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—JOANNA RAKOFF, author of *MY SALINGER YEAR*

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FINDING LOVE, SELF, AND HOME ON  
THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD

TRACY SLATER

THE  
GOOD  
SHUFU

主婦

*Finding Love, Self,  
and Home on the  
Far Side of the World*

TRACY SLATER

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

*New York*

PUTNAM

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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Version\_1

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FOR TORU, OF COURSE, AND IN LOVING MEMORY OF MAMORU HOSHINO

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The following is a work of nonfiction, and in calling it so, I feel a grave responsibility to honor that definition, but I acknowledge that it rests on the limits of my memory. I've recalled each aspect of the story as best and accurately as I can, and as literally, with the following creative exceptions: 1) I've re-created the dialogue from memory, not notes taken at the time, except on very few occasions (such as times I wrote down verbatim things my husband said because they struck me as so unique). Therefore, the conversations recorded here are a combination of my best approximations of what took place and my attempts, when possible, to consult the other people involved. 2) To protect the privacy of certain characters in the book, I have changed some names. 3) In a very few instances, for the sake of narrative consistency or brevity, I have combined multiple minor scenes that happened over time into a single minor scene.

Any other inaccuracies or errors in the text are both unintentional and mine alone.

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# 1.

主婦

## DEPARTURE

Most if not all descriptions of culture shock indicate a progression of attitudes regarding one's self and others from a lower to a higher level of development . . . [in] the form of a three-to-five stage U-curve. . . . [But] the actual progression of culture shock is seldom as neat and orderly as a U-curve suggests. Only rarely will a person achieve as high a level of functioning in the host culture as in the previous home culture, suggesting a backward J-curve as perhaps more authentic.

· Paul Pedersen, *The Five Stages of Culture Shock*

Whatever you do, *don't* fall in love over there.

· My mother

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## ONE

### 主婦

I MET HIM IN KOBE, JAPAN, IN May 2004. Three weeks later, he told me he loved me. At least I thought that's what he said.

We were hidden away far past midnight in my dorm room at a corporate training center. He was balanced above me on his arms while I stared up from below. I was a new faculty member in an East Asia executive MBA program. All twenty of my students were men. He was one of them. I'd already fallen in love with him, too.

I was supposed to be teaching these men business communication: how to lead teams and run meetings in a language and culture not their own. I knew almost nothing about English as a second language—or ESL—and had been hired under the flawed assumption that since I taught writing to American MBA students in Boston I could coach this group of Asian businessmen to talk like native English speakers.

I began to realize what I was up against on my first day of class, when I learned that most of my students had never worked with a woman who didn't serve them tea. Anyway, by now, a few weeks into the job, I was already failing miserably in the classroom, never mind my extracurricular late-night transgressions with a student who could barely speak English but had already begun to make my heart spin.

. . .

BACK IN BOSTON a month and a half earlier, on the day I'd been recruited for the job, I'd been warned I might confront challenges as a young American woman teaching senior Asian businessmen. It was early April, and the Korean faculty director of the program had tried, indirectly, to prepare me. I had yet to learn that in East Asia the most important communication is almost always indirect, where meaning is often a destination arrived at through multiple circuitous way-stops.

The director was sitting behind the broad desk in his office, books piled high against the wall, when he introduced his pitch to me. The window behind him boasted a panoramic view of the Charles River, Cambridge stretched out beyond. One of MIT's domes stood proud and gray in the distance, as if nodding sagely at its lesser colleagues across the water.

"The executive students all work for global Japanese and Korean corporations," he said. "You'll be traveling with them to Kobe, Beijing, and Seoul for each of the program's monthlong summer modules, where they'll see firsthand the manufacturing sectors across a range of markets. Then they all come here for nine months." He drew his hands wide in an expansive sweep, as if displaying the whole group in miniature right there. "They'll finish their degrees in Boston before returning next



spring to their homes and companies in Asia.” He smiled broadly, then sat back and folded his hands.

“You won’t be giving them grades. Just sit with them at meals, get them talking, go to their marketing and strategy classes with them. Help them on their case studies and assignments. Some may be demanding, but you can handle this, yes?” He leaned forward toward me, both hands on his desk. “You have a Ph.D., so you’re a professional, no?” Sitting back, he laughed then, at what I wasn’t sure but I laughed along with him. I wanted to suggest that—for the business-class tickets and a summer semester of highly compensated travel as a kind of “conversation coach”—this was work I could easily manage.

In truth, not only had I never been to East Asia or taught ESL, my Ph.D. was in English and American literature, not linguistics or organizational behavior. Moreover, I barely had an interest in cultures other than my own, although within my liberal academic circle, my provincialism wasn’t something I’d easily admit.

That April morning, just hours before the director offered me the job, I’d woken in my street-level studio apartment in Boston’s South End, the city where I’d always lived and planned to settle for good. As the sun streamed through my old floor-to-ceiling windows, I lay in my high-thread-count sheets and savored both the stillness and predictability of my life as a left-leaning, thirty-six-year-old confirmed Bostonian: overeducated, fiercely protective of my independence, and deeply committed to the cultural values of the liberal northeastern U.S.

Around me in the silence, the light swept across my bookshelves, full of volumes leaning left and right. Somewhere in the middle of all the Shakespeare and Milton, the Hemingway, Mailer, and Morrison, and the barely skimmed pages of literary theory, stood my own thinly bound doctoral dissertation on gender and violence in the modern American novel. On the floor lay a half-read copy of *Vogue*. My laptop was perched on a makeshift desk in front of kitchenette shelves stuffed not with dishes or pans but with papers and syllabi from ten years of teaching at local universities, which were crammed next to shopping bags and old tax returns. In the storage loft above the mini-kitchen were all the shoes I couldn’t fit in the studio’s small closet, rows of heels and boots and little ballet-slipper flats stacked on wooden racks.

As I did most days, I lingered awhile before leaving for my meeting on campus, luxuriating in the quiet, grateful for both the life I’d built around me and what it lacked: no complicated marriage or crying child to colonize my time. Then I climbed out of bed, showered, dressed, added a swipe of makeup, and stopped at my usual café for a soy chai before heading to the Boston-area university where I now taught. On my way out for the day, I ignored the mezuzah my mother had insisted I hang on the door frame, its tiny Old Testament scroll hidden in silver casing.

The only time my regular morning ritual differed, before my trip to East Asia changed everything, was the one day a week I’d go to Norfolk Correctional Center, a men’s medium-security prison. There I’d wake at dawn, skip the makeup, wear an old pair of flats, and drive the barren highway west. I’d reach the barbed-wired complex early, then pass through a series of electric gates before arriving at the classroom where I’d spend three hours teaching literature and gender studies in a college-behind-bars program to male convicts. This was the work I truly valued, one in a string of progressive education jobs I’d had: running writing classes for homeless adults, preparing inner-city teens for college, teaching first-generation undergraduates at a public university. The writing seminars for American MBAs funded my work in these other programs.

Either way, whether I was headed to prison or the ivory tower, I always began my morning firmly rooted on the exact path I had scripted for myself, what one ex-boyfriend termed “your life as a nonpracticing communist.” I had a large circle of like-minded friends; a combination of academic

jobs that satisfied me politically, socially, and intellectually; plus cash to buy great shoes. I'd planned each aspect of my world meticulously until together they created a kind of bulwark against the hand of mistakes I swore I'd never make: to take blind leaps of faith, give up my home in Boston, become dependent on a man, build a traditional nuclear family like my parents had, or, most important, cook dinner on a regular basis.

When he sought me out, the Korean director knew me only from my reputation around the business school. The year before, the deans had hired me to create a new writing curriculum for their on-campus graduate management program, and though I told him I'd never even been to East Asia, let alone taught there, the director had convinced himself that I was the woman to turn his foreign executives-in-training into English conversationalists—and to start in just a few weeks' time. Once he floated the idea by me, I assured him (remembering my Spanish- and Vietnamese-speaking students in lockup), “Well, I *have* had nonnative speakers in my literature classes before, lots of times.”

“Excellent.” He nodded, confirming my perfection for the job.

I played along. After all, I reasoned, the money they were offering for three months of work was more than *five times* what I'd make in a whole year teaching in prison, and I liked to travel. Besides, what could these East Asian executives possibly throw at me that I hadn't already seen either behind bars or in an MBA classroom?

. . .

IN THE WEEKS before I left for the Far East, I made only modest preparation. I bought sightseeing books about the three countries I would visit. In their brief introductions to each culture, I read that all were more conservative about gender than the West. *But surely, this won't extend much into corporate life in multinational corporations*, I assumed. Not until many months later would I learn that, in Japan particularly, even the majority of professional women become what's known as *shufu*<sup>1</sup>: housewives who after marriage give up their careers.<sup>2</sup>

My travel guides also introduced me to the phenomenon of culture shock, the five or so stages visitors can pass through in foreign places. The names of these stages sounded both mysterious and like pop psychology: *Honeymoon, Disintegration, Reintegration, Autonomy, Acceptance*. The books promised a kind of euphoria followed by a crash and then—if one spent enough time abroad—a whole other, more integrated self could emerge, combining one's native and new multicultural identities. I dismissed these notions, too. *I won't be in any of these countries for long enough*. So I turned my attention to matters I considered more relevant: buying outfits for my new short-term global gig.

When I arrived in Kobe in mid-May, the faculty director from Boston was already there. He'd come early, affording him a few days of golf with the Japanese head of the training center where we would be staying. My trip from the East Coast had taken almost twenty-four hours, and I was exhausted. But as a formal welcome, we went to dinner at a traditional restaurant downtown. Its entranceway was a mini-garden, tiny bonsai trees dotting the white stone steps from the outside door to the dining room threshold. A gentle glow from paper floor lanterns lit our way. Removing our shoes, we stored them in little wooden cubbies, then glided in slippers over polished floors to our table. Even through the blur of jet lag, the effect was serene, magical.

At our seats, the faculty director poured sake for me, his golf buddy, and another woman who had joined us, Ji-na. She was the young Korean program coordinator who would travel with me and the executive students throughout the entire summer. She had recently moved to Boston with her Jewish-American business-professor husband, then took this job for the chance to travel back to Seoul once a

year to visit family.

Ji-na explained proper drinking protocol in Asia, her small face and thin frame leaning in toward me, her hair swaying like a shiny black curtain. One person poured, and then, when everyone's glass had been drained—or better yet, when they were almost but not quite empty—we would take turns giving refills. She picked up the little round ceramic sake pitcher, holding it between delicate fingers and did the honors.

For the first course, a kimonoed waitress brought sashimi. The entire fish was propped on a series of sticks over a plate of shaved ice, head at one end, tail at the other. Tucked inside its carved-out torso were slices of white flesh arranged in a neat row. I stared at our meal's profile, its mouth slightly open as if caught by surprise, one black pupil facing me like a laminated disk. I'd never been able to bear raw fish, nor a meal that made eye contact, but I gamely picked up my chopsticks, dangling them a few inches from the platter while I tried to build an air of nonchalance. That's when I noticed the tail waving, a slow arc through the air like a metronome.

"Um, it's moving?" I observed. "Is it. Is it . . ." I could feel my eyes grow wide, my expression between confusion and horror.

"Yes! It's still alive! So we know it's delicious and fresh!" the faculty director enthused. I knew the polite response would be to tuck in with feigned relish or at the very least try a tiny nibble. But I couldn't bring myself to do either. I put down my chopsticks, my face hot, my smile weak, and drained my sake cup completely.

. . .

THE NEXT MORNING, after jet lag propelled me through a deep but uneven sleep, I had time to explore the training center where we would be working, eating, and sleeping for the next month. Its air felt arid, disorienting. Every inch was tidy, basic, uniform: identical seminar rooms with long, tiered, curving desks; orange upholstered swivel chairs; plain gray carpeting; wall-length whiteboards with black markers spaced evenly across their trays. The faculty bedrooms occupied their own wing, separated by a hallway from the students' rooms, but they, too, were basic and bare, with a narrow single bed, a nightstand, three sets of drawers for clothes, and a small white bathroom.

Classes officially began the next morning. It didn't take me long to realize that the university had made an awful mistake. I was terrible at the job, not knowing anything about the field of ESL, how our brains acquire words, or how to help foreign speakers exercise the muscles in their mouths to shape new sounds. My students realized the same thing.

I learned immediately that although the Japanese and Korean participants were unable to differentiate between *v* and *b* or *r* and *l* (so "evaluate" became *ebaluate*; "product" morphed into *ploduct*), they were expert at discerning when a young woman who supposedly occupies a position of authority is, in fact, woefully bereft of experience. "When you meet a Western colleague, you shake his, or her, hand, look directly into his, or her, eyes," I enunciated loudly as I stood in front of the classroom on the second day, my chin raised high. The hot sun baked the ground beyond the window, but inside our classroom and the hermetically sealed walls of the training center, the air conditioner was blasting. The room was bright, sterile, cold.

Twenty pairs of dark eyes stared at me. A few heads nodded politely in slight acknowledgment. The two youngest students in the room—Toru and Makoto, both Japanese, both in their early thirties, and both the only ones my age or younger—smiled kindly, but the other faces before me remained

impassive. I began to sweat, my cheeks feeling bright. I opened my mouth to begin again, but instead of speaking, I gaped silently. *I'm alienating them*, I thought, *and I'm not even sure why*. Turning to glance at the clock, I swallowed, my throat like sand. *Ten minutes past. Twenty more to go. And still no clue how to engage them.*

What I did know: my Ph.D. meant nothing now. The confidence I had been trained to project as a professor in the U.S. came off as an insult here, an uncouth display of ignorance about my real status determined by my age, my gender, and, most of all, my lack of knowledge about their countries. *Why didn't the faculty director warn me what an offense it is to show ignorance of their cultures, when he knew I'd never taught abroad before?* I felt a flash of anger. But underneath, I knew the fault was mine. It was a foolish miscalculation to devote my few weeks posthire to reading travel guides and crafting business scenarios for reenactment instead of really learning about the homes and histories of my future students.

"The right, um, the American way to greet colleagues." I plowed on, and the entire class stiffened. "I mean, in the West, in Canada or, or in North America." I fumbled. "The usual way to greet people you work with . . ." I tried to backpedal, realizing my sloppy word choice suggested a terrible insult: that the American way is best, all others lacking. I was tongue-tied and sweating harder by the second.

Later, Ji-na, the program coordinator, pulled me aside. She explained that the students had designated one Korean and one Japanese participant to be their leaders and spokesmen. In both cases they chose the eldest, men in their late fifties, since their companies' Confucian hierarchies equated age with authority.

"The students are . . . commenting," she said, after a pause. She looked down for a moment, then raised her eyes toward mine, resting them somewhere around the middle of my nose. "They like how . . . clear your voice is," she added encouragingly. "But . . ." She stopped, looked down again. "Could you . . . talk more . . . quietly? Perhaps?" Then she giggled, her small, thin fingers coming up to cover her mouth. "Show less confidence? You know," she said, waving her tiny hand in front of me. "Be more shy. Like women here are supposed to. Like the students are used to." Later, in the dining hall, neither of the group leaders would acknowledge my presence, their eyes sweeping past me, their shoulders high and proud.

. . .

FOR THE REST of the week, we mostly stayed inside the training center, sallow under its wash of fluorescent lighting. The students began referring to it as "Kobe Jail," its interior so sparse and ordered, so utterly removed from the outside world. Despite my experience teaching in a real prison in the U.S., I felt even more confined here. At least in Boston I could leave lockup after my three hours a week of teaching were up.

The few times I did venture out, to a nearby supermarket, I handed my ID to the guard at the security gate, then blinked into a sun made improbably bright after the dull glare of the training center's lights. Outside, in a residential area on the outskirts of Kobe proper, I could communicate with no one. Children on the road stared shyly at me or hid behind their mothers, my long, wavy, blond-streaked hair looking very foreign to them, I supposed. Most of the brightly colored goods at the store remained mysterious to me, with vivid packaging and unintelligible black calligraphy dancing across their tops or down their sides, a kaleidoscope of the indecipherable.

When I found a bag showing peanuts on its front, with crescent-shaped rice crackers glowing like little orange moons, the women at the checkout counter smiled and bowed and laughed kindly as I

struggled to count out correct change. Between the outside environment and the world inside the training center, I felt at once like a child in wonderland and like that fish on the platter my first night in Japan: flailing, stuck, utterly exposed.

After my talk with Ji-na, I spent the next week both ashamed and uncomfortable in the classroom. I spoke more softly. I looked down often, buttoned my shirts an extra notch around my neck. Except for the encouraging smiles of Toru and Makoto, I felt nervous meeting the eyes of the men around me. In the contest between the ideals that defined my life in Boston and the gender expectations of the East Asian classroom, I caved.

I did find some moments of reprieve, though. Especially outside of class, I was touched by most of the students' polite manners, even as I could sense they wanted someone more experienced teaching them business conversation. "Oh, you like white rice!" a few would exclaim when they saw me in the dining room with an overflowing bowl. They'd incline their heads in welcome as I pulled out a chair at their table and set my tray down. They found it hilarious when I dumped soy sauce and wasabi over my serving, since in Japan and Korea, white rice is usually eaten plain. "This, this is *natto*," a student named Sato told me when I eyed his dish of beans bathed in yellow gravy, sticky strands of sauce hanging from the end of his chopsticks. "Americans don't like! Can you eat?" he asked. "Strong smell! But good taste! Good taste!" I shook my head and widened my eyes as I peered into the bowl, then pulled back abruptly as its scent hit me, and the whole table laughed good-naturedly.

While most of the students remained distant in the classroom, Makoto would repeat everything I said under his breath, practicing the movements with his mouth. *Vertical marketing*, he'd mouth silently. "V-V-V," he'd practice, trying to push his teeth into his bottom lip to pronounce the v that Japanese replaces with a b. "Bertical, vertical, vertical marketing," he'd repeat under his breath.

Then there was Toru. At thirty-one, he was at least a decade younger than most of his classmates. Not until I'd spent a few days watching him did I realize I was drawn to him. He'd tilt his head calmly in thought, search through his portable electronic dictionary for translations to English words, and smile slowly. Sometimes he'd stare off into space, then nod and bend his head over his compact laptop, spiked black hair and fine-edged cheeks suspended over the keyboard, muscled forearms peeking from his shirt. Next he'd raise his dark eyes, cock his head, and think some more, all angular features and unhurried gestures. When he laughed, his quiet expression would break into a grin.

"Can you help?" he'd ask me sometimes after class, handing me a case study with the vocabulary he didn't understand circled in blue ballpoint. He'd nod slowly and seriously as I explained each word, watching my emphatic hand movements with interest. "Market *launch*," I'd explain, mimicking a rocket in flight, my fingers slanting upward. "Ahhh, yah, yah, yah," he'd say. "Okay, thanks you very much," he'd add as we finished. "I'm appreciate you."

Between my failures in the classroom and my disorientation in Japan, Toru's shy sincerity washed through me with bright relief.

. . .

ONE NIGHT, a few days after she first broke the obvious news that the students were unhappy with my teaching, Ji-na and I were slumped together in one of the training center's barren lounges. Her job was proving no easier than mine: since she was a young woman, and Korean one at that, the elder Korean students treated her more like a secretary than the coordinator of an international executive program who had already earned her MBA. Mainly, they expected her to xerox their assignments and fetch them tea and snacks while listening to their litany of complaints.

The air-conditioning was too high in some classrooms, too low in others, they insisted. The software for their marketing simulation was unsophisticated and slow.

Ji-na and I gossiped and giggled over beer and a Japanese approximation of Doritos. She told me which students she liked best, the few she thought were handsome and kind, and then I confided my small crush. In the twilight zone of the Japanese corporate training center—where we were the only women besides the uniformed cleaning or cafeteria workers who bowed silently to us each morning, where everything was more tidy, ordered, and sterile than our actual lives a world away—neither one of us dwelled on practical concerns such as professional boundaries or academic ethics. Instead, Ji-na pointed out how happy she was with her Jewish-American professor husband in Boston (“Just like you and Toru, sort of!”), how much calmer Toru seemed than the more senior, restive students in the program. How much she disapproved of my latest ex-boyfriend back home, the award-winning scientist with multiple diplomas and persistent fidelity issues.

That night when I slept, I dreamed about Toru, a hazy landscape of confusion and turmoil brought still by the shelter of his body. In the dream, I felt more comfort and warmth in his presence than I had ever known with another person—real or imagined. I woke feeling not so much excited as calm and safe. Then, although Toru and I could barely communicate, we came from entirely different worlds, and he was a student in a program where I was failing miserably as teacher, my feelings gave way to an even more surprising thought: *this might not end disastrously*.

. . .

THREE DAYS LATER, at an *izakaya*, a Japanese pub in Kobe’s center, the entire program had an official celebration of our first weekend. We drank and toasted and drank some more—a common practice in East Asian corporate culture, where getting drunk together builds the trust necessary to do business. In general, getting drunk and doing business seemed pretty strange to me. But getting drunk and making a pass at a student suddenly struck me as a great idea.

I thought I had noticed Toru staring at me that first week in the classroom. He had begun to hang back and wait for me when the group walked down the hall after class to the cafeteria or shuttled to the program’s factory tours. I imagined I felt heat rising off his skin as he sat near me, but then I’d think, *I’m being crazy; he’s a student*. Even though we were all adults and, divested of the power to give grades, I held no meaningful authority anyway, I was still supposed to consider him off-limits. *Not to mention the disaster I’ve already made of this job without adding inappropriate sexual conduct to the mix*.

None of this actually stopped me from checking my contract to see how the university defined fireable offenses. After all, I’d spent years dating lawyers in Boston. *Interesting*, I thought, as I read through the document. Relationships between teachers and students-of-age were not, per se, forbidden as long as harassment played no part.

That morning, before our celebration at the Kobe *izakaya*, Toru and I had sat together on the train when the whole group headed to Himeji Castle for sightseeing. The others paired near us, Ji-na sitting with one of the younger Korean students, the two talking a blue streak in their native language. Toru made me laugh by imitating the white-gloved conductor bowing again and again to no one in particular. Then he checked repeatedly to ensure the open window wasn’t whipping too much wind into my face, brushing his arm against mine for a fraction of a second as he pushed himself up to close it in one quick, liquid movement. I was ecstatic, then chagrined. Then ecstatic again.

Now, at dinner, he was sitting next to me. Getting drunk like I was.

Afterward, we filed out of the restaurant as a group, crowding tipsily into the elevator. “We’re going karaoke!” someone announced. On the street, everyone turned toward the karaoke bar.

I touched Toru’s arm. Then I ducked behind a pillar, out of sight from the rest. Toru grinned and joined me, our backs pressed against the concrete slab, Kobe’s neon signs blinking through the night air around us. We watched silently as the others departed. When they were halfway down the block, we turned to look at each other. His eyes were dark but very still. I pivoted the other way, and he followed. We were finally alone, together.

. . .

TWO WEEKS LATER, he told me he loved me.

The night of missed karaoke, we’d stayed late at a bar in Kobe, kissing furtively in a corner between bottles of beer, then snuck back to the training center, holding hands the whole way until we parted at the guard gate. For the next couple of weeks or so, he’d sneak into my room after midnight, the other students tucked into their single beds or studying under the pale light of single-bulb lamps in their bare rooms. He’d leave around three a.m. Each Japanese student had been paired with a Korean one, and soon his Korean roommate, a shy man approaching middle age, was impressed, exclaiming to the group how studious young Toru was, how he’d stay late into each night in the computer lab working diligently on his solitary assignments.

Now, as Toru declared his love for me, I feared at first I’d misheard him through his accent. The curtains were drawn against the midnight moon, Toru’s spiky black hair jutting out in urgent tufts. He looked straight at me when he said, “I lub you.”

In keeping with my dismal performance as an ESL coach, I didn’t nod with brisk encouragement or prod him patiently to enunciate his syllables. Instead, I blurted out, “You *what?*”

If he was saying what I was hoping, it would be one of the best things I’d ever heard, since he’d already turned my own heart upside down. But still, I’d only known him for three weeks, this man who’d spent his life half a planet from my home, who bowed when I shook hands, ate miso soup for breakfast while I ate cornflakes. I didn’t want to think he’d said, “I love you” when, in fact, he’d said “I live far from you.”

But he repeated it again, and a third time, and when I finally answered, “You do?” he said simply but unmistakably, “Yes, I’m love with you.” And somehow, right then, I knew I’d found a lifetime perk to the worst teaching job I’d ever had.

. . .

THROUGHOUT THE SUMMER Toru and I were together, though we spent very little time alone. We kept our relationship a secret, and during the week, in classes or sharing communal meals, we would go about as executive MBA student and faculty member. But on weekends, when the group would scatter for sightseeing or side trips, we would get away for overnights in Kyoto or downtown Kobe, and when the program moved to China and then South Korea, we’d escape to Beijing and Seoul. Away, we’d lie entwined for hours.

The initial heat of infatuation that had infected me like a fever didn’t so much dissipate as mellow and alongside my yearning for Toru, I began to grow fond of him in a quieter, more balanced way. After a fifteen-year string of Ivy League academics, lawyers, doctors, and entrepreneurs who had impressed me with ambition and inspired me with wit but still left me empty in my chest, I’d finally fallen in love with a man I actually *liked*.

One weekend in Kobe, we stayed in a small hotel near the harbor. Like most spaces in Japan, our room was tiny but as sleek and modern as I'd ever seen: the clean, precise lines of the furniture edging its dark mahogany burnish; evenly placed pillows lined perfectly against impeccably white sheets pulled so taut that the sheer absence of wrinkles belied their buttery softness. One whole wall was a window opening to Kobe's skyline, its pointed tower winking in the distance, headlights glowing in the street below, tall buildings with square windows stacked up like newly minted Chiclets. Off to one side, the sparkle of the city laced the dark expanse of water.

That night, lying face-to-face, I asked Toru about his family and his growing up. He told me of his middle-class, stable childhood in a small Osaka apartment and his parents, who loved and protected him and his younger sister with a mix of warmth and reserve that he found wholly unremarkable in Japan, but that I found intriguing compared to family dynamics in the West. "They could love me well enough, so I always knew I was safe," he said simply.

"Did you feel lonely?" I asked, as he told me of the day he first went to school at five, when his parents said he should stop calling them Mama and Papa and use the more formal *Okasan*, *Otosan*: Respected Mother, Respected Father.

"Lonely?" he repeated. "No, not lonely. Maybe a little . . . a *little* sad. But proud. Now I was real boy, not baby, so I felt good. More good than sad."

"Did your parents hug you?" I asked, getting ready to psychoanalyze. After six years in a Ph.D. program perfecting theories about the hidden meanings of literature's greatest works, there was nothing I liked better than dissecting a real-life story—especially when it involved a romance of my own.

"Yes, of course, lots!" Toru answered. "Until I was older, in school. Until about five. Then, we didn't touch so much. We Japanese, we don't touch so much." He nodded as if this were the only sensible choice.

"But still, you always felt . . . you always felt *held*, anyway?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest and rocking my shoulders to pantomime a child's sense of protection.

"Yes! Always *held*, yes. Even though not a lot of hugging."

His parents never once went out to dinner without him and his sister, he told me, nor went away without them—child-free vacations being a concept so novel to Toru that it took me a few tries even to explain. In fact, they hardly ever went out to dinner at all. "No need," Toru said, in response to my surprise. "We were happy at home."

Memories of my own parents, grim-faced but impeccably dressed, flitted through my mind: leaving instructions for the housekeeper on the way out the door, my mother's French perfume scenting the air around me as she'd lean down for a quick kiss, her voice then permeating the large, dark house by intercom—"Kids, we're leaving now. Corita will have dinner ready later." Or, best of all, when they let us four children dress up and come out with them. I'd order shrimp cocktail at Josephine's on Newbury Street and explain to my father, as he'd stare off into space, how the mirrored foyer made this restaurant my favorite. I'd feel safe then, as if anyone could see that nothing bad would happen among the gilded walls, the clinking crystal, the bathrooms with little lettered towels, all the pretty people in the rooms around us.

Back in the Kobe hotel room, though, all I said to Toru was "Huh, interesting."

. . .

THE NEXT MORNING, we both woke a little giddy. We'd have to head back to



the training center soon, and the anonymity of the hotel threw into stark contrast the confinement of the MBA program. Toru threw open the curtain and the sunlight glinting off of Kobe's skyline tumbled into the room.

I began to recite the opening lines of Nabokov's *Lolita*, a little pretentious academic humor that I knew he wouldn't get anyway, so he wouldn't be able to call me on my intellectual posturing or challenge me to recall anything beyond the book's first few lines (a literary fluency I lacked). "Light of my life, fire of my loins," I called to him from my cross-legged seat on the bed, my arm flung out dramatically, my long hair a tangled mess.

Toru turned from the window to throw me a silent smile, seemingly unconcerned that he couldn't get my meaning. Then he swiveled back to the view. I felt equally unconcerned, and then surprised, as I suddenly thought how many relationships would benefit from a lack of shared linguistics, from the absence of expectation that our partners would, or even could, understand us most of the time.

A few minutes later, Toru turned toward me once more, his grin huge as he tried to remember and return the quote. "Love of my life, tenderloin of my heart!" he offered proudly.

I threw myself back on the bed in giggles, pounded my hands and feet up and down. "Tenderloin of my heart! That is so great!"

Toru smiled at me, head tipped to one side, looking quizzical. Then he couldn't help breaking into a full laugh himself as I rolled around in the sheets, hiccupping. "What's funny?" he asked, diving into the mayhem on the bed.

"Tenderloin is a *steak!*"

"Oh, terrible. Terrible mistake." Toru shook his head with mock gravity and plopped himself onto the pillow beside me.

Still, I couldn't help but notice that his was a proclamation more visceral, touching, and eloquent than any I'd ever read in the entire Western canon.

. . .

ONE NIGHT A few weeks later, we were hidden away again, this time at the Chinese government's Ministry of Commerce training center in Beijing, where the entire program had moved for the middle leg of our Asia tour. Toru would have to leave in a few hours to creep silently along the dark hallways and make it back to his own room before dawn. We had become less careful in China, since the facility there sprawled with multiple wings, affording privacy to the faculty suites. We still hid our relationship during the day but had lapsed into more frequent late-night sneaking around.

The night was dark and heavy beyond the window, the air-conditioning churning out a constant, guttural hum. I flitted in and out of fitful dreams while Toru lay quietly beside me, his breathing soft and even. I had grown to love the peacefulness of his slumber, so different from my own turbid sleep. He eased softly into the gentlest part of night while I was always wrestling to grab hold of a meager rest, like fistfuls of shadow I had to yank from an unwilling darkness.

I'd always been prone to angst-filled dreams. Sometimes they would hold scraps of films I had seen as the child of first- and second-generation American Jews with a Holocaust fixation. Despite having lost no direct relatives in the camps, my parents enthusiastically promoted our duty to "never forget"—and then extended that to "always be remembering." In homage to this vigilance, my mother had even initiated her own version of America's favorite prime-time activity: family Holocaust movie night.

When I was four or five and our temple showed live footage from the genocide in the adult service, my parents yanked us out of the children's sing-along so we could fulfill our duty to bear witness. Half a decade later, when the network miniseries *Holocaust* aired, we brought notes to our Protestant private schools explaining that we should be excused from homework while we observed this latest chapter in our history of ethnic calamity, reenacted for network TV. I clutched the thick, lemony yellow notepaper my mother had given me, monogrammed along the top in rich red lettering, FROM THE DESK OF CHARLOTTE SLATER, and proudly handed it to my teacher before recess.

In addition to the mourning and anguish for those who perished in the camps, however, my parents hinted at another theme roiling just below the surface of these images. Or maybe in my confused efforts to grasp the ungraspable I just imagined a deeper message: the fatal naïveté of the victims. For these were the Jews who didn't get out in time, who somehow failed to recognize or admit the gathering storm. So what I took most clearly from my Holocaust education was not my responsibility as an American Jew to blindly support Israel (my mother's intended message, reinforced with a collection of window decals proclaiming I AM A ZIONIST! for each of our bedroom windows). Instead, I learned the importance of never being foolishly optimistic, never underestimating the potential for disaster, and never, *ever* assuming you could leave life up to fate.

Now, in the black of a Beijing night, lying next to a Japanese executive-in-training I had met just six weeks earlier and with whom I could barely converse, I was immersing myself deeper and deeper into a relationship that would eventually require some sort of optimistic stretch—or most likely a wild leap of faith—to sustain itself across two hemispheres. *Am I just fooling myself here, I wondered, just inviting some messy, bicontinental breakup?*

Then suddenly, Toru began to stir. I turned toward him, ready for him to cry out while I guessed about his own nightmares. The outlines of shapes—a wooden dresser, an aging TV, a book on the nightstand—ghosted softly in the dark. As Toru tossed beside me, then began to murmur quietly, I paused, weighing whether to wake him from his dreams or let them pass.

But then he laughed, a chortle bubbling up through slumber, like a child with a joke. I looked at his face, and the stress I expected there was absent; in its place, a small smile curved his lips, his cheeks peaking above a satisfied grin, almond eyes squeezed shut and crinkling at their corners.

Next he turned over, sighed, and fell back into peaceful rest.

*Holy shit*, I thought. In the inky black of night, Toru didn't dream of horror and tragedy, didn't dwell in fragmented scenes of Nuremberg, Nagasaki, or Nanking. Instead, he chuckled.

Hearing Toru laugh, I was struck with a new thought. *Perhaps utter vulnerability and pure peace really could coexist, surrender sometimes culminate in quiet joy, not destruction.* And right there, in the People's Republic of China's Ministry of Commerce training center, in bed with a Japanese businessman I had met less than two months before, I fell further in love than I'd ever thought possible, my heart crashing through a floor I didn't know existed, revealing a deeper comfort than I ever guessed another human's presence could embody.

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## TWO

### 主婦

ONE NIGHT TOWARD THE MIDDLE of our stay in China, almost eight weeks into the MBA program, Toru and I were curled together again. I lay on my side facing him, my head propped on one elbow, my other forearm extended on the sheets between us. He smiled at me, then looked down and passed one finger lightly over my forearm, near the top crease of my wrist bone. He traced two small, faint scars nestled there, little pale parentheses cradling a minor vein. He looked up at me, knit his brows.

“I made them once,” I admitted. “It wasn’t such a big deal. It wasn’t dangerous or anything.” Toru nodded wordlessly, conceding that they were nowhere near the underside of my wrist, where tender skin separated artery from air.

These were marks made during a particularly confused period of adolescence when I had wanted not so much to destroy myself as render tangible an invisible grief so it might begin somehow to dislodge and recede. “I felt pretty bad then . . . in my late teens and early twenties,” I tried to explain. “I just wanted . . . some way to feel better, and I know it sounds weird, but this was the only way I could really think of.”

I told him my family had been wealthy but “kind of screwed up,” aping the irreverence of Northeast academics discussing shrinks and psychopharmacology, personal pathology, and other upper-middle-class woes. “Like, not totally okay, you know, between people,” I said, wagging my finger from my chest outward and back again, miming personal connection.

“A-ha,” Toru said, as if starting to see a picture. Then I tried to tell him of my family’s demise, our inability to hold it together even after we had been handed so much. The morning I was eight or nine when we kids woke to a wall of kicked-in kitchen cabinets, their smooth cherry doors splintered and gaping, one in the shape of a mouth caught mid-surprise. The wreckage of a mismatched marriage, how we would hear my parents shut into the wood-paneled library of our house, my mother’s voice rising among the antique leather volumes until it reached a high-pitched scream; my father’s murmur soft and strained; we four kids ducked low at the top of the staircase or huddled in a silvery guest bathroom while the sound of our parents’ voices would come to us in waves of hisses and low pleads. The one child—my middle sister, Lauren—with whom my mother never seemed to bond and who for years slid deeper into a depression that wouldn’t quit; the other child—me, the baby—crowned my mother’s favorite, the difference so obvious that even my father proclaimed I was her chosen one.

In truth, although I never could quite figure out how I’d gotten pinned a parent’s favorite or why Lauren bore the brunt of such opposing luck, I assumed my status depended on playing the perfect little girl—and while my heart broke for my sister, I grasped on to my own role. It made me feel safe or maybe it really just held at bay some sense of terror and helplessness I couldn’t understand. Either way, I grew to believe that the more perfectly I behaved, the more fixed my safety and place in the

world would be, and the more firmly my family's cohesiveness would hold.

Of course, I was wrong.

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One day when I was ten, Ms. Wing, the headmistress at Lauren's all-girls school, called to say she had found pills in my sister's locker. Upon admitting her urge to take the whole bottle, Lauren had been dispatched to Mount Auburn Hospital's psychiatric ward. My father was somewhere in Texas that night. My mother claims he declined to take her call.

But I remember a friend of my parents', Mrs. Birnbaum, coming home from the hospital with my mother. Her hair was light brown streaked with ashy blond, piled high in a seventies sweep, and she bent over my bedside in the dark while my mother did something in the kitchen (Cried? Flipped through her Rolodex to find a lawyer? Checked the fax machine for the latest on the Middle East conflict?). Then she tried to explain that Lauren had gone away. Two weeks later, my father moved out.

My parents broke the news of their separation while Lauren was still in Mount Auburn, calling the rest of us into the library. We sat among the plush leather upholstery and burnished bookcases, the glass-shelved bar and Baccarat tumblers, and they said my father was leaving for a while. Then we went to the country club for an afternoon swim and Sunday barbecue, and I, in particular, tried to smile on cue for the other families.

After a few weeks in the hospital, Lauren moved in with her English teacher, an arrangement my parents funded privately: the upper-middle-class version of foster care without the stigma of state involvement. Years later, Lauren would tell me that her new family had been gentle and kind, although she still spent more than a decade going in and out of psychiatric wards. As if her insides had been crushed beyond repair.

Within a few months of Lauren's first stay in Mount Auburn, my brother, twelve, went to boarding school and my eldest sister moved in with my father, who had now left for good and for a new, Texan wife. Meanwhile, as if frozen into the separate spheres where our family's roles had flung us, Lauren and I lost touch for years until she went to college and I left home myself for boarding school at fourteen, and then we began to grow close. That was the year our mother remarried, too. Over time, I grew to value greatly the stability both my stepparents brought to their marriages, helping certain jagged family holes to begin to soften, to hold some hope of evening out. But still, sometimes while I was in college, Lauren would call me to her bedside when her hands itched for another bottle of pills, and I'd sit with her in a darkened room and wonder how you stopped someone from wanting to die.

Eventually, despite her crippling depression and the indelible effects of her childhood pain, as an adult Lauren graduated from psychiatric patient to gifted author and psychologist. She earned her doctorate and became renowned for writing lyrical, sometimes controversial essays about mental illness, science, and medication. She married, built her own family, and published books about her struggles, her extensive involvement with pharmacopeia, and even her experience seeing patients in the same psych ward where she once lived.

As for myself, I flirted as an adolescent with my own share of suburban angst, though much more modest in nature. I passed with total unoriginality through the requisite self-starvation and attendant crises of my ilk: boarding-school girls from chaotic families who turned their anger and shame inward. In college, I dwelled with indecent relish on existentialism and death, the maudlin English major's porn: Camus, Kafka, Levi, Arendt. But then I stopped and made myself a promise that at the time seemed wise. I'd never again become dependent on any family unit. Or anyone at all, for that matter. I bought one of those T-shirts that proclaimed A WOMAN WITHOUT A MAN IS LIKE A FISH WITHOUT A BICYCLE. I swore I'd never become marooned in another messy, unpredictable world—especially on

that required me to sacrifice all I'd squelched in my childhood efforts to play perfect, or where I was helpless to hold disaster at bay.

---

I knew I was lucky to be able to make such a promise to myself. I had the money to pay for years of therapy, the insurance to keep my Prozac prescription filled, and the good fortune to find the combination of counseling and psychopharmacology remarkably effective. I eventually took my tribe's early turmoil and, like in many a bourgeois tragedy, turned it into a career: my doctoral dissertation on violence and power, my jobs teaching gender studies and literature at universities and in men's lockup, and the business writing work that guaranteed me total financial independence from my family.

Now in Beijing, as I narrated the broad outlines of this story for Toru, he caught enough to understand, at least, what "kind of screwed up" meant. He held my gaze with unblinking eyes. He didn't ask me how I felt about any of it. He didn't say a word. He just took my hand and smiled sadly.

Unexpectedly, Toru's silence comforted me more than any commentary could. I didn't need to try to explain perfectly (nor would there be a perfect explanation anyway) the vague but persistent mix of embarrassment, guilt, and fear I'd always felt, mocking me through the fabric of my family's privilege. Toru simply let me know that he sensed both my grief and my numbness, and that his heart hurt for me, and actually that was enough—in fact, it was the only thing that mattered.

Of course, I didn't know how to tell him that night in Beijing, as he reached out to take both my hands in his so we could lie nose to nose and palm to palm and not say anything, how much his silent embrace meant to me. But even so, as he fell asleep that night, he never let me go.

. . .

BY THE TIME the Beijing module was winding down, Toru and I had begun to talk about what we would do when the MBA program ended, after the entire Asia tour was over and the following nine months in Boston were, too. He was expected to return to his country and company and climb the corporate ladder, since his firm had funded graduate school. We didn't make any concrete plans, but I suspected he might consider moving to Boston, at least eventually. He had enough money saved, he told me one day in passing, to pay his company back for his degree. He'd also lived in Malaysia for three years before starting the MBA program, working as head financial officer for one of his firm's factories there, and now he was doing graduate work through an American university. *He must be open to settling outside of Japan*, I reasoned.

My moving outside of Boston, however, was inconceivable. I'd lived my whole life in the city's vicinity, and it represented the only sense of rootedness I'd ever really trusted. For me, safety felt cartographical: the familiar, stable contours of a place I knew by heart.

One night during our last week in Beijing, on a couch in my faculty suite, I tried to explain my attachment to Boston, my dread of leaving it, and my fear about what this might mean for us as lovers from opposing corners of the earth. I told him of how, when I was finishing my Ph.D. program seven years earlier, I had turned down the possibility of a few full-time academic jobs outside of New England after realizing I wasn't willing to move from the Northeast, even for a tenure-track literature position.

Because Toru was less dramatic and more optimistic about everything, he didn't understand why I felt so sure I could not live far from Boston—but neither was he especially concerned. "It's okay," he said, with a small smile. "We don't need to worry on this now."

On one hand, I knew logically it was much too early to analyze our long-term future. On the other

rooting out possible disaster was my *thing*, my unique forte. Moreover, Toru's lack of angst about sustaining our relationship frustrated me. *Does it mean he's fallen less in love?* Perhaps most surprising, he proved strangely unanxious about *my* anxiety: very different from the other men I had dated, for whom any display of emotion trumping cool rationality hinted at the unseemly and any question over "where this relationship might be going" blinked like an urgent exit sign.

Now in China with Toru, I stared across the faux-opulent faculty apartment, its heavy green curtains framing each window, the sheer white liners underneath hiding the Beijing grime. Then I did something I had never done before. I considered giving Toru and whatever was happening between us the benefit of the doubt. Maybe his lack of concern over our future—and my own related anxiety—meant he didn't care as much as I. Or maybe he was just optimistic that we could work out our relationship when the time came to do so, and my tendency to believe the opposite didn't faze him. At first, this idea of seeing the glass half full careened into my mind as merely a novel thought. I prodded it mentally for a moment, as if jutting my tongue into the fresh gap of a lost tooth.

Then, somehow, my mind took the leap itself, and suddenly I'd made the decision to go with the better possibility. The moment I did, it felt strangely right and solid. Perhaps, I thought, instead of uncaring, Toru was simply sure and strong. Perhaps, I thought next, Toru really would move to Boston, and into my meticulously cultivated life there I could add the one thing that had always eluded me: a deep and steady love.

. . .

A FEW DAYS LATER, we had our first fight. It was early July, and the Beijing afternoon was brutally hot and humid, the air wet-cotton heavy. As dusk neared, Toru and I went to a running track near the training center. I tried to go every few days, as did a few of the executive students, who would run with their bright white tube socks pulled halfway up their shins. The track was dusty, the grass in its center brown and old. We jogged slowly because of the heat. Toru's socks, noted approvingly, were pushed down around his ankles.

I had a vacation coming up when we got to Korea, a week off when I planned to go to a spa alone on Jeju Island, lie on the beach, have massages, and forget the sound of businessmen trying to speak English. Now I suggested Toru join me in Seoul the Friday my vacation ended so we could spend a night or two at a hotel in the city before heading back to the Korean training center, where the whole group would be staying for the program's last month.

When I proposed the plan, breathing hard from the jog and the heat while Toru's inhaled and exhaled stayed smooth, he only answered, "Maybe."

"*Maybe?* What do you mean, maybe?" I exhaled harder.

"Maybe I can come. Depends on weekend's assignments. What's happening with program schedule."

"Uh, okay," I said flatly, straining to keep my frustration inside. "When can you let me know?"

"Maybe at Seoul. When I know schedule better."

Suddenly, he didn't seem very eager to spend a weekend together. *Has something happened?* My mind ticked back through the last few days. I couldn't locate any rift, but now Toru seemed a few degrees cooler in his pragmatism.

"I need to go shower and change," I said, as we wound down our slow loops around the dirty trail. A few other people were at the track, too: no one from our program, but I didn't want to have an obvious disagreement in public. Even more, I didn't know exactly what to say, but his nonchalance

stung. Confounded, I gathered my water bottle, turned toward our dorms.

Toru waved as I left, bending down to begin his stretches.

We spent the next twenty-four hours avoiding each other. I got to dinner late that night, slowed by a sudden heaviness in my limbs. I sat with Ji-na at a different table than Toru, avoiding his gaze in the cafeteria, where the buffet always made me shudder. The Beijing training center kitchen specialized in fried chicken feet and a dish of sautéed rooster crowns, the scrawny claws and flimsy, yellowing cartilage pooling in oil at the bottom of their metal pans. I had been eating a lot of fried rice.

The next day in the classroom, Toru and I continued to keep our distance. Everything around me suddenly felt grayer, the fascination of East Asia fading to a dirty scrim of strange accents and nauseating foods. That night, we still had not acknowledged each other except for quick, sad nods in the dining room. Then the whole class went to one of the training center's karaoke halls, where we were joined by members of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce for some sort of celebration—the cause of which I never fully understood but assumed had to do with the ubiquitous combination of business, drinking, and letting down your guard.

The music was booming, and three older Chinese ministry men grabbed me and Ji-na to join them onstage for a song. I had always hated karaoke, but I knew I had to play along. We chose a Beatles number and, blushing wildly, I muttered along while the men threw their arms around my and Ji-na's shoulders, swaying back and forth, and belting out "Hey Jude" in their accented English. I noticed Toru slip out during our performance.

Ji-na giggled madly, but she was used to karaoke, and she stayed behind for one more tune while I bolted off the stage as our song ended.

They chose "Let It Be" next, and I sat on one of the tawdry lounge's faux-leather couches, watching them sing under the too-bright lights from the little stage, and I smiled a frozen grin while the other students laughed and high-fived me. "Good job, good singing!" they enthused kindly. "You shouldn't so embarrass! Berry good!" another added, until tears welled in my eyes. I was suddenly, poundingly, miserably homesick. The adventure of the last two months felt small and diminished, and the thought of making it through my last month of the program without Toru as my secret salvation seemed intolerable.

"Headache," I said, pointing to my forehead, and I made another mad dash, this one for the door.

I walked around outside for a while, the training center and other campus buildings gloomy in the twilight, dark shapes hovering in humid air. I was rounding the corner of one building, heading back toward our dorms, when I saw Toru on the path in front of me, a figure emerging out of the dusk.

"Oh. Hi," I said.

"Hi," he answered, looking down, kicking an absent stone with his shoe.

"I had to leave, I . . . you know I hate karaoke," I stumbled.

"I feel sad," Toru said simply, looking up at me, meeting my eyes. "Don't know what's happened, why we don't talking, but I feel low. Too low." The lamps from the path haloed the space around him, his dark eyes reflecting a slice of their light.

I felt a swish of relief, as if the gray inside me were being swept by cool wind.

"Me, too," I said. "I don't want to fight, don't want to not talk."

"So what's happened?" he asked. "Why did you change so sudden?"

"Why didn't you want to come to Seoul with me for the weekend?"

"I didn't say didn't want. I said maybe." Toru looked at me carefully, narrowing his eyes.

"Well, why only maybe?" Now I looked down and kicked my own imaginary stone, my little ball of flats growing dusty at the toe.

“*Maybe*, maybe I can come, I tried to explain,” he said. “I don’t know what program schedule will be, don’t know if I can take time away that weekend. Of course I *want*, but don’t know if I can. So maybe. I said maybe because it’s true.”

“Okay.” I was relieved but still frustrated. “But I need you to make clear that you *want* to come away with me, that if you don’t come, it’s only because you can’t. I didn’t understand that. I needed you to explain that.”

“So just misunderstanding?” he said, his expression loosening into softer planes. Then he shook his head. “Don’t like to say something that’s not true.” A pique of annoyance crept back into his tone. He glanced down again, then back up at me. The pathway light left half his face in shadow. “So I said maybe.”

Then he sighed and reached out to grab my hand. He told me he’d been too low without me next to him, that everything since the night before had felt too bad. “Doesn’t really matter, I guess,” he said, “why misunderstanding was. Just let’s be together again.”

I squeezed his hand and brought it quickly to my chest. Then, looking around to make sure no one could see us, I dropped it reluctantly. I still didn’t understand why he needed to be so literal all the time. *Why did he have to focus on the “maybe” part, the pragmatic part, instead of on the part that matters, instead of explaining he wanted to be together?* But I was too tired, suddenly, to work it through; I didn’t even know how to explain the term “pragmatic,” and mostly, I just wanted to surrender to the relief inside me.

We turned to walk back together in the direction of the dorms. “Yes,” I said gratefully. “Let’s just be together again.”

. . .

BY THE END OF JULY, we were staying just outside Seoul, our last stop in Asia before the students headed to Boston to finish their degrees. I’d gone to Jeju Island for my vacation, and on my way back, Toru met me for an overnight at a hotel in the city. I felt a spike of joy at having a whole day and night alone with him when I could hold his hand in public, when he didn’t have to risk before dawn to sneak back to his room.

We explored the city’s downtown, then rested at a café among the cobbled streets and antique houses of the Insa-dong area. We drank sweet *yuzu* tea, hot and thick and lemony. Then we went to get haircuts in the neon-lined Gangnam neighborhood at a salon whose windows advertised American hair products, suggesting they might speak some English.

Sitting in the high salon chair, I turned my head while the Korean hairdresser cut and combed, and I watched Toru through the mirror on the room’s other side. I flushed warm at the ease and fluidity of his movements reflected back at me, the carefree shake he gave to his own clipped hair. He ran his fingers over his strong round skull, the baby whiteness beneath. He was turning toward me with a smile when the phone call came.

Hearing it ring, I turned my eyes back to my hairdresser, listened to the snipping shears slicing through my hair, watched the severed lanks in their slow deadfall to my feet. It wasn’t until a few minutes later that Toru reentered my line of vision.

At first, I didn’t notice the difference in his expression, didn’t see the disbelief fixed across his features. But then I heard him say, through the soft chops of scissors, “There’s been an accident.”

He stared blankly at me for a moment. Then, “I must go back to Japan.”

My hair half cut, I turned fully toward him. “What?”



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