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You Are What You Write

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YOU ARE WHAT YOU WRITE

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Yumeng Wang

May 2018

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YOU ARE WHAT YOU WRITE

English

Missouri State University, May 2018

Master of Arts

Yumeng Wang

Abstract

This creative thesis consists of six short stories with different lengths and styles. For the introduction, I discuss how my work is influenced by various aspects of cultural background, with examples including writers from Zitkala-Ša and Richard Wright to Celeste Ng. Cultural background is the key to understand most of the characters in the different stories. After the critical introduction, readers will have a general idea of my stories with a sense of how the relationship between different groups of people shape them to act and live under the influence of their cultural backgrounds and environment they were brought up in. Each story has its own focus on different types of relationships. I use those stories to make an effort to discuss people's actions and reactions in life when they encounter various people in their life and how they react due to their personalities and backgrounds.

KEYWORDS: short story, fiction, cultural background, relationship, personal life, diversity

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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Chairperson, Advisory Committee
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By

Yumeng Wang

A Master Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College
Of Missouri State University
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts, English

May 2018

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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Introduction: You Are What You Write

You are what you write is what I believe when I write because of my cultural background. As for me, I can't get rid of my native tongue when I write in English. It's not about grammar and vocabulary only; in a larger sense, sometimes, it's about how my characters are shaped in my stories. I always find it interesting when I read novels set in various cultures, especially seeing how those characters act, how they speak, how they communicate with their families, close friends or even strangers, and how they deal with things in their lives because of their cultural backgrounds.

When I write, I always find out my characters have similar personalities to people I know, I have heard somewhere, or I remember long ago. They all become part of my subconscious and influence my writing. Since it's part of me, why can't I use it in my writing? This is where I come up with the original ideas of writing about different people and how they deal with various relationships.

Throughout one's growing up, one can't omit or neglect their personal background. It's their personal background that brings them to where they are now and influences them to be how they are, especially in one's memoir. Sometimes we can also see this powerful influence in their fiction. In the introduction, I will use examples of *American Indian Stories*, by Zitkala-Ša; *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright; and *Everything I Never Told You*, by Celeste Ng, to analyze how cultural background shapes a writer and affects their writing. After the analysis of those writers and how their writing is influenced by their cultural backgrounds, I will introduce what has influenced my writing and shaped my stories.

Zitkala-Ša is a Dakota Sioux Indian, and her *American Indian Stories* is a story collection about nineteenth- and early twentieth- century American Indians during their transitions to reservation life, which contains autobiographical sketches, romantic fiction, local legends, a dream-story, an allegory, and an essay. *American Indian Stories* is one of my favorite story collections about American Indian life. Sometimes, some of others can be too “out there” for me and hard to catch on, but Zitkala-Ša uses very simple words and precise plots with her unique tone to create an authentic and mysterious world for readers to easily get interested in and inhabit, which inspires me to realize that interesting stories doesn’t need to be created with difficult words.

Before reading *American Indian Stories*, one quote in prologue, “there is no great; there is no small; in the mind that causeth all” drew my attention. I loved it even better after finishing the book. There is no culture that is superior to any other one in the world. As long as it’s the root that gives you the foundation for every piece of awareness you hold, it means everything all to you. For Zitkala- Ša, wherever she goes, she can’t put her Dakota Sioux Indian culture behind her because this culture made of her who she was and will be.

Costume, as a part of folk culture, can represent local people at first sight. When thinking about Zitkala-Ša’s prairie life, the first imagery that comes to my mind is her soft and comfortable moccasins. As Zitkala- Ša writes, “loosely clad in a slip of brown buckskin, and light-footed with a pair of soft moccasins on my feet, I was as free as the wind that blew my hair, and no less than a bounding deer” (8); Compared to the iron routine she needed to obey when she moves to the east, which makes her feel cold and constrained, this pair of moccasins gives her the first freedom to let her run

unrestrainedly on the Dakota plains wherever she wants. This kind of wild freedom and overflowing spirit later on becomes torture for her when she is required to wear what she doesn't want to at the eastern school.

When she first comes to the eastern school, she says, "these were Indian girls, in stiff shoes and closely dresses. As I walked noiselessly in my soft moccasins, I felt like sinking to the floor" (52). The days are gone when she is in comfortable moccasins running on soft grasses. If there were no soft moccasins in her early life, she wouldn't think about these close-fitting clothes and shoes as torture and loss of freedom. After she returns home from school, she throws away her shoes and again, wears her moccasins because those moccasins are still what she feels most comfortable with although she has already spent three years in the east. At the same time, the beadwork which her mother teaches her as a kind of early cultural art is not only learned through repeated sewing practice, but her mother required of her original designs for her lessons on beading. This early education in a preindustrial time cultivates her to have a sense of independence and innovation at a young age.

Their respect for each other in their culture really amazes me a lot. First, their respect for heroic stories is held by the whole nation, from the young to the old. As Zitkala-Ša mentions, "My uncle, whose death my mother ever lamented, was one of our nation's bravest warriors. His name was on the lips of old men when talking of the proud feats of valor; and it was mentioned by young men, too, in connection with deeds of gallantry" (12). In this prairie, no one will doubt this heroic quest since her uncle died only because of the hardship during the journey to the west, not lessening his valor among those who actually fought for their nation. Also, on this prairie, respect is not only

given to the hero and the old, but also to the young people. There is a place in the collection where her mother watches her as she makes coffee on a heap of dead ashes to serve the old warrior, and, as she recalls, “neither she nor the warrior, whom the law of our custom had compelled to partake of my insipid hospitality, said nothing to embarrass me” (28). If it happened somewhere else, the mother might correct her child on the spot, but later Zitkala-Ša says, “it was not till long years afterward that I learned how ridiculous a thing I had done” (29). Her mom neither corrects her when that warrior is at their home, nor after the warrior left, which indicates her mom doesn’t take it as an embarrassment and thought she needn’t criticize her child. This kind of respect made people in Dakota prairie pure, simple and sincere, which formed a sharp contrast to people she met in the east. As a result, almost all the stories told about her earlier life have a nostalgic flavor, and those experiences of her early life definitely have an influence on Zitkala-Ša’s writing style.

Inspired by Zitkala-Ša’s writing, family members in my story “You Are Pretty” really care about each other. At the same time, they also respect each other. In “You Are Pretty”, Ariel’s family takes the responsibility to take care of Beth without any complain and teach her lot of things with consistent patience.

In his *Black Boy*, Richard Wright puts much of his focus on the violence in his surroundings growing up to express the bitterness of his life. There are few moments of brightness and pleasantness in this autobiography. Being black, it seems like a paradox, but the more experiences of violence he has, the more sensitive and numb he becomes at the same time. Wright uses *Black Boy* as a mirror to reflect what is happening in the environment in which he grows up. After he fails to sell his dog to a white woman who

insults him, he says to his mother he doesn't want to sell Betsy to white people because "they are white." The little boy who gets insulted seemingly because he wants a dollar instead of ninety-seven cents, but actually it's because of his color. He feels helpless and powerless to change anything. As Wright says, "nothing challenged the totality of my personality so much as this pressure of hate and threat that stemmed from the invisible whites ... It filled me with awe, wonder, and fear, and I asked ceaseless questions" (73). Back then, although he gets hurt and starts to have actual fear and be more sensitive to his color, he still holds his curiosity toward the outside world, and he still has the courage to take challenges.

When he first moves to live with Aunt Jody and Uncle Clark, he fights back against the boys who tease him because of the way he looks because he thinks it's a test and he can't lose if he wants to stay at the school without being looked down although he thinks fighting is not necessary. As a result, violence is not what Wright chooses for himself, but what he has to take in his daily life. When more and more violence comes to his life, he learns the consequences so he begins to have fear.

When he can't take more fear but has to, he becomes a timid, observing, and numb person who is passive and just reacts. When he hopes he can learn technical knowledge from his job but can't get a single chance because his white co-workers don't let him, he feels disappointed but doesn't speak up. After he is bullied by his two white colleagues, he doesn't even dare to tell his boss. Like Wright says, "my personality was numb, reduced to a lumpish, loose, dissolved state. I was a non-man, something that knew vaguely that it was the human but felt that it was not" (194). As he gets more and more aware of his situation and becomes more and more deeply interested in his world of

his own thoughts and words, he finds it impossible to solve the conflicts between white people and black people.

He tries his best to let these conflicts go in his mind instead of fighting back like he used to do because his fear already takes up his life. As Wright says, “I was reminding myself that I must be polite, must think before I spoke, must think before I acted, must say ‘yes sir, no sir,’ that I must so conduct myself that white people would not think I thought I was as good as they” (186). He accepts the fact that white Southerners take their superior status for granted, so he turns his disappointment, anger, and fear into his own world of words. He chooses to look like he’s numb, acts like what he is supposed to, but thinks freely and sensitively. It seems like violence and bitterness are the consistent themes of this book because of what he has experienced throughout his growing up.

Childhood’s experience in *Black Boy* has influenced me on how I shape my characters’ personality under the influence of childhood. In my Story “The Camera”, Mia is kind of an aloof person and feels insecure when facing strangers, which is largely influenced by her parents’ divorce and always moving home when she is little. At the same time, she is also strong and independent because she has been facing many things on her own since she leaves her parents.

Another piece of work that has inspired me is Celeste Ng’s novel *Everything I Never Told You*. As an American-born Chinese, Ng sets her debut novel in a multicultural family with an American mother, Marilyn and Chinese father, James. The novel begins with the death of the daughter, Lydia, and everyone’s secret is revealed as the story develops. Ng gives very detailed personal background about the father before he gets

married. He is a college professor, very shy and antisocial. Before Marilyn walks into his office and talks to him, he barely talks to girls.

Good writings don't explain things but make you understand them, which is how I feel when I read Ng's novel. After the daughter Lydia has died but the policemen do nothing about it, the parents get very sentimental and sensitive. After several arguments, Marilyn and James become indifferent to each other and stop talking to each other. There is an incident where I feel very empathetic toward when James cheats on Marilyn and sleeps with another Chinese woman, Louisa. One day when Louisa cooks Chinese food for James, it's "three snow-colored buns, tops ruffled like peony heads ready to blossom, revealing a glint of deep tawny red within" (204).

James recalls it as is something his mother likes to make because it is his father's favorite. At that moment, as Ng describes, "*Char siu bau*, Louisa beams, and only then James realizes he has spoken aloud. He has not said a word in Chinese in forty years, but he is amazed at how his tongue still curls around their familiar shape" (205). Marilyn's mother never agrees to her daughter's marriage and warns Marilyn that she is going to regret it someday. At this "*Char siu bau*" moment, James finally has the sense of belonging which he lacks all the time in this marriage. This very nostalgic and sentimental moment really catches my heart, and I even forgive his cheating. I totally understand why James feels fragile and warm at the same time.

Food always plays a dominant role and is a consistent topic in Chinese culture. Under this cultural atmosphere, I always enjoy reading those kind of works in which I can sense how food has influence on the characters. For me, being grounded is very

important when I read and write because people need to have an actual life. Those characters who make readers feel related are always well-shaped characters.

Three years ago, I arrived at Chicago International Airport after a twelve-hour flight. I was hungry and tired. There was a layover for twelve hours before we took the next flight to Springfield. My friend Jin and I decided to eat something first our first time abroad, a lot of new things were waiting for us to try. We passed a restaurant that had a long line in front of it.

We went to the line and discussed what we were going to have, even though we could barely see the food window. When it was almost my turn, there was a guy in front of me saying, “Whatever it says, I want that.” I guess it was his first time in the States, too. After him, I walked to the counter, saying, “Whatever it says, I want that.”

It turned out to be a bagel, although I didn’t even know what a bagel was back then. It was the most horrible experience I ever had in my life. I didn’t know if it was because they didn’t have enough time to warm it up, or if airport food sucks all the time; I hated it. It had bacon, lettuce and something I couldn’t name on it. The bagel itself was warm but very dry and the bacon was still cold.

In China, food is almost always served when it is hot except when it’s supposed to be a cold dish. When you eat at restaurants, you could always get free hot tea as a default drink, but in the States, later on I knew, it was cold ice water. I couldn’t believe it when I had the first bite of the bagel. Especially after twelve-hour flight, my body was not comfortable. I was expecting something hot, juicy, refreshing, and delicious.

Then, I looked at Jin with a miserable face. I saw her suffering from finishing her food too. I was always the one who was picky about food. I put down the cold bagel, walking around, and I found nothing I wanted to try in the airport except Starbucks.

Sitting at the table, I was thinking, “Man, why do American people look so happy even when their food is so horrible?” At that moment, I almost regretted coming to the States.

Chinese people love to spend time in cooking, sometimes for hours. As I always say, “Food is a serious thing.” I worked at Panda Express for a year, and I always found out people came for Orange Chicken. In China, it takes hours to cook Orange Chicken. First, the orange flavor is from dried orange peel. Orange peel needs to be simmered to a thick broth, and then people use the broth to stew chicken bites. Here in the States, they deep fry chicken bites for eight minutes and put their exclusive number two sauce to the fried chicken bites, done.

Unconsciously influenced by Chinese gastronomy culture, my stories can't avoid the presence of food and drinking. I believe it's these things that make characters connected and close to each other. In “Half-Peach, Half-Plum Tree”, it's about conflicts between the old generation and the young in the very beginning. Then, it's grandma's food and fruits that provides unforgettable memories for the main character. In “You Are Pretty”, the character who is invited to her friend's home cooks food for the family. My mother has four sisters, so my aunts sometimes come to my home and cook for them. I grew up seeing them cook together, so I always think it's interesting to cook for those who invite you to their home. I end up missing not only my mother's food but also my

aunt's when I am far away from home. "Cooking is caring" is one of my social philosophies.

Then, the personality of my characters in the stories I have written is influenced mostly by the people I have met in my life. Sometimes I find out some characters tend to hold back even when they meet someone or something they really like. This kind of shy, withdrawn, and restrained personality is pretty common among the people I know. My father is one of this group of people. I remember when I was little, my mother would always be angry with my father about trifles in life. Every time when he felt he was supposed to apologize or communicate, he would let me be his voice and talk to my mother. Later on I found out he was not the only one I knew who was like this. Sometimes when I argued with my mother, my father would be the ice breaker, buying me ice cream and telling me what my mother really meant. This explains why I feel so related when I read Celeste Ng's novel *Everything I Never Told You*. James is the typical father in Chinese families who talks less than the mother and tries to avoid the wife's scolding even when communication is needed.

Later on when I grew older, I found out traditional Chinese culture still plays an important role in modern China. Students need to respect their teachers; it's responsibility for the young to take care of the old in a family; people are usually shy and restrained in public, especially when they need to make speeches or presentations; and so on. All of these make sense when traditional Chinese culture is taken into consideration. In most of the popular ancient and traditional Chinese classics, protagonists are always talented but very humble, respectful, and well self-controlled. In *The Four Books and Five Classics* such as *The Analects of Confucius*, *Three Character Classic*, and so on, moderation is the

main ideal. Under the influence of the classics, Chinese people's personality has its historical and cultural reference and standard, even though it's changing slightly among the young generation because of the shock of modern and foreign culture.

When I first attended classes in the States, I always found out that students started to pack their bags when the class was almost over but the professor was still talking. In China, students would never pack their bags before the teacher is done talking. Otherwise, teachers will feel offended and not respected. In the first couple weeks, it always confused me when I was in this situation. I noticed not a single professor felt offended if their students were packing their bags when they were talking. It was not a big deal if you pack your bag or not. I have realized now that the sense of time is very different in different cultures. As far as I have noticed, which could be only my personal view, punctuality is appreciated more than manners between students and teachers in the States. It doesn't mean students are not respectful of teachers; instead, it's sense of time that is regarded as significant. As a result, students can pack their bags if the professor has the tendency to prolong the lecture time. In China, teachers should be respected in any possible scenario even when the class duration is going to be slightly extended.

The more cultural shock I have experienced, the more significant influence I have realized culture has on a person. Writing is a creative job that is inspired by various aspects in one's life. You are what you write, just like as you are what you eat, what you wear, what you have experienced, what you believe, and so on.

The Half-Peach, Half-Plum Tree

Bei went home, slamming the door behind him like he did every day. With a huge “bang,” his parents knew he was home. His parents were chatting with his grandma in the living room, waving for him to come over. Grandma had just come to town today, and considered her favorite grandson, Bei, closely. His hoodie had several stains on it. He wore oversized, ripped jeans and dirty shoes with loosely tied shoelaces. For Bei, this was what a high school boy should look like. Being a freshman in high school, he was still learning how to get used to high school life. Grandma smiled her grandson and hugged him. When was the last time he saw Grandma? Too long ago to remember. Briefly saying hello to Grandma, Bei went back to his bedroom. Turning on his computer, he couldn’t wait to be in the virtual world. Being the leader of his team, he needed to guide them to finish their tasks tonight. In the League of Legends, everything was so real to him. He fought with his bunch of friends and won one battle after the other. Sometimes they lost, too, but none of them will blame it on others on the team. It was the rule he made. When he was called out to have dinner, he reluctantly paused his game.

During dinner, his parents told him they were going to leave home tomorrow for a business trip and come back next month. Still pondering his game, Bei didn’t realize they were talking to him until they stopped for seconds. He raised his head slowly from his dinner, furrowed his eyebrows and pretended to listen attentively and feel empathy. “Oh ... Don’t worry. I will have a good time with Grandma,” he said, giving grandma a shallow smile. Thinking nobody would restrict the time he spent on his computer game, he was ravished with happiness, but he didn’t show that part to them, and continued to finish his food.

Grandma had a cold and her nose was running a little. Bei quickly passed a tissue to Grandma, but she had already taken out her handkerchief from her coat and said, “Thanks, my dear, but that would be a waste, and I get used to using my handkerchief.”

“Alright,” Bei said and nodded.

The next day his parents left. Life with Grandma began. It was at least five years since he had lived with Grandma. When he was still in primary school, he spent every summer at Grandma’s home with his several cousins. He was the oldest one among them, so Grandma always told him to take care of them. There was one time when his cousin Jin cried loudly because he broke her toy by accident. He apologized to her, but she just couldn’t stop crying. When Grandma came, Jin told Grandma he did it on purpose. He didn’t explain anything because he thought he didn’t have to. Grandma ended up punishing him, making him fix Jin’s toy and clean up her backyard. Since then, every time Jin cried, Grandma would think it was because of Bei. In Bei’s eyes, Grandma never loved him as she did to his cousins. When he started to go to middle school, he never stayed at Grandma’s home that long because he got bored easily of life in the little village she lived in. He only saw Grandma a couple of times a year on holidays. When all those memories came to him, he felt a little nervous to spend a whole month with grandma.

At the very beginning, they barely talked to each other. He left home in the morning, and, when he came back home, he walked directly to his bedroom. After all, the League of Legends had already become the most important thing in his life.

“My dear, where do you usually go to get pretty rugs?” Grandma asked one day when they were having dinner. Grandma found out she needed to bring a rug for her dog when she went back home.

“I’m not sure; just check online. The internet tells you everything,” Bei said.

“Oh, okay,” Grandma said.

“My dear, do you know where the old dishcloth is?’ Grandma asked when she was doing dishes.

“The old one? I threw it away yesterday. There are extras under the sink,” Bei said.

“Oh, okay. I could still use it to clean floors and corners,” Grandma muttered.

“Grandma, my friends and I have a computer game team. We have played a computer game together for a long time. We are having an important battle this weekend. Is it cool if I invite my friends to come to our house this weekend so that we can play together?” Bei asked.

They always yelled loudly when they played the game, distributing their focus in different areas to increase the possibility of winning. His parents never liked either too much noise or his addiction to computer games, so his friends never came to his home.

“Sure. If my grandson wants it,” Grandma said.

The internet spoiled kids when parents didn’t, so did grandmas.

Before his friends came over, Grandma prepared fruits and juice for them, then went to the grocery store. She didn’t understand computer games, but she didn’t want to hurt Bei’s feelings. After she took her time shopping, she thought it would be over and went home. Bei and his friends were still there. Grandma asked them if they wanted to stay for dinner. His friends said thanks, but they needed to go home.

“If you really want them to stay, cook dinner first and then ask them.” Bei was going to say that to Grandma, but he swallowed those words back. He didn’t know Grandma thought those kids might be tired and need some food.

The telephone was ringing. Grandma came to answer it.

“Hello, Mrs. Wei speaking,” she said.

“Hi, Mrs. Wei, this is your neighbor Mrs. Lin. I am sorry but your dog has been seriously sick since last week. He hasn’t wanted to eat the last few days, and today he just lay still the whole morning. I know you can’t come back until next month, but I really think I should let you know this since he is important to you.”

Bei’s father was allergic to dog hair, so they never had a dog at home. After her husband died, she got Snow. Snow had become like her family. Grandma entrusted her dog to her neighbor when she left.

“Hmm” Grandma lowered her head, silent for a long time, “I really can’t get back. I need to take care of my grandson. No one would be his guardian if I leave. Could you please take him to the clinic when you are free? I will pay you back when I come home.”

“Yes, I already did. The doctor said he was just too old.”

“Well” Grandma’s eyes became red and started to water. She tried her best to control herself. “Thank you, then. I appreciate this so much. Just ... let him be. Please bury him in my backyard beside my garden if he can’t come through, and please, please don’t tell me when you start to do that.” Grandma hung up the phone and collapsed on the sofa. Her right hand was trembling, and she used her left hand to press it tight. *This is the cruelest moment in my life for me*, grandma thought.

Bei was eating ice cream in the kitchen, and he heard what Grandma was talking about on the phone. He walked to the living room and saw grandma crying. Grandma wiped

her eyes quickly when he came in. He didn't know what to say and pretended he didn't hear anything. "Were you talking to someone, Grandma?" he asked.

"My neighbor," she answered.

"What's wrong?" Bei asks again.

"My dog is very sick," she said.

Bei could guess what was happening, and he wanted to comfort grandma but didn't know how. "You should go home if you really want to. You don't need to worry about me. I'm a big boy now," Bei said.

"But still a boy."

"But he is your close friend who has been with you for years."

"But you are still my dear grandson for the rest of my life."

Bei stopped to sit beside Grandma. He wished he had the right words to say. He sat still for a while. After couple minutes, he said, "I saw a rug flea market when I came home on the bus yesterday. You mentioned you needed a rug. I thought you might be interested. I can go with you now if you like."

"You want to go with me?" Grandma asked.

"Yes. I do," Bei said.

"Can you wait for me a little while? I need to go get changed," Grandma said.

"Sure. Take your time," Bei said, smiling.

When they arrived at the rug flea market, there were so many different sizes, colors, styles and textures to choose from.

"Have you decided what kind of rug you want?" Bei asked.

"Not yet," Grandma said, smiling.

“Which side do you want to start with, then?” Bei asked with patience.

“This side with less rugs. Start from the easy one, I guess,” Grandma said.

“After you.” Bei followed grandma.

“Can you help me make the decision when I can’t?” Grandma asked.

“What if I can’t, either?” Bei asked.

“Well, I just trust my grandson,” Grandma said.

When they came home, they sat on the couch. Grandma was examining the rug she bought like an archaeologist studying newly excavated relics. This was the first time since Grandma had been here Bei hadn’t spent the whole night in his bedroom playing computer games while grandma sat in the living room watching old movies alone to kill time. Tonight, Bei reflected. He finally realized it was not their ages that created the gap between him and Grandma: it was his ignorance. His ignorance gave him the excuse to forget many things. Like, Grandma, as another human being, could have her own likes and dislikes, habits and lifestyle; like, communication did solve misunderstanding; like, escape from reality was not the way to live in reality. Didn’t he have friends who were totally different from him? Yes, he did. Then why couldn’t he try to understand Grandma like he understood his friends.

“You wear that bracelet every day. Kind of important to you?” Bei asked, trying to start the conversation.

“My dear, sometimes you keep something always with you. It’s not about how much your belongings are worth; it’s just part of you, like an unforgettable memory hovering in your mind. You don’t have to hide it; it’s always there,” Grandma said.

“So, is there a story behind it?” Bei sat up straight on the sofa and turned his head to face Grandma.

Grandma smiled shyly, like a little girl who was asked about her secret lover in her class. “Your grandpa had a best friend who was an anonymous monk. Nobody knew how they met each other and when they started to become friends. That was before he met me, so I don’t know, either, but that’s not the point. This story I do know because your grandpa told me before he married me. The night the monk was dying it rained heavily. It was so heavy, like millions of buckets pouring. When your grandpa heard this, he hurried to the monk’s home without caring about the rain at all. It was not even a home. The monk lived in a little ramshackle temple which was run-down. He was lying on a tattered split-bamboo mat, stiff and cold. After your grandpa saw the monk, he tried to carry him to the nearest clinic, but the monk refused.”

“The monk said it was a waste of your grandpa’s strength and shook his head slowly and weakly like a flat tire which barely moves the car. Then, he told your grandpa why he decided to be a monk. He said he was just a coward and couldn’t bear it that the girl he loved didn’t like him and married someone else. He waited for her to change her mind for so long that he couldn’t remember how long it actually was, maybe longer than World War II. He thought she was giving him hope when she told him the stories she read from her favorite book from time to time. The girl was not allowed to go to school since she had many brothers and sisters and her parents couldn’t afford one more child to attend schools, so she was taught by her mom at home, and he was the only one who was interested in her stories. The monk’s grandpa was a silversmith for the royal family. His grandpa gave him a silver bracelet, which was his first creation as a silversmith, because he was his first grandson. He didn’t have a chance to give it to the girl before she got married. In the end, he gave your grandpa this bracelet and told him to give it to his true love.”

Grandma touched the bracelet gently, and, after a long silence, she smiled and said, “I guess I was lucky enough to be that person.”

Grandpa passed away in the year Bei was born, and Grandma never remarried. It was hard for Bei to imagine Grandma could live alone all those years. How strong Grandma needed to be to go through all those rough or boring moments in her life and still hold those beautiful memories from long ago. This was something he never knew, never got a chance to know, or never tried to know.

He never knew how happy Grandma was when she heard she could spend a whole month with her grandson after all those years, how frustrated she was when she asked him where to get a rug and he said online, because she expected he would accompany her; how disappointed she was when she chose a movie to watch and he just walked away; how surprised she was when her grandson asked her if she wanted to go the rug flea market.

There was one more thing he never knew. Grandma had a unique backyard. It was not about how fancy it was, but just that you could never have a such view somewhere else, like if you had a favorite movie, you couldn't tolerate any other version of the story because every frame of your favorite could not be equaled.

Grandma lived in the small town of Hawthorn, named that because there were many wild hawthorn trees there. It's a three hour's drive from Bei's home. There was a mystical tree in the southeastern corner of her backyard, which every kid in this village would keep an eye on secretly when summer came. Half of the braches were plum branches, which had been grafted onto the peach tree. It was divided perfectly half and half, like the classic Chinese Yin-Yang symbol. This masterpiece had been standing there since Grandma had lived there. Every kid dreamed to get both the first plum and the first peach each year.

Since every farmer stopped to have a look at a distance when passing by, Grandma had never reprimanded the kids who tiptoed into her yard to steal her plums and peaches, even though she saw them, so the kids were getting bolder and bolder. Few people in this village have ever known these plums and peaches really tasted like, because barely any peaches or plums were left on the tree when it was the time they really turned ripe.

Were those kids really this wild? Not really.

When Bei was still a little boy who loved to spend the whole summer in Grandma's home and never got bored, if he called Grandma to tell her he would come for summer break, Grandma would be one of those who were waiting for the ripeness of the plums and peaches. Every day, after plowing her lands, cleaning up her yard, feeding her dog and chickens, she would stand under the shadow of the tree, examining every branch carefully to see if there were any plums and peaches she could get for her grandson. They were kept in the refrigerator before Bei came to her house. Sometimes if it was a long time before Bei came, Grandma would use them to make jam.

When it was time for grandma to leave, Bei didn't insist she stay. He knew she really missed her village. However, Bei had discovered he already had started to love his nights sitting with Grandma, listening to her stories about the old days in the small village. From those stories, Bei found parts of Grandma he had been missing all those years. He remembered how happy he was when he was at Grandma's home during those summers. Many an afternoon he sat on the doorstep waiting for the ice cream truck. When he heard the ice cream truck was approaching, he yelled excitedly at Grandma, who was in her garden to prepare a quarter sack of corn to trade for his favorite popcorn or candies. It seemed like Grandma had so much grain to trade that she could never use it all up. Usually

Grandma was a very careful and frugal person, Every time she saw that people didn't finish the food on their plate, she felt so much pity for them that she would pray for them. But when it came to her grandson, she was always so generous, like she was the richest person in the world. During all those years, he mainly kept the unpleasant memories of when he was at Grandma's home, but now he let the happy memories flow.

The next day when Grandma called him, they talked for a long time on the phone about little things. She said the dog passed away in peace and was buried beside her garden because he always sat there waiting for her to come back when she was out. She said she was going to put the rug in her living room. She said many things he wouldn't have been interested in before, but he just wanted to know every detail about her life now. He knew his grandma needed a good listener, and he was the one.

When summer break was finally close, Bei said to his parents, "Mom, Dad, I've got a plan for my summer."

"What it is?" his mom asked.

"I'm going to live in my grandma's house," Bei said.

"You miss her, don't you? How long? A week or two?" mom asked.

"The whole summer," Bei said.

His parents were so surprised at this answer. "What for? What are you going to do for such long time?" his dad asked incredulously.

"Be her grandson," Bei answered.

You Are Pretty

Knowing Eve's parents went abroad for their business meeting and she would be the only one home for Thanksgiving, Ariel invited Eve to go to her home over last Thanksgiving break.

They had been living in the same house since the first day of their collage years. It was a huge house, but the girls in other bedrooms came and left, pursuing their different paths in life. During the three years, these two were always the closest. The house was a six-minute walk from campus, so they walked to campus together most of the time and talked about the little things in their life with each other.

When Thanksgiving came, Ariel drove Eve back home. Ariel was so happy because she was always the only one in the car when she went home and she got bored easily. This time, she finally had someone to talk to.

On the way to her home, Ariel briefly told Eve her family story. "Mom works as a hairdresser, dad works at the university, and ... Aunt Beth lives with us, too." She hesitated for a little bit before she said the latter part.

Eve asked Ariel carefully, "Your aunt ... lives with your family?"

"Yes, for a special reason," Ariel answered.

"Oh, OK ... " Eve said, not willing to push Ariel to say more. Before they arrived at her home, Ariel said they needed to pick up her aunt from her school, and she explained, "A school where people who need special care do needlework and assemble toys for local factories."

Eve could guess Ariel's aunt Beth is a middle-aged woman who couldn't support herself, both mentally and physically, which made her kind of nervous because she didn't

have any experience taking care of handicapped people. She kind of felt excited, too. It was always exciting to meet new people who are different to her type.

They arrived at the place where the school bus usually dropped Beth off and waited for couple minutes, but the bus still didn't show up. Ariel looked anxious and turned to Eve, repeating in a quiet nervous voice that it was supposed to be the time for the bus to arrive. She drove her car around the parking lot many times and asked a lady where the bus would stop today. They went to the spot the lady told them and waited another couple minutes, and then the bus finally showed up. Ariel quickly opened the door at her side, walked to the bus, talked to the bus driver for a couple of minutes, held her aunt's arm carefully, and opened the door to the back seat of her car.

Beth was at her forties or fifties, kind of overweight and walked with a cane. She walked with a slow pace, left leg pausing a second after every step. Her mouth was open all the time, even when she was not talking, looking like she was smirking.

"This is my roommate, Eve, and she will be here during Thanksgiving; this is my aunt Beth," Ariel said.

Eve said hello to Beth, and Beth smiled tenderly.

"She said hello to you," Ariel reminded Beth.

"Hi," Beth responded.

That was the first conversation between the Eve and Beth.

In the car, Beth said happily to Ariel, "Jack is my boyfriend."

Ariel laughed and said, "Oh, you have a boyfriend now, don't you?"

"Yes," Beth answered proudly, "he is handsome." "Everyone likes him, but he likes me, and he gave me a Teddy bear he made today," Beth continued.

“That’s nice,” Ariel said.

When was the last time I told another girl everybody liked my boyfriend, but he liked me? Probably in middle school, Eve thought.

Beth passed an envelope to Ariel, and Eve guessed it was the money she earned today.

Ariel explained to her later that Beth not only liked to say someone was her boyfriend when she met someone she liked, but also liked to say this to tease Ariel. One time someone came to their house, and Beth said “Kiss him!” to Ariel right in front of the guy.

When they got home, Beth said she was hungry, and Ariel said she was going to make lunch soon. When the lunch was made, Beth ate with them but not the same thing they ate. What Beth had was soggy Ramen noodles which had been soaked in hot water for an unnecessarily long time. Ariel made spaghetti for Eve and herself instead. Beth tried to pick up a bite from their food, but Ariel said, “No, Beth, you can’t.”

“OK,” was what Beth said. No further words. Later on Ariel told Eve her aunt can’t chew very well, especially things that were hard.

In their house, people explained things to Beth directly, like to children, and Beth answered with the single word response, “OK.” Maybe that was how people did things when they got used to this situation. There were two bathrooms in Ariel’s home, one for Beth, one for the rest. During Eve’s stay, every morning Ariel set a timer when Beth walked into the bathroom. If she stayed too long in her bathroom, Ariel would knock the door and say it was time to come out to Beth. “OK” was what you heard from inside the bathroom.

On the Thanksgiving Day, Eve cooked dumplings from scratch for them, with the idea that “at least Beth could eat this, too.”

During the lunch, Ariel’s mom Tammy said to Beth, “You know what they are?”

Beth uttered, “Ravioli.”

Tammy explained, “They are dumplings, from China. Ravioli is from Italy.”

“Dumplings, China; Ravioli, Italy,” Beth repeated.

Eve was not sure if Beth really knew what the difference would be between those two countries, especially after Ariel told Eve that Beth only knew one place name called Arkansas, except for their home state of Missouri.

On the next day, Eve and Ariel were going to have lunch with Ariel’s best friends in town, with Beth and Tammy going with them, too. Eve had a habit of dressing up when meeting her friends’ friends for the first time. She didn’t know if it was because of her red silk scarf or the dressy navy-blue coat, but she got the best compliment ever, not from Ariel’s friends, though.

Before they got into the car, Beth looked at Eve, smiled and said, “You are pretty.” Eve was surprised and stood there for a while, then said thanks to Beth. In the car, she was thinking “*Your dress looks nice*” or “*I like your shirt*” was what people usually said to start a conversation or show their friendliness, instead of a straight-up “*You are pretty*.” “*You look nice today*” was more of a direct comment on the clothes, but “*You are pretty*” was a childishly simple and all-encompassing appraisal. Then she suddenly asked herself why she would analyze a three-word sentence so hard. It wasn’t a literature class, after all, although she didn’t even try that hard at her literature class. She finally realized it was because she didn’t see Beth as one of the “normal” people. She

didn't see Beth as a "normal" person, so she didn't expect that she talked, walked, thought, and even did everything like "normal" people did. She analyzed this, realizing she put too much meaning in Beth's words. If Ariel said the same thing, would she have the same feeling? Definitely not. When someone said something slightly different than what she was supposed to hear, she started to squeeze totally new meanings into the original words.

When they arrived at the restaurant, they made their orders and Tammy explained to Beth what was on the menu. She wanted to order more after fajitas, but Tammy stopped her. "That would be a lot," Tammy said.

"OK," was all Beth said.

"Her brain can't tell her when to stop when she is eating. That's why she is overweight, so we need to let her have only a certain amount of food each meal and each day," Ariel explained to Eve later. But there are so many people out there who are overweight, too, was what Eve was thinking. She found herself wishing that she could speak up for Beth, but she was not her family. It must have been difficult when someone told you when to stop when you were eating. It was like military training. Eve would just hate anyone who told her to stop when she was eating ice cream.

Eve noticed Beth liked to do wolf-whistles, even in front of strangers, especially kids, which was exactly like what naughty schoolboys do to get attention. Ariel told Eve even though she and her family explained to Beth many times that it could seem rude to most people, she kept doing so all the time. In most of scenarios, people gave them an eye roll and kept their kids away from her.

One day, Tammy drove them all to Walmart for grocery shopping. In the parking lot, Beth saw a cute young man. She stopped in front of him, smiling and doing wolf-whistles to the boy. The boy's mom rushed out of the car, shouted at her, yelling, "Go away! What's wrong with you!" Beth lowered her head and stood still. Tammy and Ariel came to her in a hurry, apologized to the family, and took Beth away. Beth was really upset and kept silent the rest of the day.

It hurt Eve to see all this. She didn't realize it was this bad when Ariel told her about other people's reactions. *What if a tall good-looking young guy gave the mom a wink and a wolf-whistle? "Oh, isn't that wicked cool? He thinks I'm so hot," was what someone like her would usually say.* As she thought about this, she was really heartbroken and felt sad for Beth.

After a week's stay, Eve and Ariel went back to college life again. On the day they left, Ariel dropped Beth off at one of her cousin's homes and let her take care of Beth. Before she left, Beth turned to Eve and said, "You are pretty, bye."

Eve felt something warm flowing inside her body and said, "Thank you, you too, bye." When she said "you, too" to Beth, it was not like what she was supposed to say when people said, "Have a good one" to her, it was like, "You are pretty, too, because of who you are."

Beth occasionally came to her mind at some special moments, like when she heard someone say "OK" in defeat; when she saw overweight people eat like a bird; and when she received sincere smiles from adults instead of fake ones.

It took her a long time to decide to ask Ariel some questions about Beth. She didn't know how to ask, where to start, and what words to use.

“What are your Aunt Beth’s ... issues, specifically?” she asked after some irrelevant small talk as they sat on the sofa. That was the first question Eve really wanted to ask. When she said “issues,” she hesitated a little bit and lowered her voice.

Then, Ariel gave her a long list: low mental capacity, heart disease, retardation, feet that cramp all the time, eyes with astigmatism, cleft palate tongue, and obesity.

“How long has she had those problems?” Eve asked.

“They are all caused by birth defects, so she was basically born with these problems,” Ariel answered.

Eve gave a long deep sigh.

“Because her blood circulation doesn’t work well, she has feet cramp all the time. Her brain can’t tell her when to stop eating, so she likes to eat a lot; and she has cleft palate, so she can’t pronounce certain words clearly,” Ariel explained further. “Her brain can’t take in information quickly, so instead of short-term memory, she has just long-term memory.”

“For example?” Eve asked.

“Like she can’t always remember the people she met yesterday, and she even forgets my name sometimes, but she still remembers the days with her grandma,” she said.

“Her grandma?” Eve asked.

“Yes. Both of her parents passed away early, so her grandma brought her up, and my mom took care of her, too. Her grandma had mental illness,” Ariel said.

“Wow, that’s bad luck,” Eve said.

“Definitely, especially back in 1950s, it was shameful to be handicapped,” Ariel continued, “After her grandma passed away in 2014, she moved in with my parents, and the responsibility was transferred to my mom. When she first started to go to school, she always came back asking us, ‘Did I do a good job?’ The need to feel affirmation was definitely strong.” Eve saw Ariel’s eyes became red when she said this.

“What’s the most interesting experience you had living with her?” Eve asked, trying to shift the atmosphere.

“Oh, she is so funny. She gets used to people very quickly,” Ariel said. As a person who was flattered by her, Eve couldn’t agree with her more.

“She always picks up new words from TV, even though she doesn’t know the meanings, and repeats the words to us. Sometimes, if they are bad words, we need to explain to her it’s inappropriate to say them. She likes to rename things, like she calls “birthday” “hand day,” and nobody knows why. She is always optimistic and never gets mad, even though she can,” Ariel said in a delighted tone.

“Even though she can” struck Eve; She always thought that people were born with disease and illness, they wouldn’t have a happy childhood. They were either angry or upset all the time, was what people, including her until now, usually would think about when someone like Beth showed up, “Even though she can” became an important qualifier.

One day, Ariel’s mom called her to go back home on that weekend. Her dad was undergoing surgery, so her mom needed to be there to take care of him. There was no one she could find to take care of Beth. Unluckily, Ariel needed to host an art exhibition

during that time. Eve overheard what Ariel said to her mom on the phone. She decided to be the one who was going to take care of Beth the whole day.

“Eve, you don’t have to do this for me,” Ariel said.

“It’s not for you only; it’s also for me. I like to be with Beth,” Eve said.

Eve prepared a package with food, drinks, DVDS, and several illustrations she thought would interest Beth from Magazines and went to Ariel’s home. On the way there, Eve was so excited and thinking about the topics she would talk about with Beth, for example, her favorite cartoon character, her favorite ice cream, and so on. After all, it was the first time she had been with Beth alone. When she got there, Beth was sitting on her sofa. Her sofa. There were sofas for other people in this family and a sofa for Beth. Hers was slightly higher and bigger than the others’, so that it was convenient for her to sit down and stand up.

Beth sat there, smiling to Eve and saying, “Hi, pretty.”

Eve smiled back to her. “Hi, Beth. How’s going?”

Beth answered, “I am good.”

“That’s good. Do you want to see any movies? *Frozen*? *Zootopia*? Or anything else?” Eve asked.

“*Zootopia*. I want to see *Zootopia*.” Beth answered.

“Ok. Let’s watch *Zootopia*.” Eve said.

Eve walked to the DVD player and put *Zootopia* inside. Then, they started watching the movie.

When the movie was almost over, the fox named Nick said to the rabbit Judy, “I know you like me.” Beth laughed out loud and turned her face to Eve, saying “I know

you like me.” The tender smile on Beth’s face was like sunshine on a cloudy day. Most of time, it was hidden behind the clouds, and you almost forgot its existence. For a second, when it suddenly showed through the darkness, it warmed you up immediately.

You Need to Be Humble

The first time Bella met Randell was when Bryan invited him to their party. Randell walked in with a shy smile, a hand scratching the back of his head. He still had his work shirt on. Bryan told them he worked at Panda Express so they could just call him the Panda guy.

When Bryan was introducing Randell to them, Bella closely observed on him. He was medium height, quite in shape, and always polite. He was not a good-looking guy at first sight, but very easy going.

He didn't talk much but drank a lot, remaining friendly and open. He always lowered his head and fully focused his eyes on the person addressing him when he was answering other people's questions. From the answers to those questions, Bella thought she almost knew all about him.

One day Bryan complained to Bella that he always took Randell to his group of friends, but Randell never took him to his.

"Oh, I thought you guys were friends," Bella said.

"We are; we are just not the same type of people," Bryan explained.

"Like?"

"Like, I like to go to bars to drink, but he never goes out drinking. He only drinks at home."

"Any reason why?"

"Maybe because of last time?" Bryan thought a little, and said uncertainly.

"What happened last time?"

“There was a time when he and his friends were drinking in a bar, and a guy came to them and asked to be bought drinks. He was an acquaintance of one of his friends. His friend didn’t know he was a minor so he gave him a cup of rum with pineapple juice. A policeman happened to check the bar and found out. His friend tried to convince the policemen of his innocence. The policemen didn’t believe him, and they almost fought. In the end, the policemen kicked them out of the bar. Since then, I haven’t seen him go to any bars.”

“Wow, that can’t be the only reason. One can’t just avoid certain places because he was kicked out once. I am not welcome at ZARA because I go there only to try clothes on and never buy them, but I still go there all the time.”

“That’s you. Randell is kind of a sensitive person. He saw his friend get kicked out himself. He wouldn’t go back just for the friend. Speaking of drinking, you want to go drinking with me tonight? Not a person I know can drink with me now. There is a new bar open in downtown. Half price after 10:00.”

“Maybe another time?”

After Bryan broke up with his girlfriend, he was always alone. He was so busy being around his girlfriend when in the relationship, he stopped hanging out with his friends. Randell was totally the opposite. Friends were always important to him. How did Bella know? She just met him once, but she could just tell.

After two weeks, Bella got a phone call from Bryan. He asked her to go bowling. She heard herself ask, “Will Randell come?” She regretted immediately after she said that. Bryan answered yes. She was so happy but pretended to say “Yes” with a calm voice. She stood in front of a mirror half an hour to decide

what to wear and whether she should wear make-up or not. Finally, she chose a cream-colored sweater and dark blue overalls. Not too formal, but cute enough. She asked Jen, her best friend in town, to go with her. When she got there, she found out everyone was dressed super casual. She was the one who stood out, obviously. When the bowling began, she really felt embarrassed because she was always the one who got the lowest score. Even Jen did better than her. Randell, instead, almost got a strike every time he bowled. Bryan found out her embarrassment and walked to her. He whispered to her, “Randell used to play it to earn money.” He wanted to make her, maybe himself, too, feel better by saying so, but it didn’t change a thing. Before the game started, Randell didn’t say anything, about what an expert bowler he was. He was too shy to set himself up as an example to teach others. It was Bryan who kept telling Bella and Jen, “Your gesture isn’t right,” “use your wrist, not your upper arm,” and “Do some practice run-ups before throwing the ball.” Bella thought Bryan was good at this at the beginning, but all he had was a fancy form and no really good results.

Every time when it was Randell’s turn, there was no dramatic entrance, no long run-up, no fancy gestures, but a perfect arc of the ball he threw. It was so beautiful and magical. Firstly, the ball was running right in the middle, but it suddenly veered to the right half way down the alley. When it almost hit gutter and everyone was worried it was going to be a gutter ball, it came back to the middle but slightly to the left. Then, the ball hit five pins on the left, and finally all the falling pins knocked down the five pins on the right like dominoes. It was smooth and heart-racing, a perfect professional performance. Everyone was amazed, including players on other lanes. Only Bryan, seemed not to be amazed and willing to learn from Randell. All he cared about his fancy form.

After a while, they started to realize it was meaningless to go on because Randell was so much better. They decided to team up, two of them versus the other two. Randell said it was only fair if he and Bella were in the same team. Bella, as a girl was supposed to feel ashamed she was bad enough to be paired with the best player. However, she felt satisfied.

Then, Randell started to teach Bella how to do it.

“Forget about all the background and focus on the pins,” Randell said.

“What about the amazing curve?” Bella asked.

“That’s the last step,” Randell answered.

“What’s the first step then?”

“You need to be humble.”

What an elegant response to all Bryan’s fancy gestures, Bella thought.

“Where should a beginner start?”

“If you can’t control your ball, then just make sure your right hand is in the middle.”

“I heard you used to bowl to earn money.”

“Well, then I lost all my money.”

“Come on, how could that happen?”

“Because I thought I was going to win every time back then.”

“Now you don’t?”

“If I do, I can’t make it.”

“Why? You have the ability”.

“Only humbleness could give me confidence.”

“Wow, sounds like Zen.”

Bella forgot how she acted when she teamed up with Randell that night. The only thing she remembered was the shy smile from the winner Randell. It was hard to see a winner be humble those days, especially when everyone thought he didn't have to be humble was, but anyway, because of his upbringing and personality.

Bella hadn't seen Randell for a long time. When she asked, Bryan told her Randell was busy with soccer practice.

“Wow! He can play soccer, too! What can't he do!” Bella said.

“Come on! People always have something they are good at,” Bryan said.

“So ... what are you good at?”

“Drinking, definitely.”

“Well, I am not sure if that counts as a talent.”

“Of course, it does! What's your talent, though?”

“I used to draw when I was little. I learned some pencil drawing for a few years. When I started to learn oil painting in high school, I just found it was so hard for me. Then, I quit.”

“Hmmm... used to, I am not sure if it counts.”

“Maybe I should restart doing it.”

“Everyone has their own limit. You thought it was too hard for you. It won't change if you restart it.”

“You are supposed to encourage me!”

The next time Bella saw Randell was at Jen's birthday party. When she arrived, she found out there was a new girl sitting on Randell's right. Bella pretended to sit on his left naturally. Jen introduced the new girl to Bella. Her name was Riley. Jen had met her at a comic-con and they became friends. Her whole face and neck were already red from drinking. Riley rushed off to the bathroom to puke. When she came back, some people told her to take a break and drink some warm water. Randell stood up and left quickly, coming back with a glass of water for Riley.

Bella felt like she was the only one who noticed this. If she had been Riley, she would have felt warm inside when someone actually did things for her while other people just talked about it.

Then they started to play a drinking game called "Circle of Death." All the cards faced down, and everyone took turns to draw one. It was a heavy drinking game. Bella kept drinking and got drunk finally. She tried to control herself not to speak a lot, especially serious stuff. When she tried to stand up, her legs were too soft to support her. She lay down on Jen's couch. When the party was over, Bryan said he could carry her to his car. He came to the couch and tried to carry Bella. He lifted her for a second dramatically and put her down, saying, "Oh my gosh, Bella is so heavy." Randell heard this, he didn't say anything and walked to the couch. He carried Bella all the way to his car. Bryan walked out with Randell and kept saying, "Bella is so fat." Randell laughed it off, and said "not really" in a low voice. Bella still felt dizzy, but she heard every word.

When someone hurt you, someone else was there to warm you in a so subtle but important way. From that night, Bella started to believe this.

Bella decided to join the painting club at her college. She went to art galleries on her own from time to time, and she even started to paint in her free time. The paintings were not great yet, but she just told herself not to give up this time. There was a voice telling her she was making progress every day, just like the muffled voice saying she was not fat the other night.

Several weeks later, Jen asked Bella to have lunch at her home. After Bella arrived, she found Riley was there, too. When they were having lunch, Riley started the conversation, "I really like Randell's personality. He is so sweet."

"He is kind of a nice guy," Jen said, eyeing Bella.

"Yeah, and he is always so humble," Bella said.

"Yeah, that's true. I heard from Bryan that it only took Randell two hours to learn the Korean alphabet," Riley said.

"Why would he learn Korean, though?" Bella asked.

"His ex-girlfriend liked K-pop, and he wanted to know what those songs meant," Riley answered.

"Wow, this guy sounds like an ideal husband type," Jen said.

Bella became silent. Everyone had discovered Randell was nice. She was the one who knew what kind of person he was at first sight before anyone, but now it was not a secret anymore. It was like everyone suddenly found a way to the destination on the treasure map after she had worked on it for a long time. She knew every detail on this map, but she couldn't find a way to go where she wanted because of her timidity. She thought she was being humble, just like him.

“I think he kind of likes me, too, but is too shy to make a move,” Riley said.

“Wow, how do you know?” Jen asked, for Bella. Only Jen knew her secret.

“Well, I got drunk last Friday so I called Randell to come get me. He just showed up immediately. I told him I was hungry, and he drove me around only to find Taco Bell was still open. Then he helped me order food and everything. He didn’t even complain,” Riley said.

“That sounds like ... what Randell would do for his friends,” Jen said , trying to save the situation.

“I just feel like he did more than what he was expected to do,” Riley said.

Bella listened carefully and kept silent.

“Should I make a move?” Riley asked.

“Do what you feel right,” Bella said, trying to chill.

From that day on, Bella tried to keep a distance from Randell. It seemed easy because they weren’t close in the first place. Only Bella knew how hard it was for her to stay away from him. She felt like she suddenly understood why Randell said the first step was to be humble. If people really cared about something or someone but they couldn’t get them no matter how hard they tried, being humble set the lowest expectation and strongest protection. In doing so, even if they lost, they won’t feel afraid to begin again. Randell must have experienced more than Bella could image to arrive at this level. They were the same kind of people. They were afraid to lose, so they tried hard to tell themselves “I am not the lucky one.”

The only thing Bella wished was that Riley could understand Randell more than she did. She heard that when Riley had just come in town, she had a thing on Bryan, but

she found out Bryan was only superficial, only big gestures. What if she didn't like Randell? She was just lonely. If Bryan was big gestures; she must have noticed Randell was subtle, noticing the little things. Randell deserved better than a girl who just felt lonely.

Bella decided to give it a try.

She met Randell at the elevator on the way up to Bryan's apartment. He had invited them to watch a movie tonight at his place.

"Hi, I heard last Wednesday was your birthday," Bella said.

"Yeah."

"You didn't have a birthday party or something?"

"Too old for that."

"Huh! You are not! But I did prepare a gift for you."

"Wow! Thanks! What's it?"

"It was a portrait of you I did several weeks ago. Then, I added a handmade frame decorated with little bowling pins on it," Bella said and took the painting out of her bag.

"I didn't know you could draw! This is amazing! Bella, You really surprised me!" Randell said and looked very excited.

"Well, I used to think it was too hard for me until you said humbleness gave you confidence. Then, I realized I thought it was not for me because I expected I could make it as long as I tried. Even though my painting is not perfect now, at least I am not expecting anything. I just draw as I want."

"That's really encouraging."

“Uh... did Riley say anything to you?” Bella asked.

“What do you mean?” Randell said, smiling.

“She said she had a thing for you.”

“Oh, it’s the first time I’ve heard this!”

“What! She didn’t tell you?”

“No. Even if she did, she... is not quite my type.”

“Wow, who’s your type?”

“I thought you knew.”

“You didn’t say anything. How could I know?”

“When love is hidden in humbleness, nothing needs to be said. You can just feel it. That’s the first step.”

They smile at each other like the first time she met him.

I Can Be Quite a Loner

Evan got an invitation from his childhood friend, James. They hadn't contacted each other for years. This time, he invited Evan to go to his wedding ceremony next month. *Man, the third wedding I have to go to this year*, Evan thought.

Pause.

Evan was a thirty-two-year-old engineer, still single. He just bought a big house with a swimming pool after so many years of hard work in Los Angeles. Vacations and weekends never belonged to him, only work and loneliness. His best friend, Stephen, who also got the invitation, lived next to him. They were also partners at work. Maybe it was the reason why Evan's life was always filled up and he had never realized time past so fast.

Evan had a sister, but she never cooked. In his family, after his father passed away four years ago, he and his mom were the ones who usually cooked. Everyone loved his fish tacos, roasted ribs, and blueberry pancakes. As he always said, "food is life." There was a period he was chubby. To keep in shape, he got interested in dancing. At first, he thought dancing could help him lose weight. Gradually, he started to fall in love with it. His favorite type was international ballroom dancing. He used to have a dance partner. She was very attractive and went through five boyfriends during their partnership. Evan was not one of them for two reasons. First, their teacher sat them down at the very beginning and told them the worst thing you could do with your dance partner was to sleep with that person. Second, she was not quite his type.

He wanted something different. It was not that he had high standards for a girlfriend. It was just hard to find someone to talk to except about work. You know,

meaningful talk, like when you met someone from the same mindset as yours, you could just talk about whatever came to mind. The best part was that person gave you the most amazing feedback, effortlessly, you had ever had. Then you know: this one was sent to you. It never happened to Evan, though.

The day finally came. Before leaving, Evan picked several suits and ties for the wedding trip and, of course, his laptop.

They arrived in Springfield a day earlier than the wedding ceremony. James drove them around to have a look at the city.

“Springfield is pretty ...” Stephen said.

“Small,” Evan said.

“I only mean pretty,” Stephen said.

“I only mean small,” Evan said.

“They have a cool downtown,” Stephen said.

“Yeah. Look at the outside walls of that store! Beautifully done murals! The blue is so pure, like the ocean. Turtles, fishes and, wow, dolphins! I really like this,” Evan said.

“Yeah. It’s really cool,” Stephen said.

“No one really dresses up in this town,” Evan said.

“No one cares about on fashion here. They only care about function,” James said.

As engineers, the things they cared about mostly when they came to a new city were architectures, graffiti, and colors. For Evan, there was one more thing, food.

During the first day, he didn’t find anything he really liked, so he had low expectations for the rehearsal dinner. He needed to go, anyway.

It was rainy on the wedding day. As Stephen said, “It was colder than the coldest day in L.A.” The wedding itself was small, quiet, and insipid. The church they chose was kind of plain. The vows were so long that Evan almost fell asleep at some point. Maybe because both James and Emily were Christians, but he wasn’t. Maybe because he hadn’t found anyone whom he wanted to make a vow to. He discussed with Stephen whether or not they wanted to go to the reception.

“It’s so weird not to go. You know, we came here for the wedding. We know no one in this town. Why wouldn’t we go?” Stephen said.

“I guess that’s true. Man, I just want to go to a bar and have a drink to warm up.” Evan said.

“Alright, we go to a bar after the party,” Stephen said.

“Yay!” Evan said.

Stephen was only three months older than Evan, but it was Stephen who made compromises all the time, when they chose what to drink and eat. It was not Stephen being considerate; it was Evan who had a good taste on those things. He just trusted him. Every time when it was about food or drink, Stephen listened to Evan. If it was about work, Stephen never compromised. They had been partners for six years. There was a time when Evan was just sick of Stephen being bossy. He distanced himself from Stephen for a while. When he came back, it was like nothing happened.

They walked into the place where the party was held. The hall was extremely modern and fancy. There was an open bar at a corner decorated with green plants, but the main tone was still black and white.

“I really like the style,” Evan said.

“Huh,” Stephen said.

That was what Stephen would say when Evan said something he didn't quite disagree with or didn't have any thoughts on it.

They each got a name tag from the reception desk before entering the reception hall room. Stephen's was printed as Stephanie, which was a girl's name. He rolled his eyes.

There was a guest table for those who were still single. Evan and Stephen stepped to that table, sat down and rolled their eyes. People gradually arrived and the room became crowded.

Here came a girl in a maxi blue floral dress. She had short hair with the ends curled up, quite vintage, like 1940's style. She came here with her friend Angela, but Angela was already married. Angela and her husband walked to another table, and she sat at the singles' table beside Stephen, a.k.a. Stephanie, for a while. She put her name tag before her plates.

“So, you are Isabel? Nice to meet you,” Stephen said.

“Nice to meet you. I'm Isabel. Ste...phanie?” Isabel asked.

“Ugh! They printed my name wrong. My name is Stephen,” Stephen said.

“Ha. They were busy, weren't they?” Isabel said.

Evan was going to talk to Isabel, but he somehow just enjoyed watching her talking to someone else under the dim light. Especially at this moment, Stephen was asking her about her hobbies. She smiled tenderly, and her face was glowing like when the moonlight shined through the clouds and the surface of the sea glowed like silver silk.

“I like to read and cook. People always just microwave stuff. You know, you put frozen food into the microwave. Ding. Done. I spend hours in kitchen,” Isabel said.

“What do you usually cook?” Stephen asked and eyed Evan.

“I bake most of the time. I do everything from scratch. Peach pie, brownies, green tea cake, you name it. Sometimes, I do rice pudding and ice cream, too,” Isabel said.

She was shy and restrained herself a little at the beginning, but right now, talking about stuff she really liked, she was delighted.

“Wow, that’s nice. What books do you read?” Stephen asked.

“All the clichés,” Isabel said.

“Ha, but you look young,” Stephen said.

“I have an old-school soul,” Isabel said.

The dinner began.

The food was alright. Isabel barely ate anything except the roasted duck. When it was desert time, Isabel ate several slices of brownies. Evan saw all of this and smiled. He didn’t like the food at all either.

Stephen walked out to the restroom. Evan sat to Stephen’s seat.

“You don’t like the food?” Evan asked.

“Uh ... not really,” Isabel almost whispered.

“Me, either,” Evan lowered his voice.

They both smiled at each other. They two were both picky about food.

“Oh, I’m Evan. Stephen and I work together,” Evan said.

“We are engineers. What do you do?” Evan asked.

“Creative writing. I don’t know why it’s creative, but basically just writing,”

Isabel said.

“Ha, nice. What genre do you do?” Evan asked.

“I read more than I write for now. Classics and dystopia are really my thing,”

Isabel said.

“Like the Big Brother is watching you?”

“Uh ... like that but I like his *Animal Farm* better.”

“Yeah. That’s an interesting book, too. I overheard you say you bake a lot,” Evan said.

“Yeah. When I have free time, I like to bake.”

“That’s nice. I don’t have that much free time.”

“Ha, I heard engineers work twenty-four seven.”

“Uh, not exactly, but close enough. I cook on very rare occasions. I cured some salmon and kept it in fridge. Can’t wait to see how it goes when I go back to L. A.,” Evan said with childish smile.

The dinner was almost over. Stephen came back and sat in Evan’s seat. Then the host began to play some music to warm up.

“Do you dance usually?” Evan asked.

“Unfortunately, I don’t,” Isabel said.

“He dances for competitions,” Stephen joined their conversation and said to Isabel.

“Wow! That’s neat. Will you dance here?” Isabel asked.

“I will pass it tonight. The only thing I am thinking about right now is beer. We’re gonna go to a bar afterward. You want to join us?” Evan asked.

“I came here with my friends. I will see what their plan is,” Isabel said.

After the party was over, all the people came downstairs to send off the new couple. When they passed by the open bar, Isabel said, “I really like the style.” Evan smiled and looked at Stephen. Stephen squeezed his lips tight and nodded. When they came to the entrance, they stood in two lines, holding the sparklers very high and waiting for the couple to come through the line.

“It’s really like New Year’s Eve in my hometown. People came out at midnight with sparklers.” Isabel said.

“Happy New Year,” Evan said, smiling at her under the light of the sparklers. At that moment, she felt like something inside her was lighting.

When everything was over, Evan, Stephen, and several people at the table decided to go to a bar. They asked Isabel for recommendations. Isabel said she always liked Scotch & Soda. They asked her if she would like to join them. She finally said yes because her friends were already left before the dance was over, which was the answer Evan was hoping for.

When they got there, it was already crowded. There was only a small table left. The six people squeezed in at a table, which was for three people. When they sat down, Isabel suddenly felt a little bit shy when she was the only girl squeezed among other five guys. Stephen threw out some ice-breaking questions, like everyone’s hobbies, guilty pleasures, favorite TV shows, etc. They began to talk nonstop without awkwardness.

Different than earlier at the wedding reception, Evan and Isabel were like old friends who came to a bar after work as a routine. They talked about everything, and everything sounded natural to talk about. However, there were some different meanings in those questions and answers. In every question Evan asked Isabel, there seemed to be a desperate attempt to connect. After tonight, he would go back to L.A. and work on his numerous projects. He would have only this memory and nothing left. In every answer Isabel said to Evan, there was honest openness and precious closeness. It had been a long time since she had been so open and close to someone that she just wanted to talk about her whole life with him.

They drank beer, played games, and talked for a long time. No one seemed to have the momentum to leave. Finally, when it was two a.m. and Stephen said they needed to catch the early flight, people said goodbye to each other.

When they were on the way out from the bar, Evan was a little tipsy. There was something he hadn't said to Isabel. He really wished he could stay longer than just tonight. He turned his head back and saw Isabel was behind the others on their group. He slowed down and tried to hold Isabel's hand. Isabel was startled and stopped. They were the only two people left in the bar. Others were standing at the entrance talking, without noticing them.

"I wish I could stay here longer," Evan said.

"I kind of wish that, too," Isabel said.

Evan suddenly stepped forward and stood right in front of Isabel. He clung his upper body to Isabel's and tried to kiss her. Thinking Evan would leave soon and never

come back, Isabel pushed Evan away and walked out of the bar. Her heart sank and hurt unexpectedly.

Stephen said he and Evan needed to drive Isabel home since it was so late. There was still some time left before they said their real goodbyes. In the car, Stephen and Evan discussed when they would get up and the work they needed to do. Isabel listened to what they were talking about. It was totally another world to her.

When they arrived at Isabel's home, Evan came out of the car and send her off. He hugged her tightly and smiled tenderly, saying, "You have no idea how nice it is to meet you. If you ever come to L.A, please do let me know. I'll show you around."

"Nice to meet you, too, Evan. I'm sure I will visit L.A at some point," Isabel said.

Evan kept the tight hug for so long that Isabel started to feel uncomfortable. At that moment, Evan just didn't want her to go. Although he knew he already passed the age that he could do whatever he wanted as long as he was in the mood, something crazy just ran through his mind. He lifted his head from her shoulder and turned his face to her cheek, trying to catch the moment and remember it. He felt it so torturing to think he was going to miss someone he only met once in his life. When thinking about this, he couldn't help kissing her cheek. Isabel suddenly felt frozen. He kissed her forehead again. Isabel pushed him away and turned her back towards him.

"Bye! Have a good night," Isabel said and walked to the front porch.

"Bye, Isabel," Evan said gently.

He saw her walk in, and they left.

"She is cute," Stephen said.

"Yeah ..." Evan sighed.

“I haven’t see you talk to someone so excitedly for a while,” Stephen said.

“Yeah.” Evan sighed again.

Stephen knew Evan felt something deep down inside himself. He hadn’t seen him so upset in quite a while.

Evan wrote in his diary when Stephen was already asleep that night, “I can be quite a loner sometimes, but, every so often, I do crave companionship. It seemed so close, but it’s like I missed my only chance.”

I've Been There

Lily had been working as a psychiatrist for three years after graduation from med school. She had been through a tough time, and she barely survived that.

It was a time she didn't want to talk about under any circumstances. She got married to Hudson immediately after she graduated. He proposed to her as her graduation gift, he said. She believed everything he said until what he did ruined everything she had back then.

She got residency set up by her professor when she was in her last year in med school. She worked so hard to get an official job after her residency, and she made it. Hudson was running a small company with his friends. Everything seemed fine with him until it wasn't.

When Lily went out for her lunch break today, she saw a man sitting on the curb at a corner. She was on the her out from a coffee shop, and passed by a blocked off area where a film crew was on break from shooting a movie. The guy had nice suit and tie on with neatly applied make-up, seeming to have a role in the movie.

She glanced at him, and that glance made her stop and stare. She started to observe him closely. He was in his thirties, and extremely slim and good-looking. He sat alone at the corner away from the rest, looking tired, sad, and desperate. He had his chin buried in hands, watching the crowd of pedestrians aimlessly.

She didn't know why; she could tell there was something serious going on inside him. For a second, she thought maybe he hadn't done well acting today. After seconds watching him, she felt it was more than how well he did his job; it was like something terrible had happened to him to make him upset.

After taking a shower, Lily went to bed and picked up a book to read. Not a single word could catch her attention. She put down the book, and the memory of the forlorn man on the curb came back to her.

She didn't try to remember the days with Hudson these past two years. She tried to seal away all the memories; like when a door was locked, everything was left behind in the room. But, today, when she saw that guy, the desperation on his face struck her like she was getting a heart attack. He looked frustrated, hopeless, and even lifeless. It was nothing to do with his acting. She could tell. She had the same thing.

I need to go back there tomorrow, Lily said to herself.

When the next day came, Lily struggled every minute waiting until lunch break. She went back to the same place. All the cast was still there except the guy she saw yesterday. She walked to a random crew member.

"Excuse me, sir, is someone in the cast not here today?" Lily asked.

"Uh... You mean Chris? He's been feeling sick since yesterday. Why? Are you looking for him?" the guy asked.

"I ... am his doctor. I remembered him telling me to come here today and he didn't answer his phone this morning. I was thinking maybe he would be here," Lily said.

"Oh, that poor guy. He may have forgotten. Here is his address," the guy said and took out his phone for Lily to take notes.

"Thanks so much. What's your name?" Lily asked.

"Just call me Levi," Levi said.

“Alright. I’m Lily. Here is my phone number and you can leave me a message or even call me if you see him feeling sick again.” Lily said and left her phone number with Levi.

Lily called to her office and said she couldn’t come in until afternoon.

On the way to Chris’s home, Lily reflected: Is this right? What would he think about her? Will he think she’s too creepy? But she just wants to know what’s going on with this man. Maybe she can help him solve his problem. What if he doesn’t have any problem and he was just unhappy yesterday? No, he didn’t even go to work today. Something must have happened to him. But it has nothing to do with her. He is neither a friend nor patient of hers. Should she go? Or should she leave?

When Lily had just gotten divorced, she locked her home all day long and didn’t want to go anywhere. It was under her best friend’s and her colleagues’ help that she could move past those devastating days.

I’ll just go and see what has happened to him. He may need my help, Lily said to herself.

When she arrived at Chris’s home, she could see nothing from outside because all the windows were fully covered by curtains and blinds. It was a tiny white house, simple, neat but not fancy. The lawn was quite wild, and the grasses were tall enough to hide their shoes if someone stood on them.

Lily stood at the front door, debating whether to ring the bell. At that moment, she felt like she was standing outside a giant box. It was totally locked, and she didn’t know if what was inside was either a surprise or a horror. Maybe she had really gone too far.

Or maybe the man inside really needed help. His face came to her again. That helpless, painful, and devastating look was like his heart had been shattered into millions of pieces and there was no way to put it back together. While thinking about this, Lily rang the bell. After a long silence, there was someone coming from the back of the house and uttering in a low voice, “Who is that?”

“Hi, I am Dr. Wallace. Levi asked me to check on you. They are worried about you,” Lily said.

“I’m fine. You can go back.”

“But I’m already here. Please let me in and at least make sure you are OK.”

“I’m ... OK.”

“I know, but let me just be sure. I’m a doctor. I need proof.”

There was a long silence, and the door opened.

Lily smiled and walked in swiftly.

There were not many decorations in the house, which was quite messy and dirty. There was a thick layer of dirt on the floor at the front entrance, and the mat hadn’t been vacuumed for a long time. As Lily walked through hallway, she felt emptiness throughout the house, nothing homey.

Chris took Lily to the living room and pointed out the sofa for her. When they sat down, Lily noticed Chris looked really tired. He had messy hair and there was much redness in his eyes. His T-shirt was loosely hanging on him and had several greasy spots on it.

“Hi, just call me Lily. Nice to meet you,” Lily said, trying to start the conversation.

“Hi ... Chris,” Chris said without looking at Lily.

“Are you alright? They’re all worried about you.”

“They are? I told the director I wouldn’t be there today,”

“Can you tell me what’s going on? I am a psychiatrist. You can trust me,” Lily said.

“Psychiatrist? So ... they think I already need a psychiatrist?” Chris said in a pathetic tone.

“Don’t think that way. Every single person can talk to a psychiatrist. Like you can go to McDonald’s just to grab a coffee,” Lily added, “Besides, I happen to be Levi’s friend. He asked me to come here only out of concern.”

Another lie to get close to Chris. She was getting better and smoother. Even she was surprised at herself at how good she was at lying.

Chris eyed Lily and then, lowered his head.

“It’s OK. You can talk to me about anything ... anything. Nothing is pointless if you speak it out. Treat me as your closest friend instead of a shrink,” Lily started, to encourage him.

“You won’t understand,” Chris said.

“Try me,” Lily said.

“Would you like a coffee? I may need a coffee first,” Chris stood up and said.

“Ah ... can I have tea instead, if you have any?” Lily asked.

“I only have Earl Grey,” Chris said.

“Earl Grey is my favorite,” Lily said.

When Chris came back with coffee and tea, the atmosphere became more easy-going. *His offering to help me actually got this started*, Lily thought.

“How about trading stories? You tell me one, and then I tell you one,” Lily said.

“Then it’s gonna take longer,” Chris said.

“You have other stuff to do this morning?” Lily asked.

“No, I’m just worried that I won’t have enough money to pay you,” Chris said.

“Oh my gosh, I won’t charge you for anything,” Lily said.

“Why?” Chris asked.

“You think I came here for money? I just saw you ... I ... just thought I could make a new friend. Let’s just have a talk like friends do,” Lily said.

“I will disappoint you with my story,” Chris said.

“Stories never disappoint people,” Lily said and looked at him firmly.

“I ... used to have a family ...” Chris began his story.

Something like a needle poked her heart. She squeezed a smile, raising her eyebrows to encourage him to continue.

“I had two kids, and ... they ended up being ... someone else’s,” Chris spoke in a very low voice.

Inside, Lily sighed deeply.

“Three months ago, when I came back home, my wife and ... my agent, they were having sex in bed.” Chris sat still and lowered his eyes. “They thought I would come home late because my agent asked me to attend a party, but I didn’t go.”

“I’m not rich or famous, but I did OK, and they transferred all my money to her account without my noticing. I don’t know how they did it, but some parts of money they

transferred was legal. It takes time to track the rest down. I didn't want to continue acting, but I still did, because I had literally no money."

Chris drank his coffee like drinking beer.

"I now know they were together even before our marriage. She took those two kids with her when she left. Yesterday my lawyer told me the kids are not mine."

"I only got the money back. And nothing else. It was like ... someone paid me to act a nightmare. I thought everything was real in the dream, and I had real feelings, but everyone else was fake. They were there only to scare me when I woke up. Now the nightmare comes to me every night, and I can't sleep. There's no point for me to do ... anything ... right now."

Lily listened to Chris with full attention. He almost choked with sobs as he told his story. Every word he said hurt her. She thought she had seen many kinds of pains during the past three years, but at that moment, the pain was so strong that she could barely take it. She bit her lip hard and tried her best not to cry.

They both lowered their head in silence, even though she knew she needed to be professional.

"I feel for you. I really do. What you have experienced ... I have been there. You know, when you go to a restaurant late in a day, right before their closing time, you don't know what to order until the waitress tells you they are out of everything except this thing. And then you realize it doesn't matter at that moment because that's the only thing left. Sometimes what's left isn't so bad. I'm not telling you to appreciate what you have left right now. But if it makes you full and helps you survive, then, you need to do it.

“When I first got divorced, I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to quit my job because I felt like I was not capable of doing anything. I didn’t even notice what kind of person my ex-husband really was; how could I have insight into what my patients needed? Then, my best friend Veronica came to my house every day when she got off from work, and we talked until midnight. I didn’t think about contacting my colleague, but she came to my house to check on me from time to time. Slowly, I realized I missed the bus, but there are tons of other buses I can take. Even if I miss the last one, I will just take a taxi.

“I know the realization process is hard, harder than any exam. You are much braver than the old me. It took me half a year to go back to work.”

“What happened to your husband?” Chris asked.

“I haven’t told this story to anyone, but it seems like today is the day,” Lily continued, “My ex-husband was a gay. He married me only because he wanted me to support his company. The worst thing was his lover was in that company, too.”

“How did you find out?” Chris asked.

“One day when I went to his company, he told me to wait for him because he was out running errands. I passed by a stall where I found out the lunch box I prepared for him was on someone else’s office table. I was thinking maybe he shared his lunch with his colleague. Then, a guy came to sit at the table. He didn’t come to our wedding, so I thought he was new.

“But he looked at me with a kind of weird expression. He asked me who I was looking for, and I said I was waiting for my husband. He said he went out for lunch. I

almost said, ‘What?’ but instead, I asked him, ‘He didn’t have lunch?’ He answered, ‘No, ... I don’t know.’ I kind of felt weird, but I didn’t say anything.

“That night, I asked my husband if he liked the ham sandwich in the lunch box. In fact, there was no ham sandwich in it. Then, he said yes. All of sudden, I felt like there was a boulder hitting my back and a knife slicing my heart at the same time.”

“What happened later?” Levi asked.

“What happened to you happened to me just the same. He stole my money for his company and left me,” Lily said.

There was a long silence. They didn’t know what to say to each other.

“You are much braver than me,” Chris said.

“Maybe we are the same amount of brave, just been through different pains. And we both will kill it,” Lily said.

“I am glad you are Levi’s friend,” Chris said.

“I actually only know his name and nothing else,” Lily said.

“Sounds like another story,” Chris said.

“If you got time,” Lily said.

“Try me,” Chris said.

The Camera

“Hi! This is Mia from vocal class.” Mia texted Liam. “I’m wondering if you know anything about cars because I plan to buy a car soon. I’m collecting as much information as I can now in case I get overwhelmed when I get there. It’s fine if you are not an expert or don’t have time.”

Mia and Liam went to the same vocal class. Mia was an acting major, and Liam was in audio engineering. They didn’t talk to each other until mid-term. They needed to pick two songs, one classic and one pop, and sing them in front of the class.

Liam chose “Me and Mrs. Jones” for the pop one and practiced for a long time. He did an excellent job that day. Their professor was famous for being picky and strict, but he gave Liam an A plus. Before that, Mia hadn’t noticed Liam at all.

“I like your voice! Good job!” Mia said to Liam on the way out when he was packing his bag.

“Thank you!” Liam said, raising his head, but she was already headed out.

Mia’s grandma was from Russia and her mom was half Mongolian and half Irish, so Mia got a pair of pretty blue eyes, purer than the blue sky on a cloudless day. When she talked, her glitter pink lips always caught people’s attention, not to mention her perfect nose.

Her parents were divorced when she was only one. Her grandma took her back to Russia and raised her there until she was old enough to go to boarding school. Then when she was 10 years old, her dad brought her back to the country. Growing up, she was always the prettiest in any group. Girls tried to avoid walking with her because they

could feel overshadowed. She was the one guys always wanted to talk to. Her exotic face added a hint of mystery, and her aloof personality made her out of reach at the same time.

Even though she went to the audition originally for Musical Theatre, she didn't get in. She was so disappointed because she had been so into singing and dancing since she was a little girl staying with her grandma. After a week, the director of the Acting program wrote her an email, hoping she could consider the Acting program. After several days of struggle, she decided to join that program. As her best friend Jen said, she was born to be the one in front of the camera.

The first day she walked into the classroom, she somehow had the sense of belonging because there were so many pretty faces there. She was not the only one anymore. After a semester, though, she didn't have the sense of belonging anymore. Everyone else felt like they were the chosen one.

After several minutes, Liam texted back. "Sorry, I am not that familiar with cars, but my cousin Andy is. Here is his number if you need it. I will let him know, and he can help you out."

When Mia was still hesitating, Liam sent her a text again. "He is a nice guy, and we are very close. You can definitely count on him."

Mia smiled when she saw this text and felt warm inside. They exchanged phone numbers when they were working on a group project the month before but they never contacted each other. Mia didn't expect him to be so considerate.

Before Mia decided to call Andy, Andy called her instead.

“Hi, Mia. This is Andy, Liam’s cousin.”

“Oh, hi.”

“I heard from Liam that you plan to get a car. I just helped my fiancée buy a car. I’m more than glad to help you.”

“Wow, that’s awesome but I don’t know how to drive a car yet, so it will be a lot of work for you.”

“That’s fine. I always teach my younger sisters and cousins to drive. No big deal for me.”

“OK. Thank you so much.”

After several times of searching for cars, Mia finally bought a second-hand Honda in excellent condition. Andy helped her shop for cars and negotiate along the way and never got impatient. By the time Andy taught Mia how to drive the car, they were already close friends.

Learning how to drive always reminded Mia of the days when she was still in her grandma’s home in Russia. Grandma always rode her motorcycle to grocery stores and to pick her up from kindergarten. Mia felt insecure most of the time after her parents got divorced and had their own new families. She would be the one left alone with her grandma. She waited for her grandma who would come and take her home every day when she was in the kindergarten. She enjoyed the feeling of sitting on the back seat and worrying about nothing, her eyes closed and face caressed by the wind softly, like traveling in a secret tunnel.

The night Mia finally learned to drive and could drive on her own, she made a video call to her grandma, and they talked about their recent lives. Since she got into the Acting program, there were few people she could talk to. Before going to college, she was so sure about her future. Musical Theatre, the stage, even Broadway. After a semester, some of her classmates already landed roles in the plays their department staged. She began to feel uncertain and anxious. This semester, with Liam and Andy's help, she gradually got her confidence back. After the mid-term, whatever she sang in the vocal class, Liam would always give her positive comments and encourage her. Mia started to hang out with Liam and Andy. Because of them, she met more friends.

It was late at night after Mia had taken a shower and was sitting on the couch. Someone knocked on her door so hard that it made the door shake. Mia realized it wasn't Liam or Andy because, they would call her name. The person didn't say a word, and just pounded the door heavily when one came to open the door. Mia felt threatened and scared. She couldn't guess who it was. She didn't dare open the door, even after the person left. She barely slept that night.

The next morning, when Mia went out and saw there was an empty beer bottle on the top of her car, she couldn't stop shivering. On the way to school, she called Andy and told him everything just happened with a shaking voice.

Andy and Liam came to her apartment that night to check on her. Liam kept silent. He had never known how to comfort people. He empathized with how people suffered but just couldn't find the right word. Then, Andy suggested to Mia that she

move out and find a new place to live. “Do you have someone you know that doesn’t like you?” Andy asked.

“I don’t know. I didn’t even have a lot of friends before I knew you guys,” Mia answered.

“Do you have any exes?”

“I do have one, but he moved to another city a couple of years ago.”

“Maybe he come back.”

“No way. Even if he did, it wouldn’t be him. We broke up quite amicably.”

“I think Andy is right. You should move to a new place, especially when you don’t know who this person is,” Liam said suddenly with a caring voice.

“I know that would work, but it just happened so suddenly. How could I find a new place right away? Plus, my lease is for one year. It’s only been half a year,” Mia turned to face Liam.

“The house I am living right now has three bedrooms and two bathrooms. One of the bedrooms is empty right now. I can talk to my landlord if that’s good for you,” Andy said. He sat straight suddenly and became excited.

“That’s a good idea. Is it comfortable for you, though, living with two guys?” Liam asked.

“Uh... it seems like a reasonable option. What if I just wait for like a week to see if that person will come again? Maybe it was just a random drunk guy,” Mia said.

“What if it was not? You are the only one living in this apartment. We have been worried about you,” Andy said with an anxious voice.

“OK ... I guess it’s the only option right now,” Mia said.

After Mia moved in, she started to hang out with Liam and Andy more often. Especially after her birthday party, she found out she really had a thing for Liam. Whatever happened, Liam was always there to support her.

One day when they were in the car driving back home, Liam looked at Mia, hesitating. “Do you think we should consider like dating?” Liam asked.

“Uh ... maybe so ... ” Mia said.

After couple months, they were already in relationship. Mia felt like Liam and Andy were already her family. She hadn't had this kind of feeling since she left her grandma's home. She believed she was having the best time of her life because she would never think something horrible was going to happen to her.

One morning when Mia was showering before going to school, she suddenly noticed a tiny dark spot stuck in the corner above her head. She trembled from fear and she could hardly support herself to stand. She quickly grabbed her towel, and, wobbly with shock and fear, went to sit on her bed with her towel wrapped around her.

Mia didn't know what to do. She could feel her heart thud heavily in her chest, and her thoughts were scrambled because of the shock. She felt like it was a century before she grabbed her phone, only to find her hands were still shaking crazily.

Mia called Liam and couldn't come up with complete sentences. She just remembered begging Liam to come to home. After Liam came, she told him what just happened in broken sentences and a trembling voice.

Liam's face sank and looked more and more miserable when Mia was telling him all about this. He went to the bathroom and checked the thing. It was a tiny black camera, the size of a dim.

He couldn't believe it just happened again. Three years ago, his sister experienced the exactly same thing. At that time, one of Andy's friends had a crush on Liam's sister Jessica. Andy was smoking weed back then, so he was always short of money. If it wasn't because Andy suddenly had a lot of money and weed at home, no one would have suspected him to be the one who hid a camera in Jessica's bathroom to sell the video to his friend.

How could it happen again? He was sure Andy had learned his lesson. When Liam's family found out about it, they didn't even tell Andy's parents, especially Liam's mom. She didn't want to disappoint her brother because of his son's behavior. They chose to forgive him. His sister was depressed for months after it happened and was not even willing to step into her bathroom. Their family had a hard time.

Liam didn't know how to tell Mia about this. After all, it was because of him that Mia met Andy, and he seemed so caring and considerate to her the whole time. He thought Andy was just being stupid back then and wouldn't do it anymore since he seemed older and wiser since that first incident. Liam felt like his world had just collapsed.

Liam was angry at Andy. He treated him as one of his best friends and as family, but he had hurt his sister and girlfriend for his own benefit in the same outrageous way. He didn't know who Andy would sell the video to this time, but he knew he was doing it

again. Liam could have helped Mia to find another place to live, but he trusted Andy. He felt like Andy was a total scumbag.

Liam sat on the floor, frowning, his eyebrows clenched in anger. His family chose to forgive Andy last time, but this time, he wanted to do something. Mia shouldn't be the one who went through this torture and horror.

Liam told Mia all Andy's history, and they both were grimly silent after he told her everything.

"I don't know what to do," Mia said, pained.

"Hi, baby, listen. I won't let you go through this on your own. We will definitely figure out how to deal with this," Liam said, trying to comfort her.

"How?" Mia asked.

"First of all, we act like normal and let the camera still be there. Then, we take a picture of it and tell my family about it. Maybe they can help us out, too. After all, it's only two of us now," Liam said.

"We don't go and ask help from the police?" Mia asked.

"We are not one hundred percent sure it's Andy yet. I am just guessing. If it's him, I don't know if my family wants to prosecute him. We need more evidence." Liam said.

"Where can we find evidence then?" Mia asked.

"How about this? You go to school as usual. We sneak into his room tonight before he comes back from work to see if there is something in his computer," Liam said.

"Are you sure it's gonna work legally?" Mia asked.

"Desperate measures in desperate situations." Liam said.

They never realized luck would never be on their side. When they came back home that night, the camera was already gone.

“So ... he found out. What the fuck!” Liam said.

They sat in silence for a long time, hopeless and dispirited.

“I will be here with you tonight, and you can go home with me and we will tell my family what has happened.”

“We already lost the chance. We have nothing for evidence now. It won't change a thing,” Mia said, bursting into tears.

“Come on, baby, don't be scared. I'm here. I'm with you every step of the way. We will find a way.”

The next day, they went to Liam's home and told his mom everything. His sister Jessica was there, too. After Sarah heard everything, she walked away in silence hanging her head. After Mia and Liam began their relationship, Mia was invited to their home a couple of times on holidays. Jessica found out she was angry with Mia every time when she came to their home because her parents treated Mia like their daughter already. Jessica had a boyfriend, but her mom never invited him to their home. Every time when Mia was here, Jessica felt like Mia was the daughter, not her.

Last time this happened to Jessica, her family chose to forgive Andy and it took her a long time to forgive them. This time, Jessica chose the path of avoidance. She didn't even say anything to comfort Mia and walked to her bedroom.

Mia wasn't expecting Jessica to offer help, but she couldn't believe she just ignored her. Instead, Liam's mom talked with her for a long time, but Mia could tell she

wouldn't suggest her going to the police. They had no evidence, even a picture of the camera.

Mia went back home alone and felt very frustrated. Everyone was sure that it was Andy, but no one said anything about him. She didn't understand. Everyone tried their best to comfort her and let her put it aside. Even Liam kept silent all the time his mom was talking.

When she got home, Andy's fiancée was sitting there waiting for him. Mia passed by without saying hello. When she was pacing restlessly in her bedroom, she decided to tell everything to Andy's fiancée.

"Hi, Angela! How's your day?"

"Not bad. How's yours."

"Very bad. Horrible."

"What ... happened?" Angela asked, but she didn't look like she was really worried.

"Do you know Andy put a hidden camera in Jessica's bathroom three years ago?"

"What are you talking about, Mia? Of course, I know. He told me it was just fun. He was young and dumb."

"Just for fun, huh? So, you didn't know it was for money?"

"Stop it, Mia. I don't care about his story."

"You don't care about his history? I just want to let you know he's done it again, this time to me. I found a hidden camera yesterday morning, and it was gone when I came back."

"What? Are you crazy? If you suspect Andy, where's the camera?"

“Come on, Angela! It existed! He took it back when he knew he was caught! How can you not believe me!”

“Come one, Mia! You are crazy. We are getting married. I trust him.”

“I’m crazy? He’s the crazy one! You all are crazy!”

Mia ran into her own room and cried without restraint. She buried her face in her pillow because she didn’t want Angela to hear.

She didn’t know what was going wrong. She didn’t even have someone to talk to.

She suddenly remembered that her best friend Jen said she was born to be in front of camera. Mia forced a smile and said to herself, “Is this what she meant?”

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