SALINE SEASON
By ELIZABETH HAN

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I want to mirror your image to its fullest perfection,
never be blind or too old
to uphold your weighty wavering reflection.
I want to unfold.
Nowhere I wish to stay crooked, bent;
for there I would be dishonest, untrue.
I want my conscience to be
true before you;
want to describe myself like a picture I observed
for a long time, one close up,
like a new word I learned and embraced,
like the everyday jug,
like my mother's face,
like a ship that carried me along
through the deadliest storm.

-- Excerpted from "I Am Too Much Alone in the World, Yet Not Alone" by Rainer Maria Rilke

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Stuart, our acting instructor, knew of an opportunity which called specifically for an Asian girl of a certain age. At the mid-class break, with Yuliya, I played it cool, complaining to her while we preened in the bathroom mirror, trying out different expressions, angles, gestures, and accents, that it meant nothing—his drawing me aside—and something that suited her would just as soon come up. Stuart had closed his eyes during my self-introduction five weeks before, as if I'd managed to bore him barely a few minutes into our first lesson. Still, she insisted that he always gave me one or two more sentences of feedback than he offered anyone else.

"No way," I said.

"Way. He's totally impressed. I bet it's an audition."

I knew the details already, but hadn't told her. I'd signed up for the class not for auditions or money. Unlike most of the others and their parents, I did not care about commercials, tv and video, film, or voiceover work. To prove Mother wrong, I would have to de-ghost. "I want to be visible," I said.

"Everyone's invisible," Yuliya said, thrusting out her chin. This action, she had advised me, pulled your head away from your neck so your face looked thinner in pictures.

"Not you."

"Before or after?" Swivelling, she kicked her backpack, on the floor, towards us. It was already open and she pulled out the spoils of her day, hardly glancing at most of the objects. I stretched my lips wider in the mirror as though smiling around a jumbo dill pickle.

More than a month had passed since Yuliya had returned to school, and still, the procession come bearing condolence gifts for her father's death had barely thinned, the girls and boys queueing before her at recess, lunches, and after school, like wise men to the baby Jesus. Those with money gave her gift

cards to Hudson's Bay for cosmetics; those who didn't offered their lesser jewelry, eau de parfums, and leftover cigarettes, seeing her need as greater than their own. Last Tuesday, near the dumpsters behind the school, as I shivered under a drizzle and watched for teachers, three older girls from ninth grade shoved a zip-loc containing something green and mossy into her bag and whispered in her ear. We smoked the weed together afterwards sitting on two boulders in the woods close to where her father did it. I rolled and Yuliya worked the lighter because I shook so hard my thumb kept slipping. I kept asking her if it was working and she said maybe one of us should have stayed sober to make sure.

"Maybe you should donate these, since you don't want them," I said. On the face in the mirror, my acne scars had left craters of hyperpigmentation, the largest of which, on the ala of my nose, I pressed my ring finger over. Even if I used both hands, I didn't have enough fingers to cover all the marks at the same time. If there really were further auditions in my future, I would have to learn to do my own makeup, and Yuliya had promised, when we first started speaking, that she'd teach me.

She held up a gold necklace from the pack, a chain ending in a pendant with the shape of a clover. "What do you think? Vanessa Locke, grade seven. Keep?"

"Keep, for sure. Is that real gold?"

"Yep. Anyway, I don't need to donate. I have you."

I swallowed. "My mother's going to be suspicious."

"Your mom's suspicious of eggs because she can't see inside them," Yuliya said.

I checked my watch, which showed a few more minutes before we had to return to the classroom, one of the multi-purpose rooms of the community centre, just next to a triplet of squash courts, where, every Wednesday evening, we met in a group of ten, plus Stuart, for two and a half hours.

I shook my head. "I show up with new things. She won't understand."

Mother would try to re-gift them. Or she'd accuse me of stealing and throwing away the packaging so they couldn't be regifted. The last time I'd been permitted to keep a gift I was six years old strapped to the bed with a fever of thirty-nine point five, had had diarrhea for three days and vomited twice. Bravely, tripping over his words, my father had suggested a reward for recovery, and still, Mother didn't assent till my temperature had climbed one more tenth of a degree. I'd told her I didn't want birthday parties after fifth grade; she said it was about time I saw sense and that she was proud.

Her agreement to the acting lessons, which, on the surface, served no practical use, still dumbfounded me. My mother didn't like Yuliya. She didn't like people from other countries and especially not from warzones. On our most recent trip to China, after listening to the guide speak before a famous pagoda garden outside of Beijing, my mother led me across a stone bridge, the right-most one of three similar structures, laid out in parallel, which provided sole access to the main compound. Each bridge represented a caste—scholar, farmer, or warrior, in that order—and our guide said, solemnly, we should only enter by the correct classification. My mother took a photograph of me at the apex of the scholar bridge with my back to the camera, facing the other two. From that position, the remaining bridges, though identical in appearance and bearing their own tourists whose feet had chosen for them, seemed as far to me as Antarctica. When we left the site, Mother asked me to walk ahead of her while holding her hand, leading her across the same bridge. Nine years before that trip, actually the only time I had been back since my birth, the Canadian government had recruited my father to run a research group on ocean sea level change for the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, entirely merit-based. Yuliya was here from the Ukraine, having fled bombs and tanks and assault rifles. There wasn't a Tang Dynasty bridge for refugees.

In retrospect, I could have asked for the lessons without bringing up Yuliya. There was no need for it. She and I were completely different. Mother would have had one less thing to potentially cleave to in rejection. Yet Yuliya was as inextricable from the lessons as the lessons were from the now-faded bruise on my head. The day the whole business started, when I had first told my mother the news over dinner, after running home across the field that divided our house from school, Mother had rapped her knuckle, three times, very hard, against my skull, rattling it for the presence of a single reasonable neuron.

“Are you insane? Why, for the love of God, didn’t you?”

I had no idea what she meant.

“Cry. Like the other girls. Did I raise an idiot?”

She had said I would amend my error. Not that even now, knowing what I know, I believed I had done anything wrong that day.

“Show some emotion, for pity’s sake. Is that so difficult? And preparation,” Mother went on, pacing about the room, her house slippers slapping against the smudged tile of our apartment. “We must be prepared.”

“For what?”

Mother was always thinking two steps ahead. When Yuliya came back to school, everyone would undoubtedly give her things. Amazingly, she had somehow predicted the Nativity queue even before I could imagine such a thing were possible.

“We won’t be left out. I’ll take care of it,” she promised.

A month later, I presented her with a catalogue of class descriptions offered by the community center and my rehearsed petition. Learning to act, I alleged, would engraft me with confidence and poise, character and emotional intelligence, maybe even as much as a white girl.

Mother, with the catalogue in her lap, had slid her finger under the heading *Acting 12-17*, her glasses making her look walleyed as she pretended not to remember. She always switched to a different pair of after coming home for the day, polishing her work glasses and carefully folding the legs in its case. The glasses she wore at home, an old pair, were ground in a lower prescription as she believed it was better for her eyes, which were always purpled with shadows from staying up late applying to jobs beneath her education. Before I was born, she had taught English literature at Zhe Da, in the uppermost tier of universities in China.

I played along with the amnesia. “I told you they sent grief counsellors. You asked if I cried. I said no, I was sad, but I didn’t cry.”

“You should have,” she said, but with a little less bite than usual. After many months of applications, this had been the week Mother had finally managed to secure a bookkeeping position at a local property management company. For a while she had been washing dishes in a friend’s restaurant and occasionally tutored kids from the grammar school in the rich part of town. I always looked forward to when she brought home sacks of clothing the parents would have otherwise donated, from which I sourced the quality part of my wardrobe. “I imagine it’s like passing a stool.”

I squeezed my buttocks. “We’ve decided to take classes to cry better.”

“Does…she know why you want to do this?”

“No. She just thinks I want to be an actress.”

Mother had looked alarmed. “You? An actress?”

But she had signed the permission slip and I didn’t care as long she didn’t raise objections to our going. The only conditions she placed were, firstly, that my grades couldn’t slip—at this time, I was number one of a total class of three hundred—and secondly, that I had to pay for the class using the money I’d saved from my summer job. All the previous July and August, I had taught children about fish and crustaceans and guided their grubby fingers around a touch tank at the Institute of Ocean Sciences, where my father worked. It was a point of pride for me that, to my knowledge, I got the job without asking anyone to put in a good word, and I intended to spend my money how I saw fit. I told my mother the cost was less than it was. Yuliya made up the rest from the grief collection the class had taken up for her, passing around a hat.

Now, beside me, Yuliya hopped up onto the counter next to the sink and got very close to the mirror, pressing her palms gently into her eyes, the wrists nearly touching, her knees dangerously close to a wet patch beneath one of the soap dispensers. She looked like she was playing peekaboo with herself. I imagined taking a photograph of her, the symmetry like a Rorschach blot, like a girl on the cover art of an indie rock vinyl. I washed my hands with soap and walked over to the wall, the smoggy whirr of the dryer filling the room. When I turned back, a tremor shook her elbows and travelled up her shoulders, jumping to her chin, jaw, and lower lip. I waited her out.

“Ah,” she gasped, after a moment, her hands falling away. “Is it working?”

I studied her eyes. A doily of red veins stood out against white jelly, like lychee fruit, shed of its shell, once I had begun to turn. I frowned. “Almost.”

The tiny sag of her shoulders was nearly hidden by her outsize fleece sweater. Shedding tears on command was one of the goals we both identified when, on a bulletin board at school, we first spotted the poster advertising the classes and started plotting our attendance. Judging from the syllabus he’d printed out and given us at the first session, Stuart promised we’d do in-depth scene work by weeks eight and nine, which I wanted to wait for. But recently, Yuliya had surged ahead on her own, created a notebook of research with every single technique. She had not shed tears when her dad died, not when she received the news, not at the funeral, not when she came back, and not when she was alone either, she said. At school I was known as the serious one, but in this case, she had become dedicated. I’d hear her practising under her breath in class, getting in trouble when the teacher called on her. One time she had her phone confiscated for two days in the locked bottom drawer of Ms. Hiltz’s desk. Neither of us had captured the goal, but by pure hours of application, she should reach it first.

I put my hand on her shoulder. “Hey, it’s okay. You’re almost there.”

She shrugged. “Whatever. Come on, let’s go back.”

My fingers slipped over the pilling nubs of her sweater as she moved smoothly towards the doorway. Yuliya had put her hair into a ponytail and re-applied MAC Lady Danger, the lipstick she used to get into the mood for class. Stuart wanted us to arrive in a different state of mind, ready to turn things over and become new people. Sometimes, Yuliya even asked me to call her Lady Danger and turned snippy if I forgot. She had offered the tube to me, but I could never get over the greasy feel of color—Lady Danger was a vampy ruby—in my fine lines. Today, I happened to wear earrings, simple gold one-inch hoops, and, just before class, I took them off to put them on again, this time, backwards. One day I wanted a signature makeup look too, a sunrise eyeshadow or berry blush, a flicking cat eye, a pencilled-in beauty mark at two o’clock from the corner of my mouth. But until then, work piled up on my slate—piano

lessons, math league, chess club, debate, cadets—whatever my mother wanted to co-opt that someone else's child already had.

I would tell Yuliya the details about the audition after class. I trusted Lady Danger to help me.

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On a Thursday evening, days into the new school year, a man named Yuri Udovenko, carrying a rope and stepladder, walked into the wood bordering our school, chose a tree, tied a knot, and hanged himself. The next morning, just before lunch, our principal called the worksheet-slinging class to attention and said she wanted to tell us the truth in case we heard something later which muddied up the facts. Then the grief counsellors swarmed our desks, like bees kissing pollen from flowers, holding hands and massaging backs. The other two legs of Yuliya's erstwhile clique, Lindsay and Laura, had sniffled and dabbed at their dampening eyes, while I had failed in my matching mission. A mere five hours later Lindsay and Laura began spreading the first of the nasty stories through the usual channels—that Yuliya's father, who had never been able to find steady work since coming to Canada, hadn't been able to cope with what happened to him in the war; her mother was peddling drugs from the apartment and selling her body; and Yuliya, depressed and hollow-eyed, was days away from offing herself too. Kids who a day ago would have traded their best jewelry and amusements for her attention made bets on when she'd do it, a pack of rainbow Starburst as the prize.

After we started spending time together, Yuliya asked me occasional questions about that epoch. I rarely obliged, hating to be reminded it was only due to their malice that she and I were now together.

"I want to know everything they said about me," she insisted. "Maybe they're right. Maybe I should kill myself," she said, and I would laugh to keep from answering, as my eyes itched and the root of my tongue dried up. I tried not to think of how her pointed chin and sloping nose would suit a shroud.

Until Yuri died, she and I had never spoken. Before his passing, I had happened to read in a grammar book that the correct terminology was "hanged" and not "hung," as in "Yuliya's father hanged himself." Sometimes I still repeated "hang" and then "hung" under my breath to test just how close, textually, we had been to unfriendship. When the Vice Principal brought her into our class the previous April, wearing a yellow sundress with flower appliques and her hair in an imperious ponytail off the crown of her head, Ms. Hiltz had urged us to say hello and make her feel welcomed, but it was never necessary. Even while she was still choosing a piece of chalk and writing her name on the blackboard my classmates plotted their trajectories towards her desk, chief among them the queen bees of the class, Lindsay and Laura, who shared a nod and walled the new girl off like a micelle as soon as she got up to use the electric pencil sharpener. With a face like hers, diamond-shaped with eyes of lapis lazuli, Yuliya was what I called *inevitable*. While everyone else fought and rubbernecked for her attention, I sat three desks away from hers all year and experienced her the only ways I could: listened to the clack of her tastefully kitten-heeled shoes on the floor, and breathed in the scent of bergamot lime off her hair when she floated, rather than walked, past; watched her writing, the skin on her arms smooth and creamy like the backside of Christmas wrap, her fingernails not too short or long, neatly filed to ovals and painted with a semi-sheer gloss.

I never saw her with her parents, so like a mother, I took pride in all her achievements, great and small. Her racquet head speed and spike serve and bat swing in gym class, her fashion sense which made a logo-less limited budget work. I borrowed the library books she returned and flipped through the same magazines she left sometimes on a corner of her desk that touted this season's haute couture.

I was proud when the youngest fathers turned to gape at her in the schoolyard, while picking up their daughters, their faces flushing and questioning. She had the breasts and hips of a woman while retaining the rosy fleshiness in the cheeks of a child. Then there were the boys our age. I was proud then, too.

Every year I assigned myself a boy to like and Ben Goldstein, the one for that year, got himself involved in a rumour fairly early on that he and Yuliya had taken a walk in the woods and sat behind a boulder for a bit to rustle some leaves. A poorly concealed hickey on her collarbone, a cut on her finger, twisted strands of hair—I traced them with my eyes and enjoyed a shiver of pleasure of lust so intense it left physical evidence. He blew off his friends for a week after she broke up with him, tastefully, in person and in private. She had class.

But with a well-tied knot, Yuri had changed everything. Did Lindsay and Laura really expect she wouldn't find out? After three long weeks, Yuliya came back much altered. As was their wont, Lindsay and Laura approached, sharing a smirk between them, expecting something surely. And why shouldn't they have? The Popular Girls had always seemed to me like mythical figures immortalized in paint, like the Three Graces dancing in a color plate I'd seen in a book, recently returned by Yuliya, about the Uffizi Gallery in Italy. Lindsay and Laura believed, as did most of us, that no matter what they said about her, Yuliya would return from her mourning and reoccupy her place on the tableau, the most radiant and rarified of the three. To do otherwise wasted the gift of her beauty, one of the few things she'd brought with her into this country, valued and recognized here just as keenly as in her own along with money, power, and violence. They were convinced of it.

But with a new granite in her eyes, Yuliya had selected a seat alone at a table in the cafeteria behind her non-fat milk and plastic yogurt cup of grapes, mechanically rolling them around in her mouth, acting like the guffaws and whispers did not bother her. The sharp riposte of, "Do you think I'm an idiot?" volleyed from her lips like a poison dart, and the U-turn of Lindsay and Laura's path that day, everyone had watched, from all corners of the cafeteria, lower jaws slack on their hinges.

The subsequent meeting between Yuliya and me I never intended to go through with. But perhaps, partly, her performance emboldened me. I had spells, the perfect storm of emotion and my medication, which was supposed to help me focus, where dreams melded with reality. One day, nearly drunk with jealousy, a ringing in my ears from an undeserved ninety-four on an algebra quiz, I clutched my juicebox so hard it developed a waistband, and bounced my bottom into the chair across from hers. My eyes, the globes of them hot, and her eyes, ice blocks, tongued one another and stuck together.

"Who the hell are you?" she said.

"Nobody," I said. Fucker McFucktard. Shitter von Shitbrain, the algebra quiz screamed at me.

"Didn't you hear?" she said. "Or do the rumours not reach so far? I'm contagious. You heard of suicide contagion?"

"So contaminate me," I said. We stared each other down across the table.

"You want?" she said, after a moment.

"What?"

Yuliya was pulling something from around her neck, a long chain which had been hidden beneath her t-shirt. "Lindsay's, but I don't care for it."

It was a digital pet on a keychain, a yellow one, the familiar cloud-like shape with a screen showing a little pixelated monster, at that moment sleeping. I hadn't seen one since the 90s, but the 90s were coming back in now, thirty years later. She hadn't cleaned its poop probably for at least a day, but the sound was muted, so you couldn't hear the warning beeps. We weren't permitted things that made noise in class; everyone's cell phones were on silent. I'd seen her with the toy before, but didn't know if it was from someone new, one of the offerings. Apart from the Nativity queue, other girls and boys had been trying, in

every period, trespassing the corner of her desk, slipping thin envelopes of contraband in the vents of her locker. Mother herself had dug through my prized stationary cache and settled on a five-pack of highlighters, but they had festered in the bottom of my backpack for days, as I hadn't dared to approach her until then. Lindsay and Laura never did after that public repudiation, but others continued, in the days and weeks afterwards, to gift, in silence, with notes if they were brave enough.

"Why?" I asked. "She'll ask."

"I 'lost' it," Yuliya said, with air-quotes. "And you seem to need it."

It was the first of many gifts she passed on to me that semester. Mostly things to wear around my neck. And I wear them I did. At least until we started the acting lessons.

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Stuart had outlined a week-by-week lesson plan on a dry-erase board he wheeled into the middle of the classroom. He had taught this class three times a year, fall, winter, and spring, for the past three years and never had to reference his notes. We would focus on one element at a time, develop our signature characters and by the end of week twelve deliver either a monologue in front of the group. "And before you ask," he concluded. "We'll be learning to cry on command later on. There are no texts or tools you need to go buy. I'll provide everything you need. Just bring yourselves, and if you like, a partner."

He had a pleasing, symphonic voice which placed exclamation points on everything. After class finished, Yuliya and I shared another joint, sitting in the parking lot, shaded from the sun behind a truck, and admired it again. We had no idea what our monologues would be on. Floaty and slightly suspicious of one another's clothing, we only knew that here was a plan, and as Stuart had told us on the first day, he felt each of his students held a kernel of promise which he would aim to chisel and display.

We went to Yuliya's place, a one-bedroom in a low-cost apartment building not far from the community centre, because my mother would be home and I didn't trust her not to sabotage my efforts. Early attempts in elementary school to have girls over underwent hideous transformations, my mother interrogating them on their family background and assigning us math problems to solve if we looked the slightest bit idle. And I knew my mother wouldn't be able to resist asking about Yuliya's father right to her face, for Mother was helplessly drawn to misery. Years after immigrating from China, and finally getting off unemployment insurance, she valued more than anything her evenings pretzeled around the latest issue of the China Daily, a rag specializing in struggle porn, the myriad ways our brothers and sisters suffered and ate bitter in the motherland.

I couldn't help comparing Mother to Stuart sometimes. We looked him up on the internet and his birthday told us that at twenty-eight, he was only six years younger than she was. He had a kid in preschool, but he was infinitely cooler than we thought a parent should be. A tattoo of a snake circled around his ankle bone, the medial malleolus. He wore band tees with the graphic prints half-falling off like slow-cooked meat from the bone. He had published a few chapbooks of poetry with a local press under two different names: Neven Irish and Renner Sahas. My mother, after each shift at the restaurant, had looked positively ancient.

"Cute," Yuliya said, the first time she had seen him. "Definitely cute."

He wore different iterations of the same outfit every week: a flannel shirt, a weathered pair of lace-up boots, adding a jacket in shearling and leather when the temperature started to dip around the third week of October. His pair of Levi's 511s clung to his skinny thighs and had a button-fly instead of a zipper. I was always looking at his crotch, the way the buttons flexed and rubbed as he paced around the room and exhorted us to dissect the scene like coroner's assistants, shouting our names, pointing at each of us

in turn to read the next line, make the next cut. He had an eyebrow ring and, in addition to the snake, a small tattoo on his right inner forearm of what I thought was a pair of lungs but which, on closer inspection, revealed itself to be a maple seed. “I would love a full sleeve on this side,” Stuart said often to the group, shaking out the limb, but as a frequent blood donor, couldn’t take the risk. The maple seed was one from years ago and it meant radical acceptance, for a maple seed doesn’t choose where it’s carried by the wind.

He was studying part-time at the community college to be a social worker. One time when it was raining my mother came to give Yuliya and me a ride home and she stared very hard as he shook her hand and sung our praises, so that I wondered if she had seen him around on the college grounds during a Con-Ed course, holding hand with a man, vaping, throwing recycling in the wrong bin, or one of a thousand other behaviours of which she disapproved.

How much worse it would have been if she knew that Stuart had kissed me, a real kiss on the lips. It had been the day he told me of the audition, like an afterthought. That day, he had given me a stage name too, Ailia Roy, that I had yet to use.

“Oh, Ailia?” he had said.

Yuliya had happened to leave that session fifteen minutes early for a doctor’s appointment. She was getting tested for allergies. She had swollen up while eating a tomato in the cafeteria, odd since she’d had tomatoes before without a problem. I had lingered in the classroom because Stuart had asked me to stay after, handed me a printout of the casting sheet. A provincial mental health advocacy group were promoting their new crisis mobile app and telephone hotline. They wanted teenagers and adolescents from minority groups, specifically, to feel comfortable calling the line. If I were successful at the audition, I’d play a young girl whose parents were threw dishes at one another and gesticulated and jabbered in Cantonese. I spoke Mandarin at home, but this was a non-speaking part. I only had to look traumatized.

All the time Stuart described the details to me, I stood gazing just beyond him at the wall behind, imagining the commercial, already able to see it, scene by scene. He spoke beneficently, as though he did this for all his students. But when I looked up from stuffing the details into my backpack, his face was only a few inches away from mine.

“Your earrings are backwards,” he said, and in a smooth motion touched our lips together. My world shrunk to mouth-size. His breath had a special smell, the smell of *let and still* as its only commands. Then he was wiping down the whiteboard, his back turned to me.

“I know,” I said.

I didn’t regulate my breathing till I got into the hallway and pressed my earlobes, on both sides, where the jewelry perforated the piercings, my heartbeat thrashing inside the sandwich of my fingertips.

One of the so-called influencers giving crying tips on the internet, which Yuliya had forwarded to me, said each person needs to cultivate their unique trigger, singular to them. An effective trigger may not be the one you think. The grand tragedies, like breakups, deaths, and tended not be as effective as a single precise wound—like a nick on the side of a Coke can that causes the whole thing to collapse with the slightest ding of downforce. Yuliya’s I thought was obvious, but for mine I had been searching quite a while. I had been made to kneel on grains of rice for an hour. I had screamed while Mother pulled out needles from spools of string and stabbed at my bare feet. But even if I had shed tears in those moments, their shreds of remembrance called upon had failed, repeatedly, to pull me across the threshold to moisture and salinity.

In the hall, as my mouth burned, and the aspirant tears still failed to dot the collar of my blouse, I was already thinking how the ability to cry on demand would change my life. The strength of my visible grief, I thought, was so great that others would be forced to adapt to it. My mother would sink to the ground and hug herself when I placed first in the Kiwanis festival, piano solo age fifteen and under, as I accepted my certificate with water peelings on my cheeks. I would demonstrate every correct emotion at every time. Audition after audition would make me better. Stuart had promised he would help with the technique, Yuliya with the girly stuff. Our success would bring us closer together than sisters. And Stuart might kiss me again, this time with tongue, with force.

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For the audition, the first thing we needed, aside from a resume and video reel, was a good headshot. At Yuliya's apartment, we figured that we could take one with the phone in front of a white wall and photoshop any unwanted shadows and stray hairs out. Yuliya had done the photoshop for most of the school website for the last year; she knew what she was doing, though it took some time for her to satisfy herself that the wall we'd chosen, the hallway, was superior to those of the dining room and living room. Rifling through my closet that morning before school, I had selected a silk blouse from one of the garbage bags Mother brought back from tutoring, and, alternating between buttoning it up to the very top and leaving one undone, I waited for Yuliya to finalize the shooting settings on her camera app. Around my neck, along with the pet she had given me, I wore a new necklace which I had fashioned out of a tiny glass bottle, the size of my fingertip, with a cork stopper through which I had threaded a black stretchy string. The bottle held tap water mixed with a pinch of salt, to remind me of our saline goal. When she saw me wearing it, Yuliya asked me to make one for her too.

"Ready," she said.

My hands, covered in a light sheen of sweat, balled up at my sides and I rotated my neck to loosen a crick which suddenly bothered me. One of the photographs of Yuliya's little brother taken in the Wal-Mart Studio which her mother had hung to create a gallery along the corridor nodded at an angle from the others; I wanted to straighten it. There was one empty space where a photo of Yuri must have hung.

"What's wrong?" Yuliya lowered the phone.

"Nothing," I said and stood up tall on the balls of my feet, moved my shoulders as far from my earlobes as possible. "How much is going to be in the picture? Shoulder level?"

Approaching without answering, Yuliya reached for my hands and pried my fingers open. With the edge of her sweater, she wiped them off and shook them out; I felt the vibration travel through the socket of my arm.

"Relax," she said. "You look great."

We had done our makeup together as practice, pushing the worksheets and highlighters off her desk, replacing them with a double-sided mirror to create a temporary vanity. Yuliya laid out brushes with round, fluffy ends, others with pinched or flat tips; a creamy colour-correcting palette, she explained, for our undereyes and redness; and several pots of eyeshadows, from one like a weak rooibos to a piano black with tiny microglitters which resembled newly laid asphalt. She stooped very low to apply everything, yet I'd the sense of being a doll waiting on her lap. Tarte blush in the shade "Exposed" already covered my cheeks when heat, again, rose to my face and ears. Fighting the urge to cool them with the backs of my hands, I wrinkled my nose instead.

"Stop that," she said, but she was smiling. Stepping back to the spot she had marked with a stool, she began instructing me this way and that. "Look a bit innocent." I didn't know what that meant, so she

explained, “Soften your mouth, drop the bottom lip just slightly, as if you wanted to show a tiny bit of your teeth. Raise your eyebrows slightly and imagine spreading them apart. No, that’s too much. You don’t want to look shocked, just pleasantly, happily surprised.”

Did this really work? But she was right; when I saw the result, uploaded to my computer from her phone, an unmistakeable softness drew me into my own features, the flat bridge and flared nostrils, monolidded eyes, rounded jaw. I knew I was not particularly attractive, not the way Yuliya was; people reacted to her with an awe I thought was impossible to replicate. Twice when I was with her downtown pointing at store-windows men claiming to be fashion bloggers stopped her in the street, asked if they could shoot her picture against a graffiti wall here, at a streetcar stop there. I had held her backpack and Starbucks order.

We wound down by playing theatre games. Stuart asked us to walk to the center of the circle and finish his sentence of “I wish…” or “I hope…” calling it “emotional diving.” Sometimes, it worked so incredibly well, as though he struck the spark of our grief and delight into being, and it, catching on the tinder of our so-far brief lives, ran around the ring of students like a flame. There was another one where we sat across from each other in pairs and each person in the pair made an observation about the other. You started out casually. You could say, “You’re sitting in a chair.” If you didn’t know what to say, you repeated what the other person said until something changed. While Yuliya went to get a drink of water, I made a show of balling my hands into fists, raising them above my head, tracing a circle and shaking out my shoulders, which popped like microwaved corn kernels. I flopped down into the sofa cushions and pressed one of the pillows to my chest, running my hands over the crushed velvet and fingering the buttons, twirling them round and round till they tightened like nipples in cold air.

I closed my eyes. The glass struck with a bell-like sound when she set it in the sink and ran some liquid from the tap. Her slippers muffled the whisper of her feet back on the carpet, the cushions cratered with her weight, and I waited for her to begin. Her voice, another strength, carried water in it, smooth, ribbon-like, flowing. But there was no sound except for breathing. When I opened my eyes her face covered by entire view, but oddly, as though she had traced its contours on paper and held it in front of me, her breath like fruit roll ups and marshmallow cereal.

“Your eyes are open,” she said.

“Your eyes are open,” I replied. They were. Blue with yellow tips like the circlets of a gas flame, so bright you might wait for a moment, staring, before resting the pot of water to boil upon it.

She smiled. “I see you.”

“I see you.”

“I really do.”

“I see that you do.”

“I see that you see that I do.”

“Hi,” I replied.

“I wish I didn’t,” she said. “Not because I don’t like you. But because…”

“Yeah,” I said. Because the sightline to me had started with a single branch which, in betrayal, hadn’t broken.

“Let’s start again,” she said.

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Mother dropped me off, the next week, a quarter of an hour early, at the community center, wanting to go back home to study. Recently, she had started part-time classes for a Master in Business Administration at the university, three nights a week, in addition to the bookkeeping. The bastards in charge at the financial institutions where she wished to work didn't recognize her credentials from China, even after all the lengths she'd gone to connect with her old professors and the administrations. She was still going on about the red tape as I shut the car door.

Inside, I wandered around the squash courts, of which only one of the three was booked. Within the glass rhomboid, a single man, middle-aged, sport socks pulled over his hairy, pimply calves, placed both hands on his knees and breathed hard, a sweatband at his forehead. My eyes met his rheumy ones through the partition. He hadn't shut the door all the way. At the same time, Stuart came out of the men's toilets, which faced the courts, shaking off the moisture from his hands, as he must not have finished drying them at the machine.

"Ailia," he said. "Curious."

He had been calling my cell phone too and using that word. Mother was antsy about too much screen time, but she knew she couldn't preclude me from owning a phone when all the other Chinese children were getting them, to let their parents know when to pick them up from piano lessons, chess club, math club, debate. We were all in the same clubs—without control factors, how else could we compete against one another?

"Curiouser and curiouser," Stuart had said, a few days before. He usually called an hour before bedtime and I would lower my voice, speaking into the fuzzy stand of sweaters in my closet, twisting the soft sleeves to hug my face. "You make me curious."

"I do?" I said.

"Can you do curious?" he asked.

"That's not an emotion."

"It's an expression."

"I should ask you to do it," I said, clumsily. "Is this part of your lesson plan?"

"No," he said. "It's me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not playing."

"Who said you were playing?"

He laughed. "Do you want me to kiss you again?"

"Over the phone?"

"Sure. It's just a question."

“Then, yes.”

“There.”

“What?”

“I’ve done it.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Do you have to?”

“I suppose not.”

“I’ve told you, I’ve done it. Do you believe me?”

“I’m not sure.”

“The first rule,” he said. “Remember, Ailia.”

“Go with it,” I said. “Alright.”

“So?”

“Feels good.”

“You’ll find,” he said. “That a lot of things do.”

I didn’t know how to behave around him in public, outside of lessons, and focused on his hands, from which droplets of water still fell. He gestured for me to walk with him around that level of the centre, past columns of exercise machines, the stretched rubber smell mixed with disinfectant and various flavours of deodorant. He continued to drip, intermittently, like a cloud. He didn’t say anything different, only asked me if I knew the way to the audition, at the convention centre downtown and that underground parking was available. My fears that Mother wouldn’t want me anywhere near an audition had perished when she perked up that an acting credit might look nice on a resume and her research on ACTRA had satisfied her of a safe environment on all sets. The only problem, that she had an errand right before and hadn’t been able to wrangle another parent to drive me, meant I would have to take the public bus from school. She would meet me there to fill in the sign-in sheet and hand over the required materials.

“Do you have anything for Yuliya?” I asked.

“Yuliya?” Stuart repeated. “Your friend?” His eyes focused on a middle-aged woman doing a dead-lift. His hand scratched at the tattoo of the maple seed on his forearm. “She would be hard to place,” he said.

I couldn’t think of any reason that Yuliya would be hard to place unless it were a commercial calling for disfigured, ugly people. I found it odd he pronounced her name, still, in the way she didn’t prefer, the second syllable rhyming with “lay.” The right way rhymed, at the beginning, with “Julie.” I decided I wouldn’t tell her until he had something concrete, for, surely, it wouldn’t be long.

At the same moment, I heard a musical cry of, “Tess!” and I answered, automatically, “Yuliya.” Idling down the stairs from the main vestibule, Lady Danger a scarlet blot from far away, she waved at me. I waved brightly in return, and when I turned towards him again, Stuart was kicking a wedge with the toe of his Docs to prop open the door to our activity room.

After the session, I gave Yuliya her own little bottle of saltwater, tied it around her neck while she held her hair to the side. I had ensured, by levelling my creations against one another, stooping until my eyes were at the same height as the sink, that the liquid in our bottles were exactly equal.

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That autumn was the season that things finally seemed to go my way academically. In the last week of October, I wrote and won the state competitions in mathematics and was invited to attend the regional camps, from which further invitations might be extended to national camps and international camps, where, at each step, they taught you tricks that made you better. My mother was over the moon. It all seemed to bear out her theories on child-rearing, namely, that practice, putting the hours, often preceded desire. The more proofs I coaxed, step by step, to QED, the more I craved throwing axioms and properties at the next problem. The more I practiced piano and mastered the major and minor scales, chords, intervals, and arpeggios, the more I enjoyed playing my Beethoven and Bach. Before that, I had specialized in near-misses. At the Kiwanis festival, I would neglect a crescendo or diminuendo, or hold my trill too long, and land second or third behind some other Asian kid. In the previous years' science contests, always some small mistake kept me out of the top places, a misplaced decimal point, deciding to skip a question because it looked too hard when it turned out my initial hunch at an approach, upon the posting of solutions online, had stalked the mark all along.

Funny enough, I had also found that paradoxical orders could rule in our social lives at school, where gossip preceded the drama, a fuss before what was to be fussed over. None of us practiced so hard at sport or games as we did at whispers, and they seemed to have an unearthly power. The news that Mr. Langford was getting the boot for racist and misogynist views hardly surprised though I didn't hear him utter a questionable word until the day he was on his way out, middle finger in the air. The rumour that Ben Goldstein had touched Yuliya's breast, his cupping hand under her generous Cs, had reached us long before they went off into the woods that day in June to rustle the leaves. And so, when, two weeks into November, first from the locker room, then in so-and-so's group chat on instant messenger, murmurs came to pass that Lindsay and Laura wanted to speak to Yuliya again, I prepared myself. No one knew the day or the hour. None wanted to get sick and miss a day, just in case.

In the cafeteria, bumping her tray with mine, I asked Yuliya, "What are you going to do?"

"Kill myself," she said. "I would rather."

"Really? What if there's a grand gesture?"

"What's grand? I'll believe it when I see it."

"Maybe you should hear what they have to say. Let them defend themselves."

She just rolled another grape around in her mouth, using her tongue to push it into her cheek.

I couldn't believe one of the Three Graces could turn on the others more than once. But in a world where Stuart could kiss me once in real life and once more over the phone, perhaps anything was possible.

Over the next week, I took down a golden fall wreath over our front door and replaced with a giant green light-up one for winter. Mother got an A+ on her statistics exam. At school, Yuliya killed the entire class at badminton and even made Coach Nicholl look silly in demonstration, while outside school, she reported her nose dripping clear mucus on command. She was at the precipice. Meanwhile, over the phone, Stuart kept kissing me and grew more daring, pressing a kiss to the inside of my elbow, another to my knee.

“You’re wearing tights,” he said, insisting it was more sexy, and I agreed readily with, “I am,” and he concluded, “Sheer. With a seam down the back.”

The last piece required for the audition, the video reel, was something Yuliya and I had little experience with. We knew people went to professionals for that kind of thing, but with our recent zeitgeist, how could we fail? Yuliya found an article that said without prior stage experience, what made most sense was a short personal introduction and telling a story. Given the nature of the commercial, a story about my family could show off my personality. This time I did half my makeup and she did the other half. I started out negating the blemishes as she had instructed, applied carefully matched foundation overtop, and then, with brushes of decreasing diameter, swept coral and brown shadow over my lid and a darker smoke into the crease. Eyeliner was trickier. Yuliya showed me a tip; she used cheaper pencil to pave a thick line over the main body of the eye and the more expensive brush liner to finesse the cat-flick. On the first part, I winced, the pencil on my eye tugging a bit too hard.

“Sorry. Just excited for you,” she said.

She shot the reel again with her phone. I went with a story that gave me medium pain. To me, that meant it did not skirt into abuse territory. Five years before, when I was seven, my mother had taken me grocery shopping and left me alone in the magazine aisle to wait while she went to another spot in the mall for an errand. A dozen magazines later, when she didn’t return, I panicked. At any other time if I were submitting material for public consideration in this way, Mother would have asked for veto power, sensitive to things like that. She would not have liked this story. But ever since the night classes, she had hunkered down in the furnace room where the constant roar drowned out all other sound from upstairs, such as those of my father working the wok and my pounding the piano keys, the China Dailys piling up in favour of guides to SAS and SPSS. She’d never inquired about the reel or the headshot. This time, I could say what I wanted.

Yuliya lowered the phone. Her sideswept bangs covered one blue eye. “You actually thought about stealing something so adults would come running?”

“Is that surprising?” At the time, my mother had been reading out stories about abandoned girl babies in China, thanks to the One Child Policy. Those babies were innocent; what would stop her from abandoning me, one she had punished so many times, and so creatively?

“I don’t believe it,” Yuliya said. “That didn’t really happen.”

Why would I lie? I thought. Instead, I said, “What do you think about when you…you know.” I scrunched up my hands and loosened the imaginary screws of my eyes.

“That’s private.” She laughed at the look on my face. “No, I’m totally kidding. You ever think she was doing something she didn’t want you to know about?”

“She was posting letters and got into it with the managers.”

“So she says. What if she were getting a tattoo?”

“Or signing up for acting lessons? Why a tattoo?” I had taken baths with Mother for a long time to save water. I would have known. “And how close are you?”

“I’m thinking of getting one. No, there’s no minimum age. Not in BC. I looked it up.”

“What of?”

“Trees. Don’t look so shocked, Tess.”

“I’m not.”

“And I’m close,” she said. “Real close.”

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As the date of the audition approached, I re-borrowed the book on the Uffizi gallery for inspiration. To look again on the color plate of the Botticelli painting, its tableau of characters, of which the three graces held hands in a circle while they danced. My commercial was just to shill a mental health line whose future success was dubious at best, but maybe, by becoming someone else, even someone else’s non-speaking child, was a step in the right direction. Maybe I, like the Graces, was only inches away from assuming foreground. I had long noticed that in other paintings of the period, the Graces could more than stand on their own as the primary subjects. But the more I looked at the Botticelli, the more I found the plate’s true allure to me was you did not know quite where to look. In the center of the scene, Venus, behind them, held up a hand, while over her head, her son, a blindfolded Cupid, pointed his bow at the Graces sheathed in their diaphanous robes. What kind of hand was it? Staying or directing his aim? Weren’t the three women parts of her retinue? Or was the injury of love a necessary beneficence?

I woke up early in the morning, before my alarm. Mother reminded me to bring my bus card to perform automatic deductions, along with my other prepared materials. But she had other things on her mind besides, particularly her upcoming finals in accounting and calculus, and didn’t notice I only had appetite for half my cereal. Yuliya met me in the drop-off circle outside of school and she commended me on my eyeliner, wing as airfoil-perfect as I could get it with the brush-tip liner she had lent me.

“Quick study,” she said.

“Why is everyone looking at us?” I said, pulling my locker door close to my face. I wished the half-size locker covered more than the top part of my body. I wore the silk blouse again and a knee-length pleated skirt and Yuliya’s black converse low-tops. She said I was supposed to look morose, but also to suggest the character. To shed innocence, one had to start with some.

“It’s normal,” she said. “That’s how they’re supposed to.”

Go with it.

“They’re not looking at us in any special way,” I said.

“That’s the spirit.”

The day crawled by like a mealworm through sludge, so that, by the time fifth period rolled around, French class, I counted minutes and rehearsed my story in my head in case they wanted to ask. Just after lunch, we went to the bathroom again to make sure my makeup hadn’t migrated anywhere. For once, Yuliya did not offer me Lady Danger as that would wreck the innocence, but she said my lips looked very plump, even kissable. The compliment startled me a bit; she had never used that wording before, but I liked it.

In French class, as usual, Yuliya and I chose different partners and sat in opposite corners of the classroom. Madame had us practicing imparfait versus passé compose, two types of past tense, imparfait describing an ongoing action in the past and passé composé an interrupting action in the past. I filled my mechanical pencil with new leads, as my partner recited, “Quand j’avais deux ans, j’ai demenagé au Canada de La Cote Ivoire.” We went down the list of sentences. The other partners built on top of us like

choral harmony. I hadn't seen who Yuliya had selected. It didn't seem to matter. For a long time now, it had been like that, my paying very little to Yuliya in class, the reallocation of bandwidth I previously dedicated to her kept my head hunched over worksheets, double- and triple-checking my answers when I finished much earlier than everyone else on tests. I had her all to myself after school. Why jockey for position when it didn't matter?

In old war movies, when the shell hits the sand just next to the main character, crawling serpentine on a beach, there's a moment when there's no sound at all and then a ringing in the ears, meant to simulate what the character hears. The disorientation and the slow bleed back to the present. So it was when Yuliya moved her chair. I saw only that Yuliya moved. The sound was sucked out. And I could only piece together what must have been a sequence. A series. Perhaps Lindsay and Laura had nodded at each other, set down their worksheets together, adjusted their hair, before making their way over, in the background of that interminable hush. Then, how slowly the sound re-entered and I forgot my feigned indifference. I always knew when something didn't sound right. At piano lessons, despite my laziness with the study of intervals, when quizzed by my teacher, I would guess wildly only within the known subset of dissonance: the minor second, the major second, the minor seventh, the major seventh.

So when Yuliya jerked her body and stood, the legs of her chair screaming across the floor, I discerned it as something abnormal, like the landing of a small insect on my nose. Worse still was the shriek—an electronic, science-fiction screech—which rumbled my spine like Mother's knock on my forehead after I made my little "mistake."

For one teetering second, the pistons in my heart hiccupped. I was stupid. So much for not caring. Of course we were connected. Like the day when Yuliya had done my makeup, more and more, I had the sense of sitting on Yuliya's lap, Yuliya sitting on the world's lap, the world a chair on a stage. I was never truly away from her, the warm, blood-filled platform which had elevated me to notice.

Whipping around, I felt Yuliya's thighs under her skirt clap together from all the way across the room. Lindsay and Laura, partners, stood before her. Lockstep, hand in hand. Three Graces, none dancing.

They tried to touch her. She pitched her fingers in her hair, out of reach.

"Tessa Zhang! Ici, maintenant!"

I barely heard it. Madame's voice seemed muted as though a scarf covered her mouth, filtering through only partially along with scraps of an eye, an expression, a punishment, the finish line, QED. With her accent, "Ici" sounded like "I see," shades of semantic satiation. Besides, I was thinking too much of other things, my throat constricting from what I'd hollered at Lindsay and Laura, scattering them both back to their desks.

The preceding minutes had slabbed like a sliding puzzle of a scene before my eyes, one tile in the corridor, one still with Yuliya, my shirt soaking. All of me in squares. When I abandoned my own partner, was before them, Yuliya immediately poured her face into my shirt. Her worksheet, spotted with liquid, stuck to the desk as though by glitter glue. Every drop fallen from her eyes scintillated.

"Tessa, this is so unlike you. I've never—"

But Madame, the sound of Yuliya's success was so unlike her, I wanted to say. If I could have recorded her and rewound and showed them the video, Madame would see why. All those times in the bathroom, in class, watching her struggle, I had envisioned her eventual, inevitable coup. I imagined her to weep symmetrically, discreetly, an Automat of sorrow, as easily as a bill in the slot of a machine urged forth a soda.

For the last little while, I had tried Yuliya's technique in front of the mirror to no avail. The more I desired, the more I focused on a toothpaste speck on my cheek, a blackhead on my nose, at which I scratched with a fingernail until I realized it was a fleck of eye crayon. Leapfrogging backwards over the desire was impossible, so I tried more practice. Maybe her hours had paid off.

Yuliya was still screaming.

"You don't need foul language," Stuart's voice in class. "To show anger."

I hadn't. Madame's bulk, the gravestone shape of shoulders, that made it clear she would not punish me to any severity.

Rather, with only five minutes until the end of the period, Madame put someone in charge of the class, and led me outside. By the time she let me go, the class was in last period and Madame had to speak to Mr. Sharpe about why I was late. Yuliya dropped something as I passed her desk, her nose still red, but I didn't look at it as I knew she wanted to see my eyes, though I already knew what I would see.

She glowed. Bursting with health, hair glossy, teeth like they'd been traced over in white chalk. Other heads lowered, dutifully working algebra.

I thought my desk had an uneven leg, before I recognized my shaking. All over I tingled, almost with regret, almost to the secret place between my thighs, the place towards which Stuart and I had crept closer and closer with verbiage. But even that was surpassed. The scene with Yuliya had afforded me a pleasure. I couldn't wait to speak to her, to interrogate, step by step, how she had done it, even if I would never be able to access that grievance she had extracted like an oreshoot of silver from its source.

Inexplicably, I wanted to feel my phone vibrate. I wanted for Stuart to call, right in the middle of class, so we could tell him. Between my audition and Yuliya's tears, how proud he would be of us, our victories his, and I shivered at the thought of reward, what that might look like.

He might say, we should celebrate. He might say, take off your dress. He might use my real name. Tessa. Tessa. Tessa.

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My bus was late. My mother texted me that she was held up by a queue at the post as well, but the way to the audition was a straight shot down a well-researched route, the resume and headshot stapled together in my backpack. My courier bag slapping against my thigh as I ran, my phone in my hand, towards the stop, and once on the bus, choosing a spot behind the driver, where I could see everything.

Stuart, the night before, had provided one more sweater-wrapped boost, whispering, "Ailia, you're a lock."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's okay to have expectations. Don't feel guilty."

"I don't feel guilty."

"Well, just in case."

Our fake kissing had progressed even more. When I pressed him for details, as he said sacrum, pubis, that I was forcing him to break out an old anatomy text.

“When did you study anatomy?”

“Research for my tattoos.”

I loved it when he breathed hard. I was sure of the fogged moisture against the mouthpiece of his phone. I had collapsed my whimper into a hemline. I didn’t know what he was using on his end, but I knew I wanted to see it, the evidence.

The bus oozed its way through afternoon traffic, down the main artery, stopping every ten minutes. The scenery changing from the residential buildings around the school to the commercial strip of downtown. At the next stop, someone in a wheelchair needed to get on, so the bus lowered; its ramp licked out. Out the window to my right, I recognized the intersection, next to the Service Canada, where my mother had first queued to register for unemployment insurance. She had brought me along and squeezed me against her body to keep me away from the unsavories. That is, those in headscarves, people with too many children, accents which spoke in the digraphs and diacritics. Behind them she had shrunk herself. She couldn’t conscience herself in similarity; she had kept our distance, while magnifying in her head, the two of us. Hand in hand, on the bridges. The one we had sailed across in confidence. She didn’t think she would be back, and so far, she had been right.

In our absence, the building had clearly weathered storms, its bricks grey, sign sun-bleached. The bakery once beside it had given way to a tattoo parlour, Graceland, with a large microphone logo centered on the main window. This new structure was much glossier. I had never looked inside a tattoo shop before and something compelled me to try. I tried to look smart and sat up straighter. Behind the glass, monstera and ficus plants hugged walls with framed black and white prints, and if I squinted, I could pick out one of an owl wearing spectacles.

The door opened and an employee came out, kicking a stopper into place.

“Yeah, be right back,” the employee was yelling to someone inside. Then he swept onto the doorstep. On his way, he passed a man in 511s, boots, and skinny jeans standing in the foyer in conversation with someone else, the group pressing backwards to allow the employee passage.

I stopped shaking my knee and my lips parted. I knew that outfit.

I squinted again, my torso still, and tried to make sense of this. Could it really be? No. Perhaps I was mistaken. For what could Stuart be doing there? Stuart wouldn’t get another tattoo as a result of the blood donations. He couldn’t. He’d be banned.

I looked again. The 511s, the boots. The long handsome form. The looping, expansive gestures of his arms. The man was his exact size and shape and stood in conversation with a spiky-haired compatriate holding a clipboard. A bulk of items in his back pockets. With one hand not-Stuart was scratching a picture of something in the air. With the other he held the bare shoulder of a woman in a tank top.

I pushed a palm against the window of my row. I blinked at the smeared reflection of the hairs on my arm in the part of the glass which was slid down. Now he had crawled his fingers around the woman’s neck and walked his them up each rung before sliding down again to handle the necklace she wore. The woman reached around with her hidden limb to meet his touch, scratching a nail against his skin. The design of a maple seed just north of it.

As I watched, Stuart touched the little bottle on the string—which I had chosen, cleaned, filled, stoppered, attached, and offered it to her.

My chest laboured against my blouse. I immediately wanted to slap myself. My cheek heated as though I had. Stuart turned the pendant over while still speaking, first this way then the other. A dizziness speared through me. His motion resembled repeatedly resetting the sand in an hourglass. And if there was any doubt, the woman moved and Yuliya's profile slid from behind the Swiss cheese holes of the monstera.

A seam opened in my stomach. I had felt it, viewing certain catalogues, ads on the side of bus shelters. Stuart and Yuliya looked so well together. His cutting cheekbones. The width of his hands and reach of his arms. The perfect basin of her jaw, the acromion suspended just below. I was struck by Stuart's apparent familiarity with these structures, like usage had taught them. He touched her with the unmistakeable spoor of tradecraft, without hesitancy, as my mother did me when she believed I had wronged.

Without thinking, I reached up and rubbed my head. After Mother had struck me when I hadn't cried, she pressed her fingerpads in circles as though working a balm into the skin, confusing the receptors. The pain soon guttered off. I gripped her hips. I had let myself be supported on her bulk, that itself, my apology.

She had started rubbing harder, in a square, in a cross. "I'm afraid, only afraid, that you don't know how to be."

"I wish you would leave me alone."

"If only."

I held my face very hard against the fat pad of her arm. "Be what?"

"A person. *Zhuo reng.* I suppose I knew once. People forget, now that our country is so high-tech, all of the lines. Lines for food, lines for bicycles, lines for calisthenics. Your aunt cried when we had to burn all our good shoes so no one could say we had and others didn't. But from the red book I knew everything."

"The boys," I said. "They didn't cry either."

She laughed.

"It wasn't just me," I said.

"And I swear I would accept that," she said. "If I thought it would do you any good. If I thought it would help your heart."

A splinter of anger rose inside me. What had my heart needed to be helped out of? I had thought Yuliya was helping my heart. Was she there to help Stuart choose his ink? Or he there for hers? She had mentioned trees. I thought I had been able read her better now in the months of our friendship. Her eyes were more blue when, as she worked on the goal of tears, she was digging deep. I had wanted to ask what kind of tree, giant Douglas, fir, spruce, hemlock, but like she didn't believe my story, I didn't believe she would go through with it. A gap had opened between us. As now, I felt the intrusion of myself on their moment. As I watched them, I felt my oversupply for what was already just so, in perfect proportion.

Words struggled to the surface of my mind and redrowned. Stuart was just as hard at work, beginning to laugh, while he jiggled and fished out a second chain from beneath the black string. I hadn't noticed it until he did. From far away, it was hard to tell, but it could have been real gold.

I curled my fingers over the lip of the open window. Swaying in my seat, I idly faced the commotion. The wheelchair was rolling, with some degree of struggle, up the ramp. Another passenger assisted the man in the wheelchair by taking hold of the handles and pushing. I heard the murmur of thanks from the man. Others were rearranging his shopping too, plastic bags hung in the basket of the chair. Maybe a person had to do shopping more often with a disability, fewer bags, or maybe it was more often, fewer trips? Logic tamped down taste in my mouth. Sound moved in and out, sense by sense abandoning me as Stuart continued his geological survey, using only digits, of Yuliya's neck. When he played and danced the little bottle of saline to the side out of view, he moved as one who had chosen for another something better, something loved. Could it be the same? If it was, Yuliya had lied, had tried to tell me something from the beginning. That day, outside Beijing, had I not acquiesced and taken her hand, Mother would have guided me to the bridge of her choice whatsoever I did.

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When the two, student and teacher, moved inside and the glare hid them, the street noises moved in to fill the rushing that had stormed my ears. A motorcycle revved and snuck up behind the bus. Everything was so loud. A toothpick of tinnitus.

It wouldn't help my heart. It was true. The chambers sheared under the stress of squeezing repeatedly, as did that of a peach tested for ripeness. The sun appeared from behind a cloud. I wished I sat on the other side in the shaded part of the bus. I touched my face, the old shyness took hold of me like a canker in your lip that has passed off and then returns, scorching like a fire. Mother told me to press salt on those, in a paving-over of pain with more pain until pain itself dismantled. I had always pushed away her shaker and waited for it to disappear day by day.

Without thinking, I took out my phone and dialed Yuliya's number. It rang four times, then she picked up.

"I'm on my way," I said. "To the audition."

She laughed. I listened hard to the background noise. There was no Stuart. He must have moved farther in. "So why are you calling me?"

"You did it."

She was silent for a moment. "So will you."

"Yuliya," I said. "What's your favourite tree?"

"Willow."

"Why?"

"Does it matter?"

"What if I said yes?"

"Fine. I suppose they just hang there with their leaves dragging around, like a wig."

The man in the wheelchair twisted around to adjust his shopping again. I wanted to touch the chair to brace against it. I felt floppy all over.

"I like things that hang around," she said.

“Yuliya,” I said, squeezing the faux leather of the bus seat. “I see you.”

Her voice sounded like she was smiling. “I see you.”

“I really do.”

“I see that you do.”

“I see that you see that I do.”

She exhaled. “I hear you.”

“I hear you too.”

“Your voice is shaking.”

“Is it?”

“It’s still shaking.”

“It’s still shaking,” I repeated mindlessly.

“You’re okay, though.”

“I am okay.”

The brakes of the bus pumped and exhaled. The beeping marked the seconds as the platform drew in and the bus relearned its knees. The person in the wheelchair backed into a space left by two youths who had vacated their spots and pushed up the seating.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“Getting there.”

Wasn’t that true? I looked into the large rear mirror above the driver. The makeup had oiled in the sun. My skin glowed with the highlighter on my cheeks and collarbones, the outline of my mouth and eyes so clear, as though machined by laser. A person who had been kissing and her lips left mashed. Something had entered me, a soreness which was not of the moment, but of that after. As though I had gone through a carwash, but already reached the dryness at the other side in its quiet and disintegrating damp.

I faced myself in the mirror and inhaled deeply, coercing my diaphragm. First, I didn’t know what to do other than suppress sound behind my nose. I forgot what one did with a face. But what about the expression Yuliya had taught me? The different steps. Her experience.

Head forward from the neck. Chin slightly down. Opening the eyes wide and pulling your ears back. *I bet it’s an audition.*

“You’re there,” she said. “And you’re smiling.”

“How can you tell?”

“It’s like smiling with your eyes. I can hear it in your voice.”

She was right. Somehow it had appeared sometime, summoned itself. My face holding its corners as though guided by two pushpins.

“I’m smiling.”

I was trying to claw back at something. But it had passed. I tried to picture Stuart again, but the image would not form. Only something from the neck down. A young father. Someone with shoulders narrower, the uncooked whiteness of his forearms, his jeans too tight for him.

And then a calm seemed to come over me. As when I knew the correct approach to a proof and had only to write it. Those problems had seemed like gifts, the thinking part of me shut off, and the only parts remaining being the ones receptive to grace.

“What I admire about you,” Mother had said finally. “Is that you are good for your word. You won’t, won’t you? Next time? Smile for me now.”

I did, wider.

“That’s it,” Yuliya said. “You got it.”

END