mind the quieter love making. My focus is elsewhere and I don't yet know that it's going to be a problem.

"Take a nap honey, we have dinner plans with Jaycee and Clara," James reminds me when we are done.

As I sit in the noisy Peter Luger struggling to keep up with the name dropping of designer handbags Clara is feeding me, while the boys talk about plans for the winter break, it occurs to me why I'm having a hard time writing. Life, good as it is, is getting in the way. We are eating out every other day regularly, and on weekends we are fully booked to meet friends, James' friends, in nice restaurants. James complains that I don't make friends on my own; but can we really afford more friends?

Jaycee is James' friend from school who collects sneakers semi-professionally. And Clara; well, Clara shops. She is not capable of talking about anything else. But they are both nice people, naïve and willful from the sheltering of parents. So it's not exactly a bad thing to hang out with them.

We are sitting there enjoying the last of our wine when two Chinese girls come up to our table. Clara freezes mid-sentence and a subtle change of chemistry takes place within seconds. The girls see that I'm a stranger to them and introduce themselves as Karen and Kiko to me before exchanging greeting with the rest of the table. Karen is a bubbly girl and Kiko is sort of shy, she wouldn't even make eye contact across the table, even to me. I've heard Jaycee's girl problems and I avoid looking at Clara and just pile along. Karen suggests going

clubbing at Circle afterwards and Jaycee politely declines. To help his buddy out, James gestures for the check. The girls leave with a lasting citrus-toned scent.

We call the night after that and go home after dropping off Jaycee and Clara. They have the same arrangement as we do, living together while keeping it from the parents. So that the parents can keep on lying to themselves that their babies are still innocent virgins as a result of their strict parenting. I think that's beyond hilarious, when I hide myself outside the radius of the camera while James video-chats with his mom. He is going to do the exact same thing for me when I FaceTime my parents later. We stick to the ritual and have no intention of pocking the dormant mama and papa bears. After all, they are funding our freedom and happiness.

While I have that inheritance from my grandmother's house, I've entrusted my parents to invest the money for me. Therefore, they know exactly how much I've been spending and they are not happy with it. I'm going way out of my budget and if I keep on my luxurious living style, I'm going to eat into their own middle-class-sized savings, which is against the terms we had agreed upon before I left home. So I avoid calling them until they accuse me of being an ungrateful brat. But deep down I know I need to make some changes and shift my focus onto my book. After all, it's for that that I'm here. So I tell them it's just me getting used to the new environment and I promise them I'll tune it down. And I'm going to have a serious conversation with James about this. He's talking with his mom in dialects but it's not hard to piece together the heated conversation. They are fighting over money, too. That much I manage to make out.

But I know that talk is not going to be easy. James has a thing about getting people to like him and think he is the most generous guy in the world. That way he manages to make friends up, in other words, richer. And it's a vicious circle. I don't know yet that his parents

have been going through a rough patch in their business for the past few years and they have been selling one apartment after another under their name to sustain James' life in the States. On top of that, he's been maxing his credit cards. I'm not going to find out for a long time. And even when I do, I feel like it's too touchy a topic to address, considering the kind of person James is.

During a conference with one of my professors, I talk to him about my nightmares. I didn't think I was going to tell that to a stranger, least of all to a teacher. But I just do. He is one of the good ones. His name is Mark Davidson. We joked in class his name sounded like an alias and he joked back that with a boring name like that, no matter what he did for his life, he would be able to live up to his name. Nobody was going to say, that Mark Davidson, he didn't deserve his name. I think he is funny and talented. He is also a loving husband and father and when he talks about his families, he always has a twinkle in his eyes.

I talk to him about my slow progress with my book and that my character doesn't come alive as she does in my head. Mark scrolls up my manuscript with his line edits and says, "How about talk about your life a little? How are you doing? It must be exciting, to come from China to write novel in English." He has that irresistible twinkle in his eyes again.

So I tell him about my dreams. And the deaths of my families. And James' prescription.

He nods along, and when I stop he says, "Anna, here is what I think. You can definitely go to church. Or see a doctor. If that's what you want. But in my opinion, writing is the best therapy of all. Why don't you write about these dreams through Kitty, and see if it helps, for both you and your writing. I mean, what you have here is interesting enough. It just needs some substance. A back story, if you will."

We talk some more when my half hour is up. And when I get home, I start writing immediately. I give Kitty a second, third and fourth appointments with the doctor, and I talk through her, like Mark suggested. And when James calls, I ignore and silence the phone.

Regardless, I think I'm among the fortunate.

I have helpers that are relayed up that don't leave me clueless for too long.

4-2

November. Winter is here. The fall is not long enough. It's the time when I'm almost out of the apartment every day, wandering by the river, in the parks and on the streets. I don't feel guilty about not writing around this time. Life is just too precious to be wasted on keyboards and cigarettes. But this fall, I've managed to do both. I walk around like a hobo all day and get home in the heavenly beautiful dusk before it gets chilly. And at night I write. I write like I can't wait to get over with this child's play. I write like I'm copying and pasting from a complete story. Half way through, I start thinking about telling Jeff my decision. That I'm done with children's literature. I give myself the rest of the book to prepare myself for this discussion. I have so few friends I can really talk to that I'm not risking losing a single one.

Every Friday night. 9 pm. I go to the diner in Chinatown to meet the doctor. These meetings don't really help with the blackouts; I still have them. But with each meeting, I feel like I'm closer to the truth, whatever it is. And I've come to trust the doctor more and more. He is the same cold and distant person as always, but that's okay with me. As long as I'm approaching some kind of clarity.

But I almost backed out after our second meeting. An inexplicably weird thing happened and it scared the hell out of me.

For our second meeting in September, I arrived a little earlier than the first time. And the doctor somehow managed to trump me again and I saw him enter the diner. I caught him in the booth in between the two glass doors, reaching for the inner door, his back to me. The diner was empty, still waiting for its busy hours. But as soon as I walked in, I sensed something was wrong. And I felt exposed and uneasy somehow. It was not after the doctor pointed out that they'd taken down the dollar banknotes from the wall that I realized where my disturbance came from. They'd stripped the walls bare for some crude and cheap renovation. They kept the counter, the tables and the chairs. Maybe even the floor. So basically they just repainted the wall. And there were only a few bills newly pasted sporadically on the off-white paint. And the painted wall stank a little.

But that wasn't the weird thing I was referring to. And it didn't happen until after our meeting.

I should have known when the waiter served the one glass of water. Actually it did get my attention for a second as I wondered how he knew the two of us just needed one water since this time I never saw the doctor instruct so, as I assumed he had done before my appearance last time. But neither the doctor nor the waiter deemed this matter worthy of any explanation. I didn't want to come off as too intrusive so I asked the waiter what this was all about, in mandarin. The middle-aged man replied with a string of sing-song words. He was one of those lifelong Chinatown Chinese that spoke Cantonese as their first language, a smidgen of English and none mandarin at all. He, as he would introduce himself to me after a bunch of my weekly

visit, as Old Chan (he taught me to pronounce it in Cantonese), or just Chan, if I preferred English, gave me a full smile that bared his nicotine teeth and pale gums. I smiled back at him after pointed at the fried chicken wings on the menu. I looked up only to find the doctor staring directly at me, and realized then that it was me who was under the microscope for close inspection and not the other way around. So I settled down on the chair and folded my arms neatly on the clean, if not new, table, signaling for the start of our session.

“You are a very curious person.”

“You understand Chinese?” I asked, starting to blush for my rudeness.

The doctor pushed his dark shades up his nose. It was another stuffy late summer day and he was still in his black trench coat, without any perspiration on his skin. “Language is fleeting and evasive. If you want to know about a person, look into their eyes. Long and hard. And you see their life stories reeled up in there.”

In time I would learn to adjust to his condescending and even pretentious way of talking. It was like he was reading off a random page from a certain *Selected Essay* by such and such an author. But at the time I still hadn't adjusted yet. I didn't know how to respond. So I played with my water, clinking the ice cubes against the glass wall. Putting on a show of contemplation.

Old Chan thought I was out of water and came up to offer me a refill, and went off to take care of customers at the one other occupied table when he saw my glass was still full. He didn't seem to register the existence of the doctor at all. And I decided that either the doctor had been a regular here and suddenly decided to cut off non-domestic food one day, or that he struck such a strong impression on the waiters in the diner that they, the Cantonese clan, not only remembered him but also united to phase out this cheapskate of a patron. And both

explanation would have been okay with me. And as a matter of fact, I stopped thinking about this trifle before slipping into the deep valley of paranoia.

“Window to the soul.” I spoke the cheesy line, almost starting to doubt that whatever good faith I had in this doctor, in our arrangement, was all for nothing.

“I see a girl sitting at the edge of a cubic planet. Dangling her feet and eating the strands of her long pigtails.” He was still staring at me, long and hard.

“What else do you see?” I asked. I felt a rush of dizziness. My eye sockets burned a little, as if excited to learn that they were all along housing two crystal balls that contained secrets, memories, possibly the future.

“What do you want to know?” He readjusted the right leg of his glasses, tracing his fingers around the earlobe slowly before landing them on his left hand placed at his crotch.

There was nothing I wanted to know more. “Last weekend, Saturday, I had two blackouts. Can you see that?”

“I see two sets of eyes. One of a piglet, one of a dog, I think.”

“You do?” I yelped, not caring if my high pitch was drawing attention.

“Yes. Cute puppies. Sheepdog, I guess.”

I covered my mouth with my hands. And I was shaking. With excitement. I didn’t think there was anything to fear then. It wasn’t like he could be stalking me. The hotpot place was tiny and I would definitely have told him apart from the other customers if he really were there. And I was dying for more.

He probably saw the yearning in my pupils and carried on, “The animals had faces. Not the people. Not all the people. I saw you...scared.”

If a second earlier I was debating the possibility of me running into a coldblooded psychopath serial killer, I now thought that was out of the question. The blank faces that I thought I saw in the Japanese restaurant before my first blackout was something only I saw. Only I thought I saw. The stink of the paint was not bothering me anymore. And the diner was serene like a temple, the dollar bills incense money the worshippers contributed after kowtowing at the statue of gods.

What are you? I wanted to ask so badly. But you don't ask what God is, now, do you? Maybe when you were a kid, but then you learned to grow up not knowing. And you were fine with it because not knowing made whatever god of your preference more divine and unapproachable. You need the unapproachable as your believing system, because anything approachable is just too common and, well, mortal. You need something fundamentally different from yourself, and it didn't matter if it's beyond your logical grasp. So instead I asked, "Shouldn't I be?" I tried not to let my voice tremble.

"The more you fear, the harder you fall. Why not let go?"

"Let go of what?" I was so anxious I wanted to know everything that was allowed to be revealed to me.

"For starters, lose the notebooks."

"Why?" I asked, "What do they have at all to do with it?"

"You are holding on too tight. Stones crack under heat. Rubber bands break when overstretched. You need to take it easy. And we will go from there." That was some lousy advice. I heard about it before, from my quack therapists. But somehow that we'd reached his last sentence made it all better.

I was thinking of what to say when my phone screen came to life with a message notification. It was from Issey. It said, “Is that you? In 77?” 77 is the name of the Chinese diner; nobody bothered to give it a name I guessed, so they just went with the street number as the name. I turned my back and looked outside the glass walls of the diner and there he was. With a white T-shirt streaked with colorful paint, he looked like out of this world. When he saw it was me, he shuffled his index and middle fingers telling me he was heading over.

I turned back to the doctor and didn’t know what to do. I didn't want to break off our session. I had so many other questions. Or should I include Issey? I didn’t want that either. But before I had to make a decision, the doctor said, without any change of expression, “Why don’t we call it a day? You need time to think about what I said. And to try what I suggested. We’ll pick up from here next time.” He smiled a calming and encouraging smile.

Old Chan served my chicken wings and, with a loud voice, asked me whether I attended school here in New York—and I was forced by his hospitality to converse back and forth a few times. And when I plucked myself out of the conversation, I saw a pretty white T-shirt on the opposite side of my table. Instead of the black trench coat a moment ago.

The doctor had left, without saying goodbye.

“What are you doing here alone?”

“Huh?” My mind was still with the doctor and his words.

“I said what are you doing here alone.” Issey repeated, gesturing for water.

“Wait what?” I was still miles away.

It was the third time that I really heard him. He said with a touch of anger, “What the hell is going on with you? You said you had stuff to do when I called earlier. And is this what

you need to do?” He said pointing at the chicken wings before grabbing one. “You don’t need to do it alone, you know, I like me some good hot chicken wings.”

I was frozen there. Old Chan came over with Issey’s water, plate and utensil, and the two had a patched-up conversation with heavy-accented English. When Chan left, Issey waved his hand in front of me, “Are you high?”

“What did you mean I was alone? There was someone with me when you texted. Didn’t you see him get out?” My voice was hardly recovered from the tension earlier, and it was trembling harder now.

“I mean, you’re some crappy friend. You get doped up, and sneak off for the best wings in the world without me?” He was on his second piece.

“You didn’t see a man in a black trench coat?”

“On a day like this?” Issey put down the piece he had been working on onto the plate and wiped his mouth with my napkin. “You sure you are okay?” he asked, and when he didn’t get a response, he snapped his fingers and got Old Chan over. From the broken English the two guys spoke, I heard about it. And I didn’t know what to make of it.

Was this lady with someone earlier? Issey had asked.

No. She came alone, like last time. She liked to talk to herself and today I know she is a writer. Do all writers do that? Old Chan had asked. And with no reply from either of us, he left.

5-1

My book is getting out of control.

Kitty is getting out of control.

... (To be Continued)