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The Second Choice

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THE SECOND CHOICE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Yangchun Li
May 2013

Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

This creative thesis strives to carve out the constitutional disappointments in our psychic experiences and the equally constitutional human effort to seek a temporal sense of contentment amid the disappointments, from the context of the increasing fluidity of the present world, where international mobility has ceased to be the privilege or misfortune of a few and become the norm of a growing globalized population. In this thesis, an inward-looking, self-exploring approach is employed to explore the pluralism in both disappointment and self-consoling. The limitations in the characters' perspectives are essential to both stories in this thesis, because a limited perspective can lead to disappointments, but it also allows the human subject to stay hopeful with the remaining options after the disappointing turn of events. Both stories are told in first person, because the first person point of view is very effective in showing the limitations of a particular perspective. Inspired by Kazuo Ishiguro, the stories adopt a very meticulous, analytical style of narration—a style that prompts deep thinking in readers and invites doubts.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The first duty of the human sciences is perhaps to hold on to both sides of the equation: that life can be good and made better, and that life ends in the ultimate disappointment of death.

—Ian Craib, *The Importance of Disappointment*

Disappointment is a universal experience that literatures of every historical period have tried to depict and explicate. As the postmodern human experience becomes more and more fragmented, the increasing pluralism in both disappointment and self-consoling raises a great challenge for writers today. The two stories in this thesis strive to carve out the constitutional disappointments in our psychic experiences and the equally constitutional human effort to seek a temporal sense of contentment amid the disappointments, from the context of the increasing fluidity of the present world, where international mobility has ceased to be the privilege or misfortune of a few and become the norm of a growing globalized population. As Eva Hoffman points out in *The New Nomads*, we live in a “decentered world” today, “one in which the wanderers no longer trace and retrace a given territory or look to any one symbolic locus of meaning” (57). In this context, the disappointment experienced by the mobile subject cannot be addressed with a simple diagnosis of “homesickness” (58)—an inward-looking, self-exploring approach is much needed.

The novel that provides me the greatest inspiration on human disappointment is Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. I find myself exceedingly drawn to the character of Stevens. Fully devoted to his service to Lord Darlington, Stevens, the butler, confines himself to a state of oblivion by choice—he suppresses his occasional doubts in his employer's conducts, and denies himself the entitlement to his own political views. Throughout the book, Ishiguro gives many hints that point the readers' attention to this oblivion, one of which being the conversation between Stevens and Mr Cardinal:

‘Haven't you even had a suspicion? The smallest suspicion that Herr Hitler, through our dear friend Herr Ribbentrop, has been manoeuvring his lordship like a pawn, just as easily as he manoeuvres any of his other pawns back in Berlin?’

‘I'm sorry, sir, I'm afraid I have not noticed any such development.’

‘But I suppose you wouldn't, Stevens, because you're not curious. You just let all this go on before you and you never think to look at it for what it is.’ (223)

Not only does Stevens let the political situation go on before him and “never think to look at it for what it is,” he also develops a habit of disregarding his own feelings about relations and forgoes the opportunity to find companionship. He often chooses to suppress his emotional reactions towards Miss Kenton in order to maintain the “dignity” (33) of a great butler:

Irritating as Miss Kenton's behaviour was, I could not afford to give it much thought, for by then the first of the guests had arrived. . . .

. . .
. . . For when I inquired who it was that had arrived, Miss Kenton continued past me, stating simply: ‘A message if it is urgent, Mr Stevens.’ This was extremely annoying, but, of course, I had no choice but to hurry on upstairs. (80-85)

Sadly, in the end, Stevens has no choice but to admit that the greatness of Lord Darlington—whom Stevens has given up all personal instincts in order to serve—is an illusion. All the suppression only amounts to the greatest disappointment in the story—Stevens’s final realization that it is now too late to redeem the loss in his life.

I find this notion—the disappointment that results from one’s oblivion—a fascinating subject to explore in my stories. Set in a transnational frame, my characters’ oblivion stems from the ungraspable complexity of the translocal experience. In *A Special Guest*, Benjamin misplaces his faith in the universality of international drifting. Having seemingly coped well with his childhood uprooting, Benjamin thinks that he could do well in any strange place. What he doesn’t realize is that his first uprooting happened at an early age when he did not face the pressures of a grown-up. He has a natural tendency to focus on the surrounding environment rather than human relations, which makes the first transition relatively easy, because he was too occupied by the excitements of the new environment to brood on the difficulties of fitting in. But this time in China, he completely misses the dynamics of the society around him and his real role in the school, dropping into a similar state of detachment like the butler in *The Remains*

of the Day, and later coming to the disappointing realization that he has missed the larger picture.

The unfamiliar language environment that often accompanies translocation encourages this detachment. As Hoffman observes, “the richness of articulation gives the hues of subtlety and nuance to our perceptions and thought” (48). At a stage when the mobile subject is not yet used to the more sophisticated use of his new language, he constantly interacts with his surroundings in a once-removed manner, even though he is in direct contact with his new environment. This makes his surroundings seem pleasantly uncomplicated. Yet this is a trick of perception that lures the mobile subject to hold on to an unhealthy degree of detachment, where his world seems simple, and he have very few social duties to fulfill. He may enjoy the simplicity of this phase, but not without cost. For Benjamin, the childhood uprooting did not involve as much a language challenge, but during his stay in China, the impact of a language barrier is profound. There is very little in the small town society in which he can participate directly. However, Benjamin does not immediately recognize this as a drawback. He misinterprets this lack of participation as the simplicity of life in a small town. I try to create a contrast between Benjamin’s meticulous observation of his surroundings and his insensibility to the deeper implications. The story begins with Benjamin’s detailed description of the apartment that he is given. But as the story progresses, I hope the readers come to realize that his observations all stop at the surface—he observes from the view point of an impassive spectator rather than an active participant.

At this point, I think it's important that I share my experience of forming a story idea. At the beginning stage of writing this creative thesis, I started out looking for a story by searching my own life for a significant event. However, although I could think of several important moments in my life, none of them seemed to be interesting story-seeds. The truth is, I have never been used to grabbing the party's attention with my own stories. I'm too conscious of the relativism of the word "significance"—the events in my life are only a few tiny particles against the enormous backdrop of the universe. They may be significant to me, but are hardly noticeable to those not involved.

But, if a tempest in my own microcosm can appear barely a drizzle to an unrelated human being, how many times have I rubbed shoulders with another without realizing the tumult going on inside his world? How many times have I dismissed something as trivial when it is someone else's life-changing event? There have been many people whose paths once crossed mine, but the encounters were so brief that I never got to hear their stories. What happened to them? What if I bring them back in writing, ask the questions that I never asked, and answer them with my imagination?

During my senior year in high school, the school hired a conversation teacher from Nigeria to help us practice spoken English. Despite the fact that English was a crucial component of our education, none of the students had ever had a face-to-face experience with anyone from an English-speaking country, so we were all very excited to meet him. I remember our English teacher telling us that this conversation teacher's name was Benjamin, "just like Benjamin Franklin." When my class finally got to meet him, Benjamin asked us to please understand that he was a friend, not a teacher. But the fact is,

sadly, he did not become our friend. That one meeting turned out to be the only time that we talked to him. All we learned about him were the things he told us that one time—that in his country it was not acceptable to eat while you were walking on the street, that he had come to China at his brother's bidding, and that he liked Michael Jackson. I saw him on campus several times, but I was too shy to initiate a conversation with him. Then, a few months later, he left the school. Rumors said that he stomped out in a rage, but nobody was sure what had caused his dissatisfaction.

Now, thinking back, I wish that I had reached out to get to know Benjamin. We were all so concentrated on our studies that it seldom occurred to us that life poses other challenges beside the National Higher Education Entrance Examination. That a teacher might need a warm word of support from us was a notion very far beyond us. In a sort of dream/wish-fulfillment attempt to make up for what I failed to grasp, I dedicate my first story to Benjamin, an epitome of displacement whose life path crossed mine years before I could understand the meaning of the word.

In short, my first story idea arises from a belated question: Why did our conversation teacher leave the school after only a few months' employment? This is a question to which the actual answer might have faded into a remote memory, the remnant of a bitter event from which those involved have moved on. Yet to me, the bystander, the question re-emerges years after the actual event, resonating ever stronger with my own experience of living abroad, demanding an explanation.

By the time I finish *A Special Guest*, I already know that I want my second story to take place in a dance studio and that I want to include some Chinese culture. Having

had a good experience developing the first story from a question, I set my mind floating around the studio where I used to take dance lessons, trying to pick up a question that I once overlooked. The owner of that dance studio is a forty something man who always enjoys a good laugh. I remember being told that he is currently married to his second wife and that he used to co-own the studio with his first wife—they got divorced a few years ago. Surely, in real life, asking the reason for the divorce would be nosy. But a question that drives a bad gossip in real life could drive a good story on the pages.

The Second Choice depicts “the uncertain course of naturalization” (Koshy 608). In critiquing Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*, Susan Koshy points out that, in Lahiri’s stories, “racial or national differences remain a latent force in the action, and the narrative energy stems from conflicts triggered by gender, sexuality, or generational difference” (595). This is also what I try to capture of the “diasporic citizenship” (607) in the second story—that despite the particular culture they come from, the characters laugh and cry for the same elements of life as people of other culture backgrounds, while the “latent force” of that particular culture affects the diasporic citizens in uncertain ways.

Koshy argues that “the diasporic citizen becomes a vehicle for minority cosmopolitanism by reconfiguring ‘imperfect’ or plural national attachments as a mode of inhabiting the earth” (597). What I try to show in *The Second Choice* is that, removed from the larger cultural context, “national attachments” could be rendered quite fragile and disappointing, and the reconfiguration of these “imperfect” attachments is the diasporic citizen’s way of sustaining a sense of temporal contentment. In *The Second Choice*, the divorce of Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Mei is certainly a disappointment. But

the bigger disappointment is the failed faith of the nephew. The diasporic citizens in this story have maintained a close family tie. With the proud way in which the nephew relates to the origin of his aunt's name as well as the old story that coincides with his uncle's marriage, I try to show that the nephew attaches a large part of his identity to his Chinese heritage, and without many sophisticated cultural symbols (literature, art, etc.) to carry the heritage, he greatly relies on this family romance to maintain this attachment. When his uncle's marriage is in crisis, the nephew feels that his identity is also in crisis.

The story also attempts to show the pluralism in the diasporic citizens' reconfiguration of their national attachments. When the romance fails, the older family members quickly find new reassurance about the changed situation from the second half of the historical story (which the nephew probably has never heard of until the end of the story, but this is up to the reader's interpretation), while the nephew consoles himself with the acknowledgement of uncertainty and relativism as the norm of life.

The limitations in the characters' perspectives are essential to both stories. It is because of these limitations that they experience disappointments, but at the same time, without some limitations of view, none of us can enjoy the temporary contentment in life. I choose to tell both stories in first person, because the first person point of view is, in my opinion, the most effective in showing the limitations of a particular perspective. Inspired by Ishiguro, I also try to create a feeling of a limited perspective through a very meticulous, analytical style of narration—a style that prompts deep thinking in readers and invites doubts. In *A Special Guest*, the limitation of Benjamin's perspective lies in his inattentiveness to human relations, and the use of a "central narrator" (Burroway 210)

allows the story to, without sacrificing the structure, show Benjamin's habit of perceiving his surroundings only in terms of how they relate to his own experience. In *The Second Choice*, Ruiming is a "peripheral narrator" (210), whose narration is centered on his uncle. This is also in accordance with the limitation of the narrator's perspective—a decentered self that is dependent on the stability of the Chinese diasporic community.

Ishiguro is a master at consoling the readers on the ultimate disappointment with temporal contentment. He often ends his works with small physical enjoyments that provide temporary satisfaction, which seems to point to a belief that, even though disappointments and crises are perpetual, we could still seek the small, temporary pleasures that make life worth living. The following are two such endings from works by Ishiguro.

This was Sarah Vaughan's 1954 version of 'April in Paris', with Clifford Brown on trumpet. So I knew it was a long track, at least eight minutes. I felt pleased about that, because I knew after the song ended, we wouldn't dance any more, but go in and eat the casserole. And for all I knew, Emily would re-consider what I'd done to her diary, and decide this time it wasn't such a trivial offence. What did I know? But for another few minutes at least, we were safe, and we kept dancing under the starlit sky.
(*Come Rain or Come Shine*, 86)

I filled my coffee cup almost to the brim. Then, holding it carefully in one hand, my generously laden plate in the other, I began making my way back to my seat. (*The Unconsoled*, 535)

Inspired by Ishiguro, I end *A Special Guest* with a kiss between Benjamin and Lili. It is a kiss that undermines the classic Hollywood ending kisses (such as the kiss between Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard at the end of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*) in that it involves very little romance. The kiss can be understood as Benjamin's attempt to unsettle the authority that has disappointed him, but still carries a short period of physical gratification and brings a sense of contentment to Benjamin: he realizes that the simplicity of his drifting life is an illusion, but he has done what he could for the moment, and he relates to his future plan in a hopeful tone.

The ending of *The Second Choice* serves a double purpose. I still want to illustrate the human capacity to appreciate small enjoyments and remain hopeful in spite of major crises in life. But at the same time, the ending echoes a Chinese idiom: “如人饮水，冷暖自知” (Like drinking water, one knows whether it's cold or warm oneself). What I do not attempt with my stories, is to “teach the reader a lesson” on translocation. The psychic experience of translocation is multileveled and affects each one of us in a different manner. While sharing our stories is a healthy approach to cope with the complications, I believe the taste of this experience varies from person to person. I consider this view the essence of my second story. While it brings us a certain aesthetic pleasure to find romantic similarities between each other's stories, it is the person who lives the life that tastes the life.

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CHAPTER TWO
A SPECIAL GUEST

Mr. Hu led me to the third floor and turned to the heavy iron door that was labeled “302.” On my way up I had noticed that all the doors in this building were of the same kind, bearing a peephole and a number tag. There were two keyholes in the door—Mr. Hu unlocked the door by turning two different keys in them. Behind the first door was a wooden door. Mr. Hu unlocked this second door and stepped in. I followed him and found myself in a small living room with white walls and cream-colored tile floor. Mr. Hu did not switch on the light, but the window let in enough light. There was a midnight blue fabric sofa on the long side of the room and two matching chairs against the adjacent wall, creating an L shape. In front of the sofa was a glass tea table. A water dispenser stood in a corner. A door leading to what I guessed to be the bedroom was ajar but I couldn’t make out much inside except for the same white walls and tile floor.

“I hope you find everything comfortable here, Mr. Martins,” said Mr. Hu in English.

“Oh this is very nice, thank you.”

“Mr. Martins, if you are in need of anything please don’t hesitate to phone me. You are a special guest to Second High. Principal Wang wanted to make sure you enjoy the accommodations we provide. Now you must be tired from your flight. Please have a good rest. Principal Wang has arranged a welcome dinner for you tonight.”

Mr. Hu handed me the keys and left the apartment. I pushed open the door that was ajar and saw the inside was indeed the bedroom. The furnishing was as simple as the living room, consisting of a twin-size bed, a small desk with a desk lamp, and a bare wooden chair. There was a balcony connected to the bedroom. It was sealed with glass, like a small greenhouse. I sat down on the bed and pondered whether I should unpack or take a nap first. Despite the long flight, I was in fact not very tired. I had plenty of sleep on the plane. Plus, the excitement of arriving in China for my first job after college was still on the rise. However, I was a little nervous about the welcome dinner. What would Principal Wang and others say to me? Would we be able to communicate without misunderstanding?

My father believed that every meal with the boss is real business—it was a point that he never forgot to emphasize when he recounted stories of his early years in America. In grad school, he entertained his professors with Nigerian dishes and novelties at departmental luncheons and lab dinners, during which he would deliberate over his words and, with just the right portion of carelessness in his tone, insinuate that he had been working long hours in the lab. “You’ve got to create chances to market yourself. Nobody else will speak for you,” father used to declare. His English, after many years in the US, was still thick with a Nigerian accent. “Knowing how to tell people what you do is as important as knowing how to do what you do.” He perfected this craft throughout grad school, postdoc, and his tenure track years. Now, as I was sitting on the edge of the bed and thinking things over, I became convinced that the dinner tonight would

determine how well I could fit in at this school. I decided that, even though I was still not tired, I could use a little nap to ensure my working up a good performance tonight.

* * *

I was woken up from my nap by the cell phone that Mr. Hu had given me at the airport. It was Mr. Hu calling to inform me that he would be picking me up for dinner in a few minutes. Hanging up the phone, I realized that I was still in my travelling clothes, so I went to my suitcase and took out a shirt and a pair of trousers—my mother had rolled them up in a way so that they wouldn't get too wrinkled. After changing into them, I quickly splashed some water on my face and went downstairs.

A black Volkswagen Passat was just pulling in as I stepped out of the building. The front passenger door opened, and I saw it was Mr. Hu.

“Did you have a good rest, Mr. Martins?” Mr. Hu beamed broadly and extended a hand to me. “Please get in the car. Our school driver will take us to the restaurant.”

The driver turned to look at me as I seated myself in the back. Mr. Hu said something in Chinese—perhaps, “this is the new teacher from America”—and the driver nodded and smiled at me.

The drive to the restaurant was quite relaxing. The sun had set by now and the street was lit up by the tall street lamps on both sides. There were quite a few locals on the wide sidewalk, who seemed to be families enjoying a leisurely after-supper walk in the summer night breeze. Every now and then we'd pass a walled or fenced enclosure, and each time Mr. Hu would point out the purpose of that place: *this is the City Hall*, or *this is the Forestry Bureau*, and so forth.

I had imagined a large group of school officials and teachers at my “welcome dinner,” but it turned out to be a small party of four people: Principal Wang, his deputy whom Mr. Hu introduced as Principal Liu, Mr. Hu, and myself. Principal Wang looked about the same age as Mr. Hu—my guess was that both were in their fifties. Besides age, however, the two had nothing in common. Mr. Hu was of medium height and stooped a little. His hair had all turned grey. Principal Wang had black hair, but the color looked artificial, and the lines on his face gave away his age. He talked slow, as if to give time for each word to unfold its authority. Principal Liu looked much younger, probably thirty something. I had learned that Mr. Hu was the Director of English Education at Second High. Over the course of dinner, his role was largely that of a translator. Because all words had to go through a mediator, my performance of my father’s tricks was significantly compromised. I couldn’t make any jokes that required immediate response and all my quips seemed to have missed the target. It’s like having someone else playing a dart game for you—you miss all the fun of throwing the darts, and you have no idea whether this person is good enough or how hard he will try on your behalf.

Principal Wang seemed to be in a good mood. After the introduction, he said something to me in Chinese. Mr. Hu smiled and explained, “Mr. Martins, Principal Wang just said your name is the same as one of the founding fathers of your country, Benjamin Franklin. It’s a very good name. You will be a valuable addition to our school.”

I gave a small laugh and thanked Principal Wang for his hospitality. But the truth was, the only other time someone had said something similar to me was in middle school history class. That was Michael D, who always had fun teasing me, the Nigerian child

who had recently transferred to the school to join his dark-skinned father in the US. The teasing was never too out of control, and at the time I was far too absorbed by the fresh change of environment to be overwhelmed by my mischievous classmates. Still, even now, it seemed to be a mildly embarrassing idea to take extra pride in that great founding father simply because my name was also Benjamin.

Halfway through dinner, Mr. Hu leaned towards me and said in a lowered tone, “Mr. Martins, I know in your country, people are very open when—” he paused and let out an awkward laugh, “when they want to show affections to someone, but you see here, especially in a school like this, people have a different standard when it comes to what is appropriate in public—” He paused again to check if I was on the same page with him. I assured him that I was aware of the cultural differences and that my brother, who had worked in Shanghai for years, had instructed me on social propriety before I left for China. Mr. Hu listened attentively and asked a couple of questions about my brother’s job. Then he went silent for a few seconds. When he spoke again, it seemed he had thought this over and was determined to be optimistic. “Mr. Martins, it’s great that your brother has introduced you to our culture, although Shanghai is a big international city, while this town . . . anyway, I’m sure you’ll be just fine. Please forgive me for being over-cautious.”

* * *

The next morning I woke up with a craving for some eggs for breakfast. I walked into the kitchen and was surprised to find a big gas cylinder connected to the stove. This was something my brother did not prepare me for. Perhaps he didn’t have to use gas

cylinders for cooking in Shanghai. After a close examination, I figured out how to operate the steel cylinder and made a small flame on the burner. Then I realized I didn't have eggs or any other groceries to make breakfast, and this was a much bigger challenge for me than the gas cylinder. I didn't know how to get to the grocery store or how to ask except in English. Come to think of it, I was far from settled in my new place. I phoned Mr. Hu to ask for help, but as soon as I heard him on the other end, I changed my mind and asked for my schedule instead.

“Mr. Martins, please don't worry about your schedule for now. Principal Wang wants to see to it that you are settled comfortably first. How is everything in the apartment?”

“Actually, Mr. Hu, I was about to ask you for a favor. I need to make a trip to the grocery store. But you see . . .”

“Of course. I should have thought of that. I'm about to teach a class, but I'll send my daughter to help you. She is also an English teacher here. She doesn't need to teach until 1:30 this afternoon, and I can give her leave from her office duties for the morning.”

I thanked Mr. Hu and hung up. About 15 minutes later, my doorbell rang. It was a young woman, petite, with red highlights in her short hair. She introduced herself as Lili, Mr. Hu's daughter. Her crisp voice and simple office attire exuded a sense of assurance. I welcomed her in and apologized for taking up her time. She smiled and said, “It's my pleasure to help. Plus I can get away from work for a little while.”

We took a cab to a local supermarket. I tried hard to think of everything that I might need—I knew if I forgot something I would have to inconvenience Lili or Mr. Hu

again. I bought a lot of packaged foods that could last for a while. Lili joked that I might as well buy the whole store. “I can take you here again, you know.”

This trip made me deeply aware of how much I had needed help. Neither the cab driver nor the cashier spoke English. Despite my one semester of Chinese in college I couldn’t understand a single word when Lili talked to them. I remembered my semester of studying abroad in Barcelona. I was able to get around then with my combination of English and barely level-one Spanish. But here in this small town in China I couldn’t go anywhere on my own.

I offered to thank Lili with a coffee or tea. “There is a place within this supermarket that has really good bubble tea,” said Lili, “but the only place where you can get coffee in this town is McDonald’s.”

I could tell she was curious to see my reaction to her mention of McDonald’s. “Although I’ve always considered bubble tea a bit too girly for me,” I said, “I don’t think a McDonald’s coffee says ‘thank you’ in the correct tone.” We both laughed and Lili started leading me to the bubble tea place.

It was only a small booth that sold cold drinks. The foamy drink was just like the bubble tea from the tea shop outside my apartment back in college. We sat down on a long bench near the exit of the supermarket, and Lili asked how I learned about this job. I told her that I recently graduated from college with a degree in biology. “Many of my fellow students went on to graduate schools, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do the same. My brother, who made a fortune in Shanghai, insisted that I should look beyond North America. He said a lot of great things about China. In the end I was unable to resist the

temptation. I found this job opening online. ‘High school English teacher position available. Must be native English speaker. Accommodations included.’ It sounded perfect to me.”

Lili seemed a little surprised. “You were hired as an English teacher?”

Puzzled by her question, I said, “Of course. What else do you think I could be? A secret agent?”

I wasn’t really offended, but my reply might have sounded defensive. Lili seemed to very much regret what she said and sought to change the topic by asking what my brother was doing in Shanghai.

“He works for Puma, the shoe company.”

“Why didn’t you join him there? Your life would be much more exciting in a big city.”

“My brother and I are very different. I thought a smaller town would suit me better. Of course I didn’t know McDonald’s would be the only coffee shop in town.”

* * *

It had been three weeks since my “welcome dinner.” I was still waiting for Mr. Hu to give me my work schedule, but I wasn’t completely idle. My apartment building was located on campus, and I had been walking all over the place to feel my way around. Second High had four classroom buildings and one office building. Behind one of the classroom buildings there were six outdoor ping-pong tables made of concrete. The paint on the tables had faded to a mottled greyish color—you could barely see the white lines. In the middle of each table there was a row of bricks that seemed to supply the place of

the net. Every afternoon I saw a group of older men gather around this area to play ping-pong. Back home, I had never been too enthusiastic about ping-pong, but I hadn't touched any sports since I arrived here, and I found myself craving for a part in this local fun. However, I hesitated at the prospect of introducing myself and joining those men, as I figured they probably didn't speak any English. Then one afternoon, when I spotted Lili walking from the classroom building to her office, I quickly walked up to her and begged her to introduce me to them. It was an easy task for her. As it turned out, those men were all retired teachers of this school. They all had worked with Mr. Hu and known Lili since she was little. Lili later told me that she called all of them "uncles." With Lili's help I quickly made friends with them and started playing ping-pong on a daily basis. Although we didn't share the same language, they never ran out of patience reading my hand gestures and body language.

Lili had taken me shopping three times, twice for groceries and once for clothes. She had taught me how to give instructions to cab drivers and how to tell salespeople what I wanted in Chinese, but I still called her whenever I needed to go out.

Once Lili took me to the office that she shared with eleven other English teachers. Every teacher had his or her own desk. But all the desks were pushed together in twos or threes, which meant each one of them had one or two "desk neighbors." I began to wonder where my desk would be placed when I started teaching. If I was assigned to Lili's office, I could see myself becoming Lili's desk neighbor, as she currently only had one neighbor, and her desk was at a corner of the office where a third one could easily be added. I told this to Lili, but she only laughed a bit awkwardly. You might think I was

attracted to her. My brother thought so when I told him about Lili on the phone. But it wasn't that. I might have made it sound like I spent a lot of time with her, but in fact Lili seldom had free time. Besides her busy work schedule, she was also studying; she wanted to go to graduate school. In order to be accepted by a graduate program, she had to get good grades in a set of exams.

"Don't tell anybody that I'm studying for those exams," said Lili during one of our shopping trips.

"Why?"

"Just keep it secret for now. I'll explain it to you later."

I didn't mind that Lili refused to tell me the reason right away. I actually appreciated her trusting me with a secret.

"Where do you want to go for graduate school?" I asked.

"My first choice is Shanghai. Other big cities will do, too. I'm tired of the small town life."

"I'm the opposite. I never liked big cities. I enjoy the simplicity of this town very much."

"Do you really?"

Indeed I started to enjoy my life in this town. For the first time, I found myself in a peer-pressure-free environment. I didn't have to try to fit in—when your foreignness was so obvious, you really didn't need to worry about being different. My father hadn't been so keen on my following my brother to China. "You are not that type," I remembered him insisting—he thought that I should "pull myself together" and try to get

into medical school instead. He did have a point; I was not like my brother who could instantly make friends with a group of strangers in a bar. But did one have to be a particular type to go drifting in a small foreign town?

* * *

When I finally got to teach my first class, Principal Wang arranged a special meeting with Mr. Hu and me to explain my duties.

“Mr. Martins, every teacher in this school is hired for the special skills he or she possesses. And your special skills are the language you speak and the culture you come from. The other English teachers here, they teach the way they have been taught in their school years. They ask the students to memorize words, phrases, grammar rules, and texts. That is the old-fashioned way, although an effective way to get the students through the important National Higher Education Entrance Examination. But for the New-Model school that Second High strives to be, we need to add something to supplement the old-fashioned method. We need you to immerse the students in your language and culture. The students will still have their regular English teacher for words and grammar. But you will be their special teacher for immersion.”

The arrangement was that I should teach one class per day, but each day I would have different groups of students. The total number of students at Second High was around 3,000, so it would take almost a whole semester to cover all students by one round. “It’s a small addition to their English education,” said Mr. Hu, “but at least we are trying to do something new. Mr. Martins, because you are not expected to give the

students assignments or grade anything, you do not need to sit for office hours like the other teachers. Your time outside the classroom is at your own disposal.”

I was quite happy with this arrangement. My workload was light. I talked to students about movies or sports in slowed-down English, which didn't take much preparation. I didn't need to worry about repeating the same topic since I had different students each day. My classes were in the afternoons, so after class I would just go home, change, and rush to my ping-pong games.

I usually started my class by asking what the students wanted to know about America. Once, a girl brought up that a Starbucks was recently opened in the city where her cousin worked. “My cousin says it's too expensive for her, but her boss likes it,” she declared. “Do you drink a lot of coffee? Do you like Starbucks?”

“I suppose I do. But you can actually get more than just coffee at Starbucks. They can also brew green tea for you.”

One student said it was quite unnecessary to go somewhere just for green tea. “If I go to Starbucks I will not get green tea. I will get something that I can't make myself. How difficult is it to pour hot water into tea leaves?” Then another pointed out that the advantage of Starbucks was that it made even a simple cup of tea more enjoyable by providing a place for people to sit down with friends.

“I'll make a pot of tea at my own place and invite my friends.”

“You mean our dirty dorm?”

My mind started to drift off in the midst of these arguments. I was brought back to one particular afternoon, not long after I had decided to come to China. It was earlier that

same day that my father had said “you are not that type.” That afternoon, I had gone to the Starbucks a couple of blocks away from my parents’ house to grab a coffee. I had seated myself inside on one of those tall chairs by the window. From where I was sitting, I could see three outdoor ceiling fans slowly stirring the air on the patio, and the green fabric of the big Starbucks parasols moving gently with the airflow.

I could remember that afternoon so vividly, mostly because there had been this one guy who caught my attention. He was sitting underneath one of the patio parasols, wearing a big wristwatch, grey striped T-shirt, and khaki shorts. A square shape depressed into the back of his cotton shirt below the neckline, where a fabric tag must have been sewn onto the inside of the shirt. At times, he pressed a cell phone to his ear. He appeared to be my age. His dark skin was almost the same shade as mine. Small, tight curls crawled on his scalp. His car key lay on the table, attached to the logo of a local university. Next to the key was a book—*Common American Phrases in Everyday Contexts*. The book was the only thing that revealed his foreignness. Would father consider him “that type”? I remembered myself trying to picture him to be the very image of my father 30 years ago, well, minus the cell phone.

* * *

After that class of discussing Starbucks, an English teacher, Mr. Xu, whom I remembered to be Lili’s desk neighbor, came to me to “borrow a class.” He explained that a standardized test was approaching. The group of students that I was going to teach the next day were his students, and he wondered if I could let him have the students instead.

“Mr. Martins, it is very important that the students do well on this test. The school’s ranking depends on it. Please let me borrow your class so I can get them better prepared.”

I found this request extremely unusual, but I told him that I had no problem as long as Mr. Hu agreed. Later that day I went to Mr. Hu’s office to ask his opinion on this matter. Mr. Hu seemed very tired, but he listened attentively as I explained Mr. Xu’s request and confirmed that such “borrowing” was allowed as long as the teacher had a good reason.

After this incident several other teachers borrowed classes from me, including Lili. I discovered that those kinds of tests happened almost every month. At first it was just the English teachers that came to borrow my classes. But before long teachers of all subjects started to swarm in whenever there was an “important test.” Sometimes I went through a whole week without having to teach.

One day I was at a ping-pong game when Lili came up and asked if I had a few minutes. I was already losing the game so I simply stopped trying and waved goodbye to the men. I was still embarrassed about the game when Lili and I walked onto the track surrounding the playground.

“Did you see my last kill? Pretty impressive, right?”

“Benjamin, I have news.”

I sensed the seriousness in her voice, so I dropped my self-mockery and fixed my eyes on hers.

“I’m accepted to a graduate program in Shanghai.”

“Congratulations! That’s really good news! Now you can go to a big city and seek your dream. Why did you sound so grave? For a minute I thought something bad happened.”

“They won’t let me go. The school.”

“Is that why you wanted me to keep your studying secret? But they can’t stop you if you are determined, can they?”

“Benjamin, you don’t understand. They will ask my father to persuade me to stay. And he cannot fail this task. Do you know how many younger teachers covet his position? He worked hard all his life to get where he is now.”

We both fell silent. It seemed neither of us knew how to continue the conversation, so we kept on walking without speaking. Apart from a few student-athletes who seemed to be chatting and doing their warm-ups at one corner of the playground, Lili and I were the only people in the vicinity. I suddenly realized that the playground had always looked quite deserted—the school never had people repaint the gym bars or sweep the track. It was already late fall. Withered leaves were falling from the poplar trees beside the playground and had spread all over the track, breaking into crunchy pieces under our shoes.

After a few minutes, Lili seemed to have mustered up more courage to pick up the topic again. “Benjamin, I have thought about it. I have a plan. But only you can help me carry it out. Will you help me?”

“Of course. What can I do?”

“I need to make them want me to go. I can’t make really bad mistakes so that they fire me. The graduate school won’t take me if I have bad records. But I can act inappropriately so that they will be happy to let me go. Benjamin, I need you to kiss me. I need you to kiss me in public, where the principal can see. They can’t fire me for kissing, but they will not want me here after they see us kissing in public. Will you do that?”

Lili’s eyes shone with confidence in her plan. But I was slightly annoyed. Had she even considered the consequence I would have to bear if we were to carry it out? True, she said that the school wouldn’t fire a teacher for kissing in public. But I could see her plan was still selfish.

“Lili, I wish I could help. But you see, your plan, it’s bound to jeopardize my career. There must be some other way.”

The eagerness faded from Lili’s face. “Benjamin, I thought you would have known by now. The school is not planning to renew your contract after this semester. They are letting you go.”

At first I couldn’t take in what Lili said. I tried to make sense of it, but the noises from the students-athletes, which had been barely noticeable before, now seemed to interfere with my thinking. I turned and saw that they had started their training—three of them were running in our direction. We stepped to the side of the track and let the runners pass us. It was only then that I managed to absorb Lili’s words and give the situation a quick assessment. “Lili, I understand your frustration over this grad school matter, but what you said about my job can’t be true. The school has just started on this New-Model English education. All the students enjoy my classes. Maybe you have heard it wrong—”

Lili looked incredulous. “Benjamin, when are you going to wake up? You call that a job? Don’t you see how everyone works here, how many classes we teach, how many office hours we have each day? And yourself? Only one class a day. And it’s always borrowed away. I’ve never heard of a teacher with so little responsibility. If that’s a job you must have the easiest job in the world! Anyway, whatever you have here is ending as it is. The students need to put their time into studying to get into colleges. They don’t have time for ‘language immersion.’ You are just expensive decoration so that the school can call itself New-Model. But it can’t afford to keep you for long. That apartment you have . . .”

I turned away. The afternoon sun was partially blocked by one of the classroom buildings. But the part that wasn’t blocked was still strong and it hurt my eyes. “I’m sorry, Lili. I can’t help you.”

* * *

I didn’t see Lili for a whole week. I kept on playing ping-pong with those older men, but the games were not half as fun as before. I couldn’t help examining the lines on those men’s foreheads and the wrinkles around their eyes. They had all worked hard for their whole lives and deserved to spend the rest of their days at leisure, while me, aged twenty-three, able-bodied . . . How did I get to have as much free time as the retired men? What was it that I had been doing at this school? Was I, as Lili said, merely decoration? No. I quickly assured myself. My students enjoyed my classes. Lili was only saying that to get me to act out her plan.

It was a Tuesday. The school had just finished another round of the “important tests,” and I was glad that I had the students back again. But on my way to teach, I was stopped in front of the classroom by Ms. Song. I remembered this teacher because Lili and I had once seen her scolding a girl in the hallway. I couldn’t comprehend what she was saying at the time, but her voice was loud and harsh like the scratching sound of blades against a metal bar. I remembered onlookers’ heads popped out of several classrooms to watch them. Lili had later told me that Ms. Song was “extremely difficult.”

At present, this Ms. Song spoke with a wide smile, “Mr. Martins, you don’t need to teach today. I have taken over to give the students a surprise quiz. There is no need to check with Mr. Hu. He never objects. Plus, he is in the conference room with the principal and other school officials.”

“Ms. Song, Mr. Hu has been quite clear that borrowing classes is only allowed when there is an absolute need. Now that the most recent tests are over, I don’t think there is such a need. Also, I would appreciate it if you could ask me at least 24 hours before my class in the future.”

“There is always such a need, Mr. Martins. The students *need* to get into universities. If you like, I can give you a 24-hour notice.” Ms. Song chuckled as if she couldn’t help it. “It’s just until the end of this semester, right?”

I could feel my face turning red with anger, anger at this toad-like woman in front of me, anger at myself for staying in denial even after Lili told me the truth. I turned and started walking towards the office building. I found Lili in her office. She appeared to be sharing a joke with her desk neighbor. I went up to her, took her by one hand, and led her

out. Lili remained calm. We went upstairs where the conference room was. The door was shut. We waited outside, our ears pressed to the door. Then we heard chairs moving and steps approaching the closed door. I pulled her close. Looking straight into her eyes, I bent down and pressed my lips onto hers. She put her arms around my neck and pushed her tongue into my mouth. I could see Principal Wang, Mr. Hu, and other officials in my peripheral vision. Then I closed my eyes. In the next minute, Principal Wang would need to decide whether he should let Lili go, and whether Mr. Hu had been negligent in supervising his teachers. But for now I knew Lili's thoughts had escaped to the exciting metropolis of Shanghai. Maybe I should pay a visit there too, after I left this town, to stay with my brother for a few days and see what the big deal was. Then I would head back home, and as my father suggested, give medical school a try.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SECOND CHOICE

Today at our staff meeting, my uncle, Jeremy L Zhang, who is also my boss, the proud owner of M & J Dance Studio, announces that GK, the famed ballroom dancer who has won numerous championships in the last decade, has accepted his invitation to give a few workshops at our studio next month. At this announcement, our small conference room/office immediately starts to bubble with excitement. It is very encouraging news for the staff members, as GK is a legendary figure among professional ballroom dancers. I can guarantee, any young instructor in our studio would be more than happy to give up a summer vacation on the beach for a face-to-face meeting with GK.

As a dancing professional, I of course have been looking forward to meeting an inspiring figure like GK. However, as the nephew, knowing the history between GK and Auntie Mei, I must say my uncle's announcement strikes me as odd. My uncle and aunt have known GK since their youth in China. They went to the same dance school, and GK was Auntie Mei's lover before my uncle. Rumors say that GK has never gotten over my aunt, which is why his two marriages both ended in divorce.

Still, GK's visit wouldn't disturb me a bit if my uncle's marriage were as good as, say, six months ago. I look through the glass window of the conference room. Across the polished dance floor, Auntie Mei is typing something on the computer at the small front desk. It's the third time this week that she didn't attend our staff meeting.

Of all the extended family members, I probably have more of an insider's view of Aunt Mei and Uncle Jeremy's marriage than anybody else. My father passed away when I was a still toddler. Growing up, my mother encouraged me to stay close to my uncle, as she was worried that the lack of a father figure would become a significant hindrance to my development. As a result, not only has my uncle acted as the most important male role model in my life, my aunt also has become my second mother.

As long as I can remember, my uncle and aunt have shared a harmonious companionship that everybody envies. After they moved to the US, my uncle adopted an English name for the convenience of business, while my aunt kept her Chinese name, as English speakers don't seem to have any difficulty pronouncing it at all. Many people in the US think my Aunt Mei has a generic Chinese name, a name that reminds them of women in silk *qipao* with their hair pinned up that they've seen in movies. Even the Chinese people here, upon being introduced to my aunt, often mistake her name for the conventional female names such as 美 (beauty) or 梅 (a flowering plant that blooms in the winter), both spelled Mei. The actual Chinese word for Aunt Mei's name, 眉, means "the eyebrow." My aunt was born on a clear night with a new moon in the sky. Her father thus named her based on a quaint Chinese phrase that compares the new moon to a beautiful woman's eyebrow.

I'm explaining my aunt's name here, not because I want to boast about the complexity of Chinese characters, but because I intend to show you how the names have led others to see my uncle and aunt as a predestined match. Of course, they are both very peaceful, tolerant people, which is probably the real reason why they seem to be made for

each other. But it is the fact that their names happen to fit in an old story of an affectionate couple that has made them stand out.

My uncle's namesake, Zhang Chang, was an official for the emperor in the Han dynasty over two thousand years ago. Zhang's wife had a small imperfection on her eyebrow due to a childhood injury. Every morning, before Zhang Chang went to the officials' routine meeting with the emperor, he would help his wife shape her eyebrow with black color. Zhang's political enemy told this to the emperor, and accused him of lacking self-respect for wasting time on something so feminine. When the emperor asked him to defend himself, Zhang said, "I've heard more intimate things between a husband and a wife than the makeup of the eyebrow." Zhang's witty reply saved himself from the emperor's reproach, and the anecdote became a tale of matrimonial love. With my uncle's last name being Zhang, and my aunt's name meaning the eyebrow, you can see how naturally people tend to compare them to the historical couple.

Among my extended family, when younger couples have friction, the elders often bring out the example of my uncle and aunt to give the young people a lesson on the philosophy of marriage. Of course, a lesson of this sort seldom solves the problems between a husband and a wife. Sometimes, you can hear one or the other of the lectured couple talk back. "All they do is dance together all the time. And they have no kids. What is there for them to quarrel about?"

I don't blame them. If I were one of them, trying to build my adult life while my parents couldn't refrain from meddling in my private affairs, and kept comparing me with others as if I was still in middle school and they had just come back from a parents'

meeting, I'd be annoyed too. But I must point out that they are not being fair when they suggest that marriage is somehow easy for my aunt and uncle, as if any couple could do it were they in the same situation. Those young people are mistaken, to think a couple that co-own a dance studio "dance together all the time." In fact, during the two years that I have been working for them, I've seen my aunt and uncle dancing together in the studio no more than five times, except when they need to demonstrate some steps to the other instructors, of course.

This is partly because, as instructors of the studio, none of us dance with each other very often. All of us, including my uncle and aunt, spend most of our time in one-on-one lessons with students. When we hold parties in the studio, we are all occupied with inviting the students to dance, keeping them entertained, and making sure every student has a partner—so you wouldn't see the instructors inviting each other to dance at those parties.

But it's not that we *never* have occasions for instructors to show off a little. There are often two or three dance shows arranged at the beginning of our parties—these are the opportunities for the instructors to pair with each other and amaze the students with showy routines at the professional level. But my uncle and aunt usually give these show opportunities to the younger instructors, and even if one of them were to dance, it would be with another instructor. This is for a specific reason, as my uncle once explained to me. In a dance studio, the students tend to think the owners the strongest dancers, especially in our case—that is, all the other instructors are younger than the owners. Also, my aunt and uncle represent the romantic ideal of ballroom dancing—they are both a real

life couple and long-time dance partners. These facts could easily put my uncle and aunt on a pedestal that no other instructors in the studio can reach, which wouldn't be good for the business, because the students of the other instructors would think they are not given the best deal. So by avoiding dancing with each other, and giving the show opportunities to the younger instructors, my uncle and aunt are actually trying to minimize that “undesirable idolization.”

So you see, they do not actually “dance together all the time.” Despite what some may think, they do not have an easy way to sustain their marriage by twirling around to dreamy tunes. In fact, even in the days when they did “dance together all the time,” that is, before they started this studio business, when they engaged themselves in all kinds of competitions, what I observed in them was the utmost seriousness towards their profession. Although ballroom dancing is a romantic sport, at its very core it's high standard self-control. A beginner often makes the mistake of depending on the partner for body support. But one must learn to shift weight within oneself, not to one's partner. The leading and following can appear flawless only when both dancers are able to hold their own bodies. In my opinion, the secret to their matrimonial harmony is that they apply this same strength of control to situations that could lead to potential conflicts—such situations are plentiful when a couple co-own a business, as you can imagine.

Lately, however, they both seem to be letting loose a bit in terms of this control. It's not like I have seen any outbursts in the studio. Just small things, like last week, for instance. One of our staff members, Lydia, forgot her dance shoes at home last Monday. Instead of asking her to go home to get her shoes, my uncle told her to simply wear my

aunt's dance shoes, since they wore the same size. Lydia needed to teach early that morning. But my aunt didn't have any lessons scheduled until later that day, so she didn't need her dance shoes that morning. In this sense, I thought my uncle's arrangement was reasonable. My aunt was in the bathroom at the time. When she came out and saw Lydia wearing her shoes, she said she would go home to grab another pair. Nobody sensed anything wrong then. But my aunt never came back that day. Kate took over her students and I had to give my uncle a ride home at the end of the day. After that my uncle and aunt stopped coming to the studio in the same car. This incident may not seem a big deal to you. But knowing how the two had been for all these years, I could tell they crossed a boundary that they had carefully maintained for a long time, and it's the fact that things like this have been happening for months between them that has gotten me alarmed, which is why I am so surprised that uncle should invite Aunty Mei's old lover to the studio at such a time.

* * *

For days our work in the studio has revolved around the planning for GK's visit: updating the news on our website, distributing fliers to our students, getting students to sign up for private workshops with GK, selling tickets to the dance party that is arranged at the end of GK's visit, etc. My part is to plan the dance party.

It's a Tuesday night, already past the studio closing time. All the other instructors have gone home except my uncle and myself. I'm sitting at one of the small tables

surrounding our dance floor, drawing the seating for the party. On the red wall at my right-hand side, two muted plasma TVs are playing videos of my aunt and uncle competing in London a few years ago. I'm about to finish the drawing when my uncle walks up to me.

“Ruiming, for the three show dances at the beginning of the party, let's have you and Kate do a samba. I'll tango with Lydia and your aunt will dance a Viennese waltz with GK. Why don't you pick some music for the three dances and show it to me tomorrow?”

If I was surprised when uncle announced GK's visit, it's nothing to compare with my shock at this arrangement that uncle is proposing. For a while I keep staring at him. What is he thinking? He knows that GK is still in love with aunt. Although the romantic feelings evoked by a dance do not necessarily result in an affair between the partners, I don't see why uncle needs to put his marriage to the test. With all that is going on between him and my aunt, he couldn't have picked a worse time to let GK dance with her. You should know that my uncle is not just giving GK a chance to dance with Aunt Mei, he is also giving GK hours and hours of time to spend with her, doing choreography and practicing. And Lydia—of all people my uncle decides to dance the tango with Lydia! I don't hold anything against Lydia personally. But from a professional's point of view, I have the least respect for her style of dancing. In my opinion, her insatiable thirst for attention is what prevents her from achieving any greater heights than where she is now. And I know Aunt Mei would agree with me on this point. The way Lydia goes about it is all show. After seeing uncle act out all the dramatic seductions in tango with

Lydia, whatever grudge my aunt has against uncle is bound to double. Then, as she travels down the dance floor with GK, who can guarantee she won't start to wonder whether she has been with the wrong person all these years? Uncle should have considered this!

“Uncle—” My uncle insists that I call him “Jeremy” at the studio. But right now there isn't anybody else, and I feel more comfortable saying what I'm about to say when I address him as uncle. “I know you have made it a point not to do dance shows with aunty very often. But this is a special occasion—” I check myself, but decide to go on. “Uncle, forgive my impertinence, but there are gossips saying GK has never forgotten aunty. Are you sure you want him to dance with her?”

Uncle paces away from me and stops at the shelves that hold all the trophies he and aunt have won. He seems to have gone into a trance.

“Uncle, you should dance with aunty. Why don't you two dance a bolero? A beautiful bolero can surely show GK that he has no business getting in between the two of you. Or paso doble. That's right. A triumphant matador's dance like the paso doble would be better. It will remind GK that you have won aunty's heart, that you were the victor twenty years ago and you will remain so.”

I start to imagine my uncle and aunt dancing the paso doble. Like a matador's flaring cape, the hem of Aunty Mei's dress opens up in a fierce flight. Even with several paces between them, the two still maintain the perfect connection, with just the right amount of arrogance, as if nothing in the world could stop them. The music gets stronger beat by beat, building up the tension, drawing the two to the center of the dance floor—

“No one will remain the victor forever, Ruiming.” The weight in uncle’s tone breaks my imagination. “You probably have noticed the coldness between your aunt and me lately, but you don’t know how bad it has become. I guess it’s about time to let the family know.” He sighs and turns to face me. “The truth is, my marriage is coming to an end.”

“Uncle—”

“Your aunt loves me. But love can only work this much. GK is more of her kind. He is what she needs now.”

I want to say something, but uncle stops me by lifting one hand. “I’m very tired. You should go home too.”

What does uncle mean, that love can only work this much, that GK is what my aunt needs now? Is Aunt Mei one of those women that can only love a man for his glory? Is Aunt Mei disappointed by the fact that uncle didn’t achieve as much as GK did? Does she wish she had been dancing with GK for all these years instead of my uncle? I find it hard to think of my beloved aunt as that kind of woman. Maybe Aunt Mei is just going through a midlife crisis. I need to find a way to bring her back to the days when she fell in love with Uncle Jeremy.

* * *

“Why did you choose this song? Who told you to do this?” Uncle is furious when I show him the song I have picked for aunt’s show dance.

The song I'm showing to my uncle, *Little Rowan Tree*, is a Russian folk song that not many in my generation are familiar with. I only know about this song because it's in one of those old cassettes that my mother used to play on her recorder at home. The song was popularized in China during a time when the Soviet Union was looked up to as the home to the most progressive, revolutionary spirits. There are many versions of this song. The Chinese version that mother used to play, which I also believe to be the version that my uncle and aunt are familiar with, goes like this as I recall:

Lyrics gently ripple the lake at dusk.
The distant mill shines through the misty twilight.
The train runs by,
Its windows lit up in splendors.
Two youthful lads wait for me
On two sides of the rowan tree.
Oh, you thriving rowan tree,
Snowy blossoms cover you.
Oh, you lovely rowan tree,
What myth puzzles you?

The version that I'm showing uncle is a Russian one, but I'm certain that the tune is enough to remind Aunty Mei of these lyrics. When she hears it, she will remember whatever it was that made her choose uncle over GK twenty years ago.

That is, if I get to let Aunty Mei hear it. However, as I say, uncle is angry with my idea.

“You must pick a different song for your aunt and GK’s dance.”

“Uncle Jeremy, please, let’s use this song. Don’t give up your marriage yet. Let’s try this.”

For a second I think uncle is going to scold me even more for being presumptuous. Then I realize that his face has turned white, as if all the anger has drained from him. He picks up a paperweight from his desk—it is a figurine of two people in a ballroom pose. He studies the dark bronze material thoughtfully. When he starts to speak again, it is as if he is talking to the paperweight.

“I shouldn’t have been angry with you. You don’t know what’s going on. That song you picked will upset your aunt. You must not upset her. It is me who wants to split up.”

Unable to believe what I have just heard, I fix my eyes on my uncle, trying to read his face. But uncle keeps his eyes on the figurine in his hands.

“But—you two are meant for each other. You are the couple that others want to be.”

“Ruiming, you know better than to listen to all that family talk. ‘Predestined match’ is just a formula that happened to fit in our case. When the formula fails people will find another one to entertain their minds with.”

Through the glass window of my uncle’s office, I can see the two TVs on the wall above our dance floor—in one of them, uncle proudly leads my aunt circling around the dance floor, saluting the judges and spectators.

“Your aunt is a respectable dancer. Dancing is her life. Nothing else means more to her. It’s a pity she didn’t go on competing. With that kind of talent and determination, she could have made it. When I married her, I thought I was the same. We agreed that we would not have children, because your aunt’s figure would not be the same after bearing a child.”

“But there are plenty of female dancers that have had children. Kate had a girl and she has almost gotten back to shape now.” Even as I’m saying this, I know my argument sounds weak and pathetic. I know listing other people’s stories is hardly going to solve the problem that is troubling my aunt and uncle.

“Everybody is different. Your aunt knows her body. Plus, there’s the example of her own mother, whose dancing career was ended because of that. Anyway, the point is, she could not risk it. She would not allow the possibility of herself having anything less than a perfect dancer’s figure. Now I know what you are thinking. She is already forty. It’s not likely that she will go back to do serious competitions. What’s the point of her keeping a perfect figure? But it doesn’t matter. Your aunt will always see herself as a dancer, whether she is 40, 50, or 60. And I respect that. You should too. I thought I was the same. But it gets hard, when you reach your forties and still don’t have a young one. Neither of us is getting any younger. Your aunt has suggested that we adopt a child. But, I guess I never realized how traditional I am. We will get a divorce. She will go with GK, while I will remarry and have children.” Uncle places the figurine back on his desk and turns his gaze to me.

“Your aunt was right. She has remained a dancer, while I have become the regular businessman. It is my fault, knowing who she is, not knowing who I am.” He leans back in his chair and runs both hands through his carefully groomed hair. I examine his forehead and jaw line. It’s the first time that I realize my uncle has aged very well. The years have not taken away the well-defined facial structure so prized by competitive dancers.

* * *

It’s been over three years since GK came to our studio, my mother and I are visiting my grandfather, and somehow my mother brings up Uncle Jeremy’s ex-wife.

“Do you remember Sima Mei? I always thought things not as well as they looked between her and my brother. How could a couple never fight about anything? The calmer the surface the deeper the turbulence. Twenty years of marriage, she never forgot that other guy.”

My grandfather shakes his head. “You know, that Zhang Chang in the Han dynasty never got promoted to an important position. The emperor might have appeared not to care that he did makeup for his wife, but really the accusation that time was quite a blow to Zhang Chang’s political life.”

“Your tea must be cold. I’ll go make a new pot.” My mother picks up the teapot. “Don’t drink the cold tea, Ruiming.”

My mother holds the traditional Chinese belief that cold tea harms the body. But there is a subtle sweetness in this cup that I'm particularly fond of. As I sip the lukewarm tea, I begin to think of my Aunty Mei, and I wonder if she is living a good life.