

# Free Food for Millionaires

A S T O R Y

by *Min Jin Lee*



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## 1 OPTIONS

COMPETENCE CAN be a curse. As a capable young woman, Casey Han felt compelled to choose respectability and success. But it was glamour and insight that she craved. A Korean immigrant who’d grown up in a dim, blue-collar neighborhood in Queens, she’d hoped for a bright, glittering life beyond the workhorse struggles of her parents, who managed a Manhattan dry cleaner.

Casey was unusually tall for a Korean, nearly five feet eight, slender, and self-conscious about what she wore. She kept her black hair shoulder length, fastidiously powdered her nose, and wore wine-colored lipstick without variation. To save money, she wore her eyeglasses at home, but outside she wore contact lenses to correct her nearsightedness. She did not believe she was pretty but felt she had something—some sort of workable sex appeal. She admired feminine modesty and looked down at women who tried to appear too sexy. For a girl of only twenty-two, Casey had numerous theories of beauty and sexuality, but the essence of her philosophy was that allure trumped flagrant display. She’d read that Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis advised a woman to dress like a column, and Casey never failed to follow that instruction.

Seated in the spacious linoleum-covered kitchen of her parents’ rent-controlled two-bedroom in Elmhurst, Casey looked out of place in her white linen shirt and white cotton slacks—dressed as if she were

about to have a gin and tonic brought to her on a silver tray. Next to her at the Formica-topped table, her father, Joseph Han, could've easily passed for her grandfather. He filled his tumbler with ice for his first whiskey of the evening. An hour earlier, he'd returned from a Saturday of sorting laundry at the Sutton Place drop shop, which he ran for a wealthy Korean who owned a dozen dry cleaners. Casey's father did not speak to her, and she did not speak to him as they sat together. Her younger sister, Tina—a Bronx Science Westinghouse finalist, vice president of the M.I.T. Campus Christian Crusade, and a pre-med—was their father's favorite. A classical Korean beauty, Tina was the picture of the girls' mother, Leah, in her youth.

Leah bustled about cooking their first family dinner in months, singing hymns while Tina chopped scallions. Not yet forty, Leah had prematurely gray hair that obscured her smooth, pale brow. At seventeen, she'd married Joseph, who was then thirty-six. On their wedding night, Casey was conceived, and two years later, Tina was born.

Now it was a Saturday night in June, a week after Casey's college graduation. Her four years at Princeton had given her a refined diction, an enviable golf handicap, wealthy friends, a popular white boyfriend, an agnostic's closeted passion for reading the Bible, and a magna cum laude degree in economics. But she had no job and a number of bad habits.

Virginia Craft, Casey's roommate of four years, had tried to convince her to give up the habit that preoccupied her considerably while she sat next to her brooding father. At the moment, Casey would've bartered her body for a cigarette. The promise of lighting one on the building roof after dinner was all that kept her seated in the kitchen—her bare foot tapping lightly on the floor. But the college graduate had other problems that were insoluble by a smoke. Since she had no job, she'd returned to her folks' two-bedroom on Van Kleeck Street.

Seventeen years earlier, in the year of the Bicentennial, the family of four had immigrated to America. And Leah's terror of change had kept them in the same apartment unit. It all seemed a bit pathetic. The smoking, among other things, was corroding Casey's sense of being an honest person. She prided herself on being forthright, though she often dodged her parents. Her biggest secret was Jay Currie—her white American boyfriend. On the previous Sunday night after having some very nice sex, Jay had suggested, his elbow crooked over his pillow and head cradled in his hand, "Move in with me. Consider this, Miss Han: sexual congress on tap." Her parents also had no idea that she wasn't a virgin and that she'd been on the pill since she was fifteen. Being at home made Casey anxious. She continually felt like patting down her pockets for matches. Consequently, Casey found herself missing Princeton—even the starchy meals at Charter, her eating club. But nostalgia would do her no good. Casey needed a plan to escape Elmhurst.

Last spring, against Jay's advice, Casey had applied to only one investment banking program. She learned, after all the sign-up sheets were filled, that Kearn Davis was the bank that every Econ major wanted in 1993. Yet, she reasoned, her grades were superior to Jay's, and she could sell anything. At the Kearn Davis interview, Casey greeted the pair of female interviewers wearing a yellow silk suit and cracked a Nancy Reagan joke, thinking it

might make a feminist connection. The two women were wearing navy and charcoal wool, and they let Casey hang herself in fifteen minutes flat. Showing her out, they waved, not bothering to shake her hand.

There was always law school. She'd managed to get into Columbia. But her friends' fathers were beleaguered lawyers, their lives unappealing. Casey's lawyer customers at Sabine's, the department store where she'd worked weekends, advised her, "For money—go to B school. To save lives, med." The unholy trinity of Law, Business, and Medicine seemed the only faith in town. It was arrogant, perhaps rash, for an immigrant girl from the boroughs to want to choose her own trade. Nevertheless, Casey wasn't ready to relinquish her dream, however vague, for a secure profession. Without telling her father, she wrote Columbia to defer a year.

Her mother was singing a hymn in her remarkable voice while she ladled scallion sauce over the roasted porgy. Leah's voice trilled at the close of the verse "waking or sleeping, thy presence my light," then with a quiet inhale, she began, "Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word . . ." She'd left the store early that morning to shop and to cook her daughters' favorite dishes. Tina, her baby, had returned on Thursday night, and now both her girls were finally home. Her heart felt full, and she prayed for Joseph to be in a good mood. She eyeballed the whiskey level in the jug-sized bottle of Dewar's. It had not shifted much from the night before. In their twenty-two years of marriage, Leah had discovered that it was better when Joseph had a glass or two with his dinner than none. Her husband wasn't a drunk—the sort who went to bars, fooled around, or lost his salary envelope. He was a hard worker. But without his whiskey, Joseph couldn't fall asleep. One of her sisters-in-law had told her how to keep a man content: "Never deny a man his *bop*, sex, and sleep."

Leah carried the fish to the table, wearing a blue apron over her plum-colored house-dress. At the sight of Casey pouring her second glass of water, Leah clamped her lips, giving her soft, oval face a severe appearance. Mr. Jun, the ancient choir director, had pointed out this anxiety tic to her before her solos, shouting, "Show us your joy! You are singing to God!"

Tina, of course, the one who noticed everything, thought Casey was just asking for it. Her own mind had been filled with the pleasant thoughts of her boyfriend, Chul, whom she'd promised to phone that night, but even so, she could feel Casey's restlessness. Maybe her sister would consider how much trouble their mother had gone through to make dinner.

It was the water drinking—this seemingly innocent thing. For always, Joseph believed that the girls should eat heartily at the table, grateful for the food and for the care given to it, but Casey habitually picked at her dinner, and he blamed Casey's not eating on her excessive water consumption. Casey denied this accusation, but her father was on the mark. Back in junior high school, Casey had read in a fashion magazine that if you drank three glasses of water before a meal, you'd eat less. It took great effort on Casey's part to wear a size six or smaller; after all, she was a girl with a large frame. Her weight also shifted by five pounds depending on how much she smoked. Her mother was thin from perpetual

activity, and her younger sister, who was short like their father, had a normal build, and Tina disapproved of dieting. A brilliant student of both physics and philosophy, Tina had once scolded Casey when she was on *Weight Watchers*: “The world is awash in hunger. How could you cause your own?”

Casey’s water drinking at the table was not lost on her father.

At five feet three, Joseph was compact, yet his rich, booming voice gave him the sound of a bigger man. He was bald except for a wisp of baby fuzz on the back of his head, and his baldness did not grieve him except in the winters when he had to wear a gray felt fedora to protect his head and large lobed ears. He was only fifty-eight but looked older, more like a vigorous man of seventy, especially beside his young wife. She was his second wife. His first, a girl his age whom he’d deeply loved, died of tuberculosis after a year of marriage and before she bore him any children. Joseph adored his second wife, perhaps more so because of his loss. He appreciated Leah’s good health and her docile Christian nature, and he was still attracted to her pretty face and her delicate form, which belied her resilience. He made love to her every Friday evening. She had given him two daughters, though the elder looked nothing like her mother.

Casey drained her water glass and rested it on the table. Then she reached for the pitcher.

“I’m not Rockefeller, you know,” Joseph said.

Casey’s father didn’t look at her when he said this, but he was addressing her. There was no one else in the room who needed to hear how she didn’t have a trust fund. Right away, Leah and Tina moved from the counter to their seats at the table, hoping to dissipate the tension. Leah opened her mouth to speak, but hesitated.

Casey refilled her glass with water.

“I can’t support you forever,” he said. “Your father is not a millionaire.”

Casey’s first thought was, “And whose fault is that?”

Tina knew when not to speak. She unfolded her thin paper napkin and spread it across her lap. In her mind, she ticked off the Ten Commandments—this thing she did when nervous; and when she felt particularly anxious, she recited the Apostle’s Creed and the Lord’s Prayer back to back.

“When I was your age, I sold *kimbop* on the streets. Not one piece,” Joseph raised his voice dramatically, “I couldn’t afford to eat one piece of what I was selling.” He lost himself in the memory of standing in a dusty corner of Pusan’s marketplace, waiting for paying customers while shooing away the street urchins who were hungrier than he was.

Using two spoons, Leah filleted the fish from its skeleton and served Joseph first. Casey wondered why her mother never stopped these self-indulgent reveries. Growing up, there’d been countless monologues about her father’s privations. At the end of 1950, a temporary passage to the South had been secured for the sixteen-

year-old Joseph—the baby of a wealthy merchant family—to prevent his conscription in the Red Army. But a few weeks after young Joseph landed in Pusan, the southernmost tip of the country, the war split the nation in two, and he never again saw his mother, six elder brothers and two sisters, and the family estate near Pyongyang. As a war refugee, the once-pampered teenager ate garbage, slept on cold beaches, and stayed in filthy camps as easy prey for the older refugees who'd lost their sense and morals. Then in 1955, two years after the war ended, his young bride died. With no money or support, he'd abandoned his hopes of becoming a medical doctor. Having missed college, he ran errands for tips from American soldiers, nursed his migraines and persistent nightmares, worked as a food vendor, and taught himself English from a dictionary. Before coming to America with his wife and two little girls, Joseph labored for twenty years as a foreman at a lightbulb factory outside Seoul. Leah's oldest brother, Hoon—the first friend Joseph made in the South—had sponsored their immigration to New York and given them their American first names. Then two years later, Hoon died of pancreatic cancer. Everyone seemed to die on Joseph. He was the remnant of his clan and had no male heirs.

Casey wasn't indifferent to her father's pain. But she'd decided she didn't want to hear about it anymore. His losses weren't hers, and she didn't want to hold them. She was in Queens, and it was 1993. But at the table, it was 1953, and the Korean War refused to end.

Joseph was gearing up to tell the story of his mother's white jade brooch, the last item he'd possessed of hers. Of course, he'd had to sell it to buy medicine for his first wife, who ended up dying anyway. Yes, yes, Casey wanted to say, war was brutal and poverty cruel, but enough, already. She'd never suffer the way he did. Wasn't that the point of their coming to America, after all?

Casey rolled her eyes, and Leah wished she wouldn't do that. She didn't mind these stories, really. Leah imagined Joseph's first wife as a kind of invalid girl saint. There were no photographs of her, but Leah felt she must have been pretty—all romantic heroines were. A lady who died so young (only twenty) would have been kind and good and beautiful, Leah thought. Joseph's stories were how he kept his memories alive. He'd lost everyone, and she knew from the fitful way he slept that the Japanese occupation and the war returned to him at night. His mother and his first wife were the ones he had loved the most as a young man. And Leah knew what it was to grieve; her own mother had died when she was eight. It was possible to long for the scent of your mother's skin, the feel of her coarse *chima* fabric against your face; to lay down for the evening and shut your eyes tightly and wish to see her sitting there at the edge of your pallet at dawn. Her mother had died from consumption, so she and Joseph's first wife were entwined in Leah's imagination.

Joseph smiled ruefully at Tina. "The night before I left on the ship, my mother sewed twenty gold rings in the lining of my coat with her own hand. She had these

thick rheumatic fingers, and the servant girls usually did the sewing, but . . .” Joseph lifted his right hand in the air as if he could make his mother’s hand appear in place of his own, then clasped the right one with his left. “She wrapped each ring in cotton batting so there’d be no noise when I moved around.” Joseph marveled at his mother’s thoughtfulness, recalling sharply how every time he had to sell a ring, he’d unstitch the white blanket thread that his mother had sewn into the coat fabric with her heavy needle. “She said to me, ‘Jun-oh-*ah*, sell these whenever you need to. Eat good hot food. When you return, my boy, we shall have such a feast.’” The yellowish whites of Joseph’s eyes welled up.

“She unclasped the brooch from her *choggori*, then she handed it to me. You see, I didn’t understand. I thought I was supposed to return home in a few days. Three or four, at the most.” His voice grew softer. “She didn’t expect me to sell the pin. The rings, yes, but not . . .”

Casey drew in breath, then exhaled. It must have been the thirtieth time she’d heard this tale. She made a face. “I know. Not the pin,” she said.

Aghast, Tina nudged her sister’s knee with her own.

“What did you say?” Joseph narrowed the slant of his small, elegant eyes. His sad expression grew cold.

“Nothing,” Casey said. “Nothing.”

Leah pleaded silently with a look, hoping Casey would restrain herself. But her daughter refused to notice her.

Joseph picked up his tumbler for a drink. He wanted to stay with the memory of his mother, the leaf-green silk of her jacket, the cool whiteness of the pin. He’d never forget the day he left the jeweler with the bit of money he got in exchange for the pin, his hasty walk to the herbalist to buy the foul-smelling twigs and leaves that never cured his wife.

Wanting to create some distraction, Leah removed her apron then folded it conspicuously. “Tina, would you pray for us?” she asked.

Tina would have done anything to make Casey control herself. She brushed aside her thick black hair and bowed her head. “Heavenly Father, we thank you for this food. We thank you for our many blessings. Lead us, dear Lord, to your good service. Show us your will; let our hearts and minds converge with it. We pray in the name of our dear Redeemer, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.” Privately, Tina wanted God to tell her what she should do with Chul—how she could keep him interested in her without having sex with him, or if he was the one to whom she should give herself. Tina wanted a sign; she’d been praying for guidance for the past several months, but she could discern nothing except her own pressing desire for this boy.

Leah smiled at Tina, then Casey. In her heart, she, too, was praying, “Dear God, let there be thanksgiving because at last, we are together.”

Before anyone could eat, Joseph spoke, “So what are you going to do?”

Casey stared at the steam rising from her rice bowl. “I thought I’d try to figure it out this summer. No one’s hiring now, but on Monday I’m going to the library to write some cover letters for jobs starting in the fall. Sabine also said I could get more hours during the week if someone leaves. Maybe I could work in another department if she —”

“You know the options,” he said.

Casey nodded.

“A real job,” her father said. “Or law school. Selling hats is not a real job. Making eight dollars an hour after getting an education worth eighty thousand dollars is the stupidest thing I have ever heard of. Why did you go to Princeton to sell hairpins?”

Casey nodded again, pulling her lower lip into her mouth. The blood left her face, making it paler.

Leah peered at Joseph’s expression. Was it safe to speak? He hated it when she took the girls’ side.

“Graduation was just last week,” Leah ventured. “Maybe she could rest a little at home. Just read or watch *tere bi*.” Her voice was faltering. “Casey had all those exams,” Leah smiled at her daughter. She tried to shore up her voice and sound like it was the most natural thing in the world for someone in her family to graduate from college, then to figure things out. Casey was staring at her rice bowl but didn’t pick up her spoon. “Why don’t you let her eat?” Leah said carefully. “She’s probably tired.”

“Tired? From that country club?” Joseph scoffed at the absurdity.

Leah shut up. It was useless. She knew from his face that he wouldn’t hear her, nor would he let her win any points in front of the girls. Maybe Tina might say something to help the conversation along. But she looked as if she were somewhere else entirely, chewing her rice with her lips sealed. Even as a child, Tina had been a good eater.

Casey studied the white walls. Every Saturday night, it was her mother’s ritual to wipe down the glossy painted walls with Fantastic.

“Why are you so tired?” Joseph asked Casey, furious that she was ignoring him. “I’m talking to you,” he said.

Enough, Casey thought, and she glared at him. “School work is work. I’ve always worked hard . . . just as hard as you work at the store. Maybe harder. Do you know what it’s like for me to have to go to a school like that? To be surrounded by kids who went to Exeter and Hotchkiss, their parents belonging to real country clubs, and having a dad who could always make a call to save their ass? Do you know what it’s like to ace my courses and to make and keep friends when they think you’re nothing because you’re from nowhere? I’ve had kids step away from me like I’m unwashed after I tell them you manage a dry cleaner. Do you have any idea what it’s like to have people who are supposed to be your equals look through you like you’re

made of glass and what they see inside looks filthy to them? Do you have any clue?” Casey was screaming now. She raised her right hand at him as if to strike him, then she pulled back, having surprised herself. She clasped her hand over her heart, unable to keep from shaking.

“What? What do you want from me?” she asked at last.

“What I want from you?” Joseph looked confused. He repeated himself. “What I want from you?” He turned to Leah. “Do you hear what she’s saying to me?” Then he muttered, “I should just kill her and me right now, and be done with it.” He cast about the table as if he were searching for a weapon. Then he screamed, “What the hell do I want from you?” Using both hands, Joseph shoved the dinner table away from him. The water glasses clinked against the dinner plates. Soup spilled over the bowls. Joseph could not believe his daughter’s nerve.

“What do I want from you?”

“Damn it, that isn’t what I meant.” Casey tried to keep her voice from quavering, and she willed herself from dissolving into tears. Don’t be afraid, she told herself; don’t be afraid.

Leah shouted in Korean, “Casey, shut up. Shut up.” How could the girl be so stupid? What was the point of being good at school if she couldn’t understand timing or the idea of finessing a difficult person. Her older daughter was like an angry animal, and Leah wondered how it was that she hadn’t been able to prevent her from becoming so much like Joseph in this way. A man could have so much anger, but a woman, no, a woman could not live with that much rage—that was how the world worked. How would Casey survive?

Joseph stood up. “Get up,” he said, gesturing with his hand for Casey to rise.

Leah tried to pull him down. “*Yobo*.” She was begging him, and her fingers caught the belt loop of his slacks, but he swiped her hand away and pushed her back to her seat.

Casey rose from her chair, tucking aside the loose hair that had fallen over her face.

“You stupid girl, sit down,” Leah cried, hoping that of the two, Casey might be reasonable. “*Yobo*,” she pleaded, “The dinner . . .” Leah wept.

“Come here,” he said, his voice calm. “What?” he began, his shimmering eyes unblinking. “You think you know more about life and how you should live?” He’d long feared that his college-educated children might one day feel superior to him, but he would never have held them back from any height they wanted to scale. Still, he hadn’t anticipated how cruel it’d be for his child to condescend to him in this way—to consider herself equal to him in experience, in suffering, in the things he had seen. He could hear his Korean accent muddying his English words, and he regretted having told them always to speak English at home. He’d done this for their benefit—so they wouldn’t look stupid in front of the Americans, the way he did. Joseph regretted so many things.



Tentatively, Casey shook her head from side to side, not quite believing what an asshole he was. He was so unfair.

Tina pressed the fine features of her face into her folded hands. From behind her seat, she could feel the heat of Casey's long body moving toward their father. Ever since Casey was in high school, she'd fought with Joseph once or twice a year. And each year, Casey's anger toward their father grew, compacting into a hard, implacable thing. But no matter what, Tina adored her sister. Even now, as Casey stood in front of their father, awaiting a painful judgment, there was an obvious grace in her erect posture. Casey's white linen shirt hung casually on her lean frame, the cuffs of her sleeves were folded over as if she were about to pick up a brush to paint a picture, and her narrow white wrists were adorned with the pair of wide silver cuffs that she'd worn since high school—an expensive gift from Casey's boss, Sabine.

Tina whispered, "Casey, why don't you sit down?"

Her father ignored this, as did Casey.

Joseph lowered his voice. "You don't know what it's like to have nowhere to sleep. You don't know what it's like to be so hungry that you'd steal to eat. You've never even had a job except at that Sook-ja Kennedy's store," he said.

"Don't call her that. Her name is Sabine Jun Gottesman." She spat out each part of her boss's name like a nail but kept herself from saying, "How could you be so ungrateful?" After all, Sabine had given his daughter a flexible job, generous bonuses that helped pay for her books, for clothes—all because Sabine had gone to Leah's elementary school in Korea. Sabine and Leah had not even been friends back then—they were merely two Korean girls from the same hometown and school who'd by chance run into each other as grown women on the other side of the globe—of all places, at the Elizabeth Arden counter at Macy's in Herald Square. It was Sabine who'd offered to hire Leah's daughter for her store. And over the years, the childless Sabine had taken Casey on—the way she had with many of her young employees. She'd bought Casey rare and beautiful things, including the Italian horn-rim eyeglasses she was wearing now. The glasses had cost \$400, including the prescription lenses. Sabine had treated Casey better than anyone else had, and Casey hated her father for not seeing that.

"I had to work for Sabine. I had no choice, did I?"

Joseph looked up at the ceiling tiles above their kitchen. He exhaled, stunned by the child's meanness.

Casey felt bad for him suddenly, because for as long as she could remember, they never had any money, and her father was ashamed of this. Her paternal grandfather was supposed to have been very rich but had died before her father had any real opportunity to know him. Joseph believed that if his father had explained to him how a man made money, things would have turned out differently. In truth,

Casey had never blamed her parents for not being better off, because they worked so hard. Money was something people either had or they didn't. In the end, things had worked out for her at school: Princeton had paid for nearly everything; her parents paid whatever portion they'd been asked to contribute, so she didn't have any college loans. For books, clothes, and spending money, she'd taken a train to the city every weekend and worked at Sabine's.

"I . . . I . . ." Casey tried to think of some way to take it back, but couldn't.

Joseph looked at her squarely in the face, studying her defiance.

"Take off your glasses," he said.

Casey pulled off the tortoiseshell horn-rims. She squinted at her father. From where she stood, not quite three feet away from him, she could still see his face clearly: the wavy lines carved into his jaundiced brow, the large, handsome ears mottled with liver spots and his firm mouth—the only feature she had inherited. Casey rested her glasses on the table. Her face was now the color of bleached parchment; the only color in it came from her lipstick. Casey didn't look afraid; she was more resigned than anything else.

Joseph raised his hand and struck her across the mouth with an open palm.

She had expected this, and the arrival of the blow was almost a relief. Now it was over, she thought. Casey held her cheek with her left hand and looked away, not knowing what to do then. It was always awkward after he hit her. She felt little pain, even though he had used great force; Casey was, in fact, watching herself, and she wished the person who was watching her and the body she inhabited could merge and come to a decision.

"You think good grades and selling hats is work? Do you think you could survive an hour out there? I send you to college. Your mother and I bring lunch from home or share one sandwich from the deli so you and Tina can have extra money for school, and all you learn are bad manners. How dare you? How dare you speak to your father this way?"

Leah wanted to stop this, and she rose again from her chair, but Joseph shoved her back down.

Joseph struck Casey again. This time, Casey's torso weaved a bit. A sound rang in her ears. She regained her balance by firming her jaw and balling her fists tighter. Why was he doing this? Yes, he didn't want her to talk back to him. As her father, he deserved respect and obedience—this Confucian crap was bred in her bones; but this ritual where he cut her down to size had happened so many times before, and always it was the same: he hit her, and she let him. She couldn't shut up, although it made sense to do so; certainly Tina never talked back, and she was never hit. Then as if a switch had been flicked on, Casey decided that she'd no longer consider his side of the argument. His intentions were no longer relevant. She couldn't stand there anymore getting smacked. She was twenty-two, a university graduate. This was bullshit.

“Say you’re sorry,” Leah said, holding her breath, and she nodded her head encouragingly as if she were asking a baby to take another bite of cereal.

Casey drew her lips closer still, hating her mother.

Joseph grew calmer, and Leah prayed for this to be over.

“This girl has no respect for me,” he said to Leah, his eyes still locked on Casey’s reddened face. “She’s not . . . good.”

“She is sorry,” Leah apologized for her daughter. “I know she is. Casey is a good girl, and she doesn’t mean any of those things. She’s just so exhausted from school.” Leah turned to her. “Hurry. Go. Go to your room, now. Hurry.”

“You spoil the children. You let this happen. No wonder these girls talk to their father this way,” he said.

Tina got up from her seat. She rested her hands lightly on her sister’s thin shoulders, trying to steer her away, but Casey refused to follow. Their mother wept; she had cooked all afternoon. Nothing was eaten. Tina wished to rewind time, to come back to the table and start again.

Tina murmured, “Casey, Casey, come on. Please.”

Casey stared at her father. “I’m not spoiled. Neither is she,” Casey said, pointing to Tina. “I’m sick of hearing how bad I am when I’m not. You won the sweepstakes with kids like us. Why aren’t we good enough? Why aren’t we ever fucking good enough? Just fuck this,” she said quietly. “Fuck you.”

Joseph folded his arms over his stomach in shock, unable to accept what she was saying.

“And why am I not good enough right now? Without doing another damn thing?” Casey’s voice broke, and she was sobbing, not because he had hit her, but because she understood that she had always felt shortchanged by her father. It wasn’t like she hadn’t tried.

Joseph took a breath and swung his fist, hitting her face so hard that Casey fell. Her eyeglasses ricocheted off the table and skittered across the floor. Tina hurried to pick them up. A nose pad was broken, and one of the sides had nearly snapped off. Casey grabbed onto the table for support, and the Formica table with its cheap metal legs toppled, and she slipped, falling amid the crash of bowls and dishes. A bright red flush spread over Casey’s right eye, adding color to the handprints on her left cheek.

“Get up,” he said.

With her fingers splayed across the green linoleum, Casey pulled herself off the remaining dry patch of floor. Somehow, she was standing in front of him again. Blood trickled inside her cut lip, the metal taste icing her tongue.

“You going to hit me again?” she asked, her tongue sweeping across her teeth.

Joseph shook his head. “Get out. Get your things and leave my house. I don’t know you,” he said, his speech formal. Joseph’s arms hung limply against his body.

Fighting was useless now. He'd failed as a father, and she'd died as someone to watch over. He left the kitchen, stepping across the broken pieces of a white ceramic water pitcher. From the living room, he turned around but refused to look at Casey. "I sent you to school. I did what I could. I'm done now, and I want you gone by morning. It makes me sick to look at you."

Leah and the girls watched as he walked into his bedroom and closed the door. Casey sat down in her father's empty chair. She stared up at the ceiling tiles, unconsciously counting them, as she used to do at meals. Tina smoothed her hair in an effort to comfort herself and tried to regulate her breath. Leah sat still, her hands clutching the skirt of her dress. She believed that it would have been better if Joseph had stayed in the room and slapped Casey again.

## 2 CREDIT

THE CHILDHOOD BEDROOM Tina and Casey had shared until Casey went away to school was far smaller than any of her dorm rooms in Mathey College or Cuyler Hall. The girls' bunk beds were pushed up against the length of the room, blocking a dirty window that could not be cleaned from inside. Above the laminated headboard of the top bunk where Casey slept hung a faded poster of Lynda Carter dressed as Wonder Woman, her arms akimbo. Within the framed space of the bottom bunk, Tina had taped up a free Yankees poster from Burger King that she'd gotten when she was in primary school. Barely eighteen inches from the bed were two mismatched plywood desks and a pair of white gooseneck lamps from Ohrbach's. Above the desks, the girls had papered the walls with unframed certificates of excellence from their school years: among their many awards, Casey had received recognition for Photography, Music, and Social Studies; Tina, for Geometry, Religion, Physics, and BC Calculus.

Casey didn't notice the awards anymore, their curled edges stuck down with yellowing Scotch tape. Nor did she notice the uncomfortable scale of the room, or its lack of natural light. In the first years of visits home from school, she'd compared the glorious working fireplace in her suite in Mathey, the wood-paneled classrooms, and the stained-glass windows to the Dacron blue pile carpet in her Elmhurst bedroom and the bulletproof glass in her apartment building lobby, and she decided that she could not afford to look too critically at what was home, because it hurt.

After the fight with her father, Casey went to her bedroom for the sole purpose of retrieving her Marlboros, and as soon as she got them and a book of matches, she walked out the front door.

She hiked three flights of stairs instead of taking the elevator because there was no other way to get to the tar-paved roof. From memory, she keyed in the security

code—4-1-7-4, the birth date of Etelda, the building superintendent's only daughter. For years, Casey had helped Etelda with her schoolwork, then later tutored her for the SATs. In consideration, her father, Sandro, gave Casey free rein of the roof. When Etelda got a full scholarship to attend Bates College, Sandro bought a metal café table and two matching chairs from a hardware store in Paramus with his own money and left the gift, along with a glass ashtray, on the roof for its sole visitor.

But now Casey didn't pull up a chair. She sat on the wide parapet bordering the roof, dangling her legs against the north side of the building facing the street, not caring if her white pants were dirtied by the brown brick facade. The night breezes, undetectable in her mother's airtight kitchen, brushed against her battered face. There was little light in the sky, no sign of the moon, and as for stars, Casey had never seen any in Queens. Until she was invited to the country by Virginia during a school vacation, Casey had no clear idea what the poets wrote about or what Van Gogh painted. The first time she saw a black sky pierced with what seemed like an infinite number of white holes was on a trip to Newport to Virginia's grandmother's house. What Casey felt initially was the pause in her own breathing. The sight literally took her breath away. Then she craned her neck to stare at the swirl of the Milky Way, and she could hardly be persuaded to go back into the great house, despite the mosquitoes nibbling on her ankles. For the remainder of her visit, the senior Mrs. Craft pronounced Casey "that starry-eyed girl." The next day, when her mosquito bites grew fat and pink on her ankles and toes—forming their own raised constellation—Casey felt no regret whatsoever. At the age of nineteen, she'd finally seen stars.

Casey yearned for the darkened steel layer of city sky, banded by pink and gray ribbons of twilight, to be stripped to reveal the stars. There was no way to see them. Fine, she thought, feeling deprived. From where she sat, there were countless, identical apartment windows brightened with electric bulbs, each covered by a square glass shade screwed into the ceiling. On both sides of Van Kleeck Street, there were attached rental apartment buildings raised in the late 1960s by the same developer—all with the same floor plans, Whirlpool refrigerators, and small closets. Inside them, lightbulbs flickered invitingly. The apartments were brick beehives—defined pockets of air, sound, and light. Casey wanted to believe that in them there could be happiness and not just droning.

Casey began to play her favorite roof game. There were hardly any rules, only one objective: to choose a window, then to study the contents in view. She had the idea that your possessions told something about you: a plaid, duct-taped armchair showed a man's brokenness; a heavily gilded mirror reflected a woman's regal soul that had not yet faded; and a paper cylinder of store-brand oatmeal left out on a kitchen counter testified to a lack of coins in a retiree's purse.

Across the street, at eye level, Casey made out a South Asian boy and girl watching television in a modest-sized living room. They were perhaps elementary

school age. Casey wanted to sit beside them, silent, invisible, and breathless, because their handsome, earnest faces possessed wonder about the images transmitted to them. The glow of Casey's cigarette kept her company, but she would've preferred a lamp and a book, or in her current mood, an episode of *Mary Tyler Moore* or *Bob Newhart*. Always Casey had been a reader and a viewer. The contempt others had for television made no sense when *Alice*, *The Jeffersons*, *All in the Family*, *The Love Boat*, *Fantasy Island*, *The Bionic Woman*, *The Brady Bunch*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and of course *Wonder Woman* had served as guides to the Han sisters' understanding of America. The classics borrowed from the Elmhurst Public Library had taught the sisters about Americans and Europeans from long ago, but modern life had been extrapolated from the small screen. Joseph and Leah did not discourage television. With the girls' irreproachable report cards, television was a treat even the Hans could afford.

Casey heard Tina's wooden sandals clacking toward her.

"Don't jump," Tina said, her voice edged with teasing.

"Ha," Casey replied. "If only it were so easy." She glanced down at the concrete pavement ten stories below. Opposite the red fire hydrant, neighborhood kids crowded the stoop of the building catty-corner from hers and ate Sicilian pizza straight from the box. Casey envied their appetite, feeling none herself.

Tina dried her wet hands on her blue jeans. She'd been on her knees mopping the kitchen floor with a fat sponge. Downstairs, their mother was still washing dishes. It had been Leah's idea for the younger one to go find her sister.

"So what are you going to do?" Tina asked.

Casey shrugged. Her feeble smoke ring lost its form.

"I expected a blowup some time around August. Not in the first week of our arrival at *chez Han*," Tina said.

"You're awfully funny tonight." Casey dragged on her second cigarette.

"Can you stay at Jay's?"

Casey nodded. "Looks that way. Virginia is in Newport for a month, then off to Italy. It must be nice to have pots of money. And time to piss it away."

"Italy sounds nice," Tina said. Neither of them had been to Europe.

"And I just got that credit card last week, and if I could score a ticket, Virginia would let me crash with her, but once I'm there, I don't know how to get work, and . . ." The notion of living in Italy sounded impressive and exciting, but it was ludicrous for her to think of such a thing.

Tina followed her sister's gaze and tried to guess which window Casey was studying. Tina had no attachment to this game; to her, the round shape of someone's dining table, the short denim skirt a woman chose to wear at home, did not seem telling. But then again, Tina was constantly being surprised by her peers at M.I.T.—the marked difference between their appearances and tastes—whereas

Casey was rarely stumped by people. Chul was more like Casey in that way; he seemed to have a natural curiosity about other people's choices. Then Tina remembered she was supposed to call him, but it was probably too late to phone his parents house in Maryland, where he was staying for the summer.

"Do you want to go to Italy?" Tina asked.

"Not this way," Casey answered.

"So to Jay's then?"

"Yes."

Tina didn't know what to say about the hitting. After one of these fights, Casey hated their family. And how could Tina blame her for that? No one knew how to stop their father when he was angry. "I have two hundred you can have. And twenty in quarters."

"I still owe you . . ." Casey reminded her.

Four years ago, Tina had given Casey her savings to pay for an abortion. Before Casey had met Jay, she'd gotten pregnant from a one-night stand, a guy whose name and number she'd thrown away. Since then, however, when she'd had the money to pay her sister back, a sweater, a hat, a pair of boots had seemed more pressing. Casey wished now that her Dun & Bradstreet was better.

"I don't care about that money. If you hadn't had that . . ." Tina clenched her jaw, "procedure, your life would have been ruined."

Casey stubbed out her half-smoked cigarette—smoking was akin to burning dollar bills, but she enjoyed the wastefulness of it. Right away, she lit another.

Tina started, "I've seen pictures of lungs —"

"Not tonight, please. Spare me."

"You could have spared us tonight too," Tina mumbled, then hearing the sharp truth of what she'd just said, hoped Casey wouldn't pick up on it.

"He was being an asshole, Tina."

"Yes, I know that." Tina looked hard at her sister. "So what. None of this is new to you."

"And I suppose you would've handled it differently. No, brilliantly, with your excellent bedside manner, Dr. Han." Casey had called her this since they were kids.

"I didn't say he wasn't being an asshole." Tina resented Casey's persistent wish to choose sides.

"You also didn't say I was being an asshole, although that's what you're thinking. Fuck you."

"Why? Why do I bother with you?"

"Why do you?" Casey replied, frowning her eyebrows. "Don't do me any favors."

Tina's voice grew quiet. When it came to family matters, she'd always felt like she was the older one. "C'mon, Casey. It's me."

Casey exhaled, feeling stupid and alone. With her index finger, she tapped her right temple. “Hey, I just made up a rule. Wanna hear it?”

“Yes.” Tina offered up her baby sister smile; it said, Tell me something I need to learn. Let me adore you again.

“One fight per night.” Casey beamed, raising her eyebrows dramatically. “I already had my one fight. So I can’t fight with you. Maybe tomorrow I can squeeze you in.”

“By all means, sign me up,” Tina said smiling.

They grew quiet. Tina swallowed, then with her right hand reached toward Casey’s face, partly hidden in the evening shadow. “Let me see you.”

“Don’t.” Casey flinched, blowing smoke in Tina’s direction.

“You should take the money.”

“Since I’m causing the problems, it’s right that I should go.” Casey said it methodically as if she were reciting a geometry proof. Then she muttered, “I can never catch a break here.”

“You’ll kill each other if you stay,” Tina said. “Take the money I can give you.”

Casey nodded, trying to contain her disgust. “I’ll pay you back. All of it.”

“I don’t care about the money, Casey.” When they were younger, Tina felt pleasure when Casey merely looked at her.

“I’m leaving after they go to bed.” Casey’s face was impassive. “They can’t know where I am. All right? Please do me that favor.”

Tina wouldn’t argue. By noting Casey’s mistakes, Tina had avoided making the same ones. If she felt a duty to do better in life, it was because she’d screened the previews. She felt—what was it? A primitive loyalty? Certainly not gratitude. Responsibility? Regardless, it wasn’t what she wanted to feel.

The dark street below was empty. A pair of rats dashed out of the black garbage bags near the curb.

The evening shouldn’t have turned out this way. On the train ride down from school, Tina had been going through her list of questions for Casey—worries saved up from the semester. They rarely spoke during the school year. Long-distance calls were expensive, and their schedules were so full and out of sync. And Casey made things difficult. Her life appeared frenetic and purposeless. She was so hard to make out.

The evening grew darker, and with no moon or streetlights, Tina could barely detect the silhouette of her sister’s face—the shallow-set eyes, their father’s mouth, the high cheekbones, the nose that was slightly rounded at the tip. Her sister’s skin color was fairer than her own, and her straight black hair turned chestnut brown in the summer. Tina’s black hair had a bluish cast, and in the winter, it was raven. When they were out, no one ever suspected that she and Casey were sisters. But Tina wanted to protest that they were sisters; they were not best friends, but they’d always be each other’s own.



Tina took a breath. There was always so little time.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Hmm?” Casey was almost surprised to hear a voice, having already wished Tina gone.

“What’s . . . it like?”

“What?” Casey was confused.

“Sex. What’s it like?”

“Are you going to have sex?” Casey widened her eyes, offering shock, then amusement. “Is there a boy in my sister’s life?”

“Shut up.”

“Well,” Casey pretended to be offended.

“There’s a boy,” Tina admitted, her eyes more full of worry than pride.

“Name?” Casey asked.

“Chul.”

“Korean?” Casey opened her mouth.

“Yes.”

“Whoa.”

“I know,” Tina said. It was Law: If either of them brought home a white boy, that daughter would be disowned. They were to marry Korean. But the likelihood always seemed zero, since no Korean boys ever asked them out.

“Tell.” Casey leaned in.

It was easier to discuss him in the dark. Chul was a year ahead of her at M.I.T., also pre-med, tall, and a volleyball player. Harvey, the president of the Campus Christian Crusade, had brought him to an ice cream social in December and had introduced him to Tina. He was serious looking and more manly than the other boys who milled about her at school. He had beautiful Korean eyes, an open brow, and a masculine nose. When spring term began, and he asked her to go to a movie with him, she couldn’t believe it, but he came for her as promised with twelve blush-colored roses wrapped in white paper. After three dates, they made out in his blue Honda Accord. When she told him she was a virgin, he pulled back. “It’s sweet,” he said. He’d only had one experience himself—awkward intercourse after a prom night. They agreed to pray about it. In no time, he said he loved her. “It’s up to you, Tina.” Five months of unclasped brassieres, erections that had initially frightened her, and being touched until she could hardly bear it—she was now worried that her beliefs no longer charmed him. She wanted to make love, but she was afraid of it and him and God, and everything looked gray. Was fellatio sinful too? Her moral lines kept shifting. They’d done everything up to the last thing. “I don’t believe in premarital sex, you know. The Bible . . .”

“I know.” Casey nodded dramatically. “But you think abortions are okay.” She couldn’t help getting in this little jab—and it was really toward herself anyway.

“Didn’t you have some newfound rule about one fight per evening?” Tina squinted.

“Oh, yes. I forgot.” Casey laughed.

“Well?” Tina asked, wanting Casey to talk.

“I think, it’s . . .” Casey wanted the right word. “It’s sincere, your faith. I don’t know how you do it, but . . .”

Tina gazed at her sister intently. Sex was a thing Casey knew, and Tina envied her experience.

“I just can’t imagine not having sex. I like it. I hope you like it. It’s so . . . overwhelming. And I want to be overwhelmed. Can you imagine that?” Casey turned to face her sister, but she couldn’t see her expression clearly. Casey wanted her sister to allow her own desire and not be impeded by conventional ideas. “It’s good to be out of your head. To forget yourself. To just yearn for someone else.”

Tina exhaled. Casey’s boldness impressed her.

“Perhaps I like it too much,” Casey said, feeling ashamed of saying what she believed. Perhaps she shouldn’t lead her sister astray. So few people had any beliefs these days. “I’m probably not a good example for you.” If Casey interpreted her sexual biography by her sister’s template, she was probably a slut—having slept with eight different men, not all of them ones she’d been dating, and seven of them she’d slept with before she was nineteen. At Princeton, there’d been girls who had thirty to forty partners (with diaries and ranking methods), and girls who’d had one true love. And there was Tina: one of the last holdouts.

Tina wanted details, clues, advice. At M.I.T., where most of the students were male, few girls were virgins. Men fell out of the sky to have sex. Now that Tina had a boyfriend, she was beginning to get what the other girls had been telling her all along: there had always been boys willing to record cassettes of her favorite love songs, write her bad poetry, take her to dinner in Cambridge—all for the possibility of taking off her clothes. Her friends, especially the attractive ones, and even the plain ones in her Wednesday prayer circle, couldn’t believe Tina was still a virgin.

“Why is it so overwhelming?” she asked.

“Because the sensations are so powerful. It’s just wonderful being naked with someone you like—touching their warm skin, feeling their breath and bones, being close, so close and feeling needed, urgently—and afterward, it can be so soothing; everything else seems so secondary. And . . . and . . .” Casey had never described sex to anyone; no one had ever asked. Images tumbled across her mind. She felt alert, alive suddenly.

“It’s exciting, so exciting to be wanted by someone you like. And with love, it’s even more powerful because when you trust him, it’s possible to surrender. Completely. I think if you love Chul and he loves you, well . . .” Casey stopped herself, feeling like some sort of premarriage sex advocate she didn’t want to be.

“Tell me more.”

“You know the first time a boy tries to kiss you?”

Tina nodded.

“It’s that kind of thrill, but suspended and stretched out. It’s . . . consummation.”

Casey had liked Jay Currie the moment she spotted him beneath Blair Arch.

He was standing there in the middle of a group of guys, telling some funny story, and he noticed her looking at him too. His large blue-green eyes—the color of a trout’s body with shimmering gray and black speckles—had lighted on her, and she felt startled. A few days later, he sat next to her at Mathey College dining hall, but it turned out that he was a junior, a member of Terrace. Later, he confessed that he’d been trailing her and had snuck into the younger students’ dining hall to meet her. She agreed to a date, and after *Pauline at the Beach* ended (she couldn’t remember the story at all), and as the credits rolled, he leaned in and pressed his lips against hers, his chin slightly stubbled, his hair, wavy and honey colored. After pulling back, he remarked, “You are so soft,” as if this quality had surprised him. She laughed, saying, “Is that so?” and she bit her lower lip from happiness. Immediately, he kissed her again.

“So do you think Jay is the great love?” Tina asked her.

Casey made a face, not having considered it in such terms. “You mean like the great love of my life?” she smirked. “That’s cute.”

“Don’t be such a hard-ass. I was wondering, I mean, I don’t mean to rationalize.”

“Rationalize away, Dr. Han.”

Tina ignored the jibe. “Listen, if Chul was the great love of my life, and I wanted to be with him forever, and I could promise that I would want only him, then . . .” It was hard for her to get the words out. She was trying to say that it might be okay to sleep with him before getting married.

“He’s your college boyfriend. That’s like saying you’ll, oh, my God, I mean, get married to someone who took you to your first formal or something? For heaven’s sakes.” Casey had not intended to sound so dismissive, but Tina’s argument was preposterous. Fantasy or, worse, orthodoxy.

“But you said that the sex was better when you love—”

“Yes, of course, but love is not the same as a promise to be together always.”

“But that’s what I want. And I think that’s what we all want, at least in the beginning.”

“Well, yes. But I’m glad I didn’t marry Sean Crowley.” She mentioned the boy she gave her virginity to when she was fifteen.

“But are you glad that you . . . slept with Sean?”

The answer was a flat no, but then Casey didn’t want to say that. “I’m glad I had that experience,” she said. The reluctance in her voice was obvious.

Pleased by her modest win, Tina continued: “I know what I want. I want him to promise me that he will want only me. There should be some sort of promise.” Tina couldn’t think of a better word.

“You mean like a goddamn covenant?” Casey recoiled physically, almost repulsed by this suggestion. “Oh, come on, Tina. Get real. You’re twenty. You can’t get married. And what do you do if he’s terrible in the sack? That’s fucking ridiculous. You could be married for fifty years. Hell, with science the way it is, you could be married for seventy years. Then what?”

“But you’re supposed to love, and you said that if you loved each other that it’s better, so with your argument how could the sex be bad? I’ve been thinking about this . . .”

“Yes, I can see that.” Casey laughed.

“I think it would hurt so much if I wanted him, but he didn’t want me . . . for . . . for . . . always. You know? And vice versa.”

“Yes, it would hurt,” Casey threw her hands up, “Sure. Of course it would hurt. But damn, Tina, love is . . .” Casey stopped. “It’s this naked thing. You can get screwed over, but . . .” Casey felt her position was weaker because she believed less in her own theories. She felt her face sting suddenly. The swelling was worsening. She touched her face, not really wanting to know how bad it was.

“You okay? Here, let me.” Tina pushed the hair from Casey’s forehead.

“I’m fine,” Casey snapped, jerking her shoulder back. Then she saw Tina’s hurt expression.

“Sorry. What I mean is, with love, you have to march into the possibility of losing.”

Tina nodded, thinking Casey didn’t sound wrong.

“Never mind,” Casey said. “Don’t do what I do but what you think is right. But whatever you do, you can’t keep yourself from getting hurt. The heart doesn’t seem to work that way. I want love, Tina. I want that. I’ll pay.”

The streetlamps turned on, lighting Casey’s face, and Tina gasped at the depth of the bruises.

“Your face,” Tina closed her eyes, then opened them, as a rush of sympathy overcame her.

“Is it bad, Dr. Han?” Casey said with a smile, refusing to be moved by her sister’s concern. She bit the inside of her left cheek, knowing from Tina’s look that it must be awful.

“We have to clean that up,” Tina said. She was trying to remain calm and keep from crying. “C’mon, let’s go.”

### 3 NET

WHEN THE SISTERS got downstairs, Leah and Joseph were in their bedroom with the door shut. The kitchen table was bare except for the plastic napkin holder stuffed with paper napkins and a shot glass filled with wooden toothpicks; all the surfaces had been wiped down, with no trace of the meal that had been thrown on

the floor. The living room, located at the back of the building, was quiet except for the occasional screech of a distant streetcar. In the bathroom with the burble of the tap running, Tina cleaned Casey's face. Neither spoke, anxious that their father might be roused from sleep. After Tina finished, Casey put in her contact lenses. In their current state, her eyeglasses couldn't be worn. She packed a duffle and a messenger bag.

Tina sent her off, giving her the money and securing Casey's promise to call later that week. The sisters parted without any hugging or kissing—those intimate gestures that came so easily to Americans. The painted elevator doors closed, taking Casey down to the lobby, and Tina turned back to the apartment.

Casey walked toward Queens Boulevard. She'd catch the N or R at Grand Avenue. She wore a wide-brimmed canvas beach hat and a pair of mirrored ski sunglasses lifted from a lost and found at Sabine's. The pin dots of blood on her collar were indiscernible, so Casey hadn't bothered to change her shirt. She was too exhausted to care. All she wanted was to fall into Jay's bed. She didn't want to talk, and he was most likely at the office anyway. He worked most Saturday nights and Sundays.

At the subway platform, Casey rested her things on an empty bench. The duffle was filled like a sausage casing with summer clothes and shoes. In the messenger bag strapped across her chest were her books: copies of *Middlemarch* and *Wuthering Heights* that she read and reread for comfort; a collection of Pritchett's stories borrowed long ago from Virginia that she hadn't read yet; the confirmation Bible she read each morning in private, and a 99¢ marble composition notebook in which she copied her verse for the day. Also in the bag, wrapped in a cotton scarf, was a mint first edition of Lilly Dache's biography that Sabine and her husband, Isaac, had given her for her graduation. Lilly Dache was a celebrity hatmaker from the 1940s and '50s whose career Sabine had emulated and improved. After Sabine gave her the book, she told Casey that she'd paid \$500 for it. A retailer, Sabine couldn't help talking about the cost of things.

In her straw handbag, Casey carried cosmetics and a Vuitton wallet (another present from Sabine) with \$272 in cash and a Visa charge plate activated from her parents' apartment that night. The card had a limit of \$5,000. At the bottom of the purse, two rolls of quarters weighed heavily.

Amazingly, the pay phone on the platform had a dial tone, but when Jay's home phone began to ring, the R train came, so she hung up and ducked into the car. Soon she reached the Lexington Avenue station and switched for the 6. Before midnight, Casey found herself in front of Jay's apartment building on York Avenue.

With her own set of keys, she let herself into Jay's cramped lobby—its walls painted a Schiaparelli pink. The lobby had just enough square footage for an upholstered stool opposite the elevator and a path for a resident to reach the six mailboxes

behind the staircase. Jay's box, as she'd predicted, was jammed, including a fat alumni magazine from Lawrenceville, where he'd been a day boy. Casey flipped through his heavy stack of mail. They had an arrangement in which he gave her checkbooks with signed blank checks, and she paid his bills. He didn't have time to sleep or to spend money on a regular basis; his big-ticket items were skiing in the winter, golfing in the summer, and the repayment of school loans. In January he'd received a 100 percent bonus and made \$160,000 in total compensation. Their point of view on money was identical: whoever had more covered for the other. At school, when she had extra because her weekend job was steady, she'd paid their expenses. And now that he earned much more, he picked up the tab.

In return, when she stayed over during weekends and vacations, while her parents had the impression she was sleeping at Virginia's, Casey did housewifey things for Jay—went to the dry cleaners for his shirts, tidied the apartment, scrubbed the bathtub, stocked the refrigerator with orange juice, milk, cereal, and coffee. She helped him select his suits, shirts, and ties—he preferred Paul Stuart over Brooks—and every night when they spoke on the phone, she reminded him to take his vitamins before saying goodnight. She could've cooked more but lacked real interest in the domestic arts—her repertoire was limited to baked ziti made with Ragu sauce and Polly-O cheese and a Lipton's Onion Soup mix meat loaf. Nevertheless, Jay was grateful. He was a pleasure to take care of, because he had beautiful manners. For that, Casey took her hat off to his mother, Mary Ellen.

Casey's face was hurting. In the dim light from a pink glass chandelier installed by the landlord's nephew, Casey opened her compact to check her face. Her father's mark on her face was less distinctly a hand—it was more liver shaped. She snapped the mirror shut. Jay didn't know about her father hitting her. He knew her parents were difficult; he was aware that she wasn't meant to date white guys. But Casey never told anyone about the hitting. When she was a girl, her mother warned her and Tina that in America, if your parents disciplined you and the teachers at school found out, the state would put you in an orphanage. Consequently, Casey and Tina never told anyone anything. As they grew older, they saw their parents working yet unable to get ahead. Leah looked perpetually frightened in the streets, and both she and Joseph were treated like idiots by their customers, who little cared that the hardworking pair was fluent and literate in another language. Casey and Tina saw their parents' difficulties and believed that Leah and Joseph meant well. And Casey and Tina feared their parents' actions would be misunderstood. As if to confirm it, Jay called her parents bigoted. "Your silence about me is a form of collusion with their racism."

To Casey, it seemed upside down to call a minority person a racist, or a woman a sexist, a poor person a snob, a gay person a homophobe, an old person an ageist, a Jewish person an anti-Semite. All these labels were carelessly bandied about at

school. But she admitted that it was possible to hate yourself and easy to hate others because you'd been hated. Hatred had its own logic of symbiosis. Her father refused to buy a Japanese car and instead drove an Oldsmobile Delta 88. Casey found this absurd, yet she had never had a brother shot by a Japanese soldier or experienced a hostile colonial occupation. She saw that her father's stance was a powerless person's sorry attempt to regain some dignity. Casey wanted to believe she could rise above her father's smallness. But the crazy thing was that her father probably considered himself just as Casey considered herself: broad-minded and fair.

She was no longer welcome in his house; she was no longer his daughter, he'd said this. He might be right that she had no idea what it was to lose everything. Had she lost everything? Life seemed too vast, so many things to consider, and she was overwhelmed. How would she explain to Jay what had happened? He would see the bruises and think her father a monster. Jay's own father had walked out when he was three. Casey hoped Jay wasn't home. In the morning after sleep and coffee, she'd talk to him. The elevator finally arrived.

Inside the apartment, Casey heard the bathroom radio that Jay never turned off, but it didn't sound like the news. Jay preferred the station with its spooled taped news reports because it broadcast the weather in five-minute intervals, but also because the editorial content was so absurd. He called it radio station bang-bang because from listening to it, you'd think that all there was in New York was bedlam, murder, and mayhem.

Casey dropped her bags on his Jennifer Convertible sleeper sofa, removed her hat, and brushed her hair back with her hands. Then she plopped down in Jay's grandmother's armchair—the only good piece of furniture in the place. Casey planned to have it recovered for him one of these days; Jay's maternal grandmother, who'd recently died, had watched over him and his brother when they were boys while their mother worked at the Trenton Library. Jay was unequivocal in his adoration of her. Casey leaned back, feeling calm, almost joyous to be at Jay's. Then his voice drifted from the second bedroom that he used as his office. Jay was likely on the phone. Managing directors had no qualms about calling him any time of the day. Casey leaped up and rushed to him.

She saw the girls first. Jay lay across the beige wool carpet with two naked girls—one of them joined to him, straddling his hips, and the other crouched over his face, his mouth tight to her body. She was an attractive redhead with gold-colored eyes; the other was a pretty blonde. They looked like girls she and Jay could have known from school but prettier than Princeton girls. Casey scrutinized them. They looked happy—their faces flushed. A half-empty bottle of red wine rested on Jay's white Ikea desk. A year ago, he had borrowed his mother's car, and he and Casey drove to Elizabeth to buy the desk and a pair of white shelves. They ate Swedish meatballs in the store cafeteria. She and Jay had never had sex in this room

and not on any floor in quite a while. His stereo was set to a top-40s station, something he never listened to, and Casey was glad it wasn't radio station bang-bang because that was their joke. The song playing was "Lady in Red," and Casey focused on its maudlin lyrics and the rattling of the air conditioner—its chassis hanging out the casement window. They hadn't noticed her yet.

Casey stood unwilling, or unable, to speak. In her mind, she kept repeating, "Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God." It seemed almost a pity to interrupt them; they were involved in so much pleasure. The three of them resembled gleeful children playing a game. They were youthful and attractive, and their sex looked like a sporting exercise more than anything else. Jay opened his eyes from his labor and stretched his neck upward, jostling the blonde one with the spectacular breasts who was perched on his shoulders. He wondered how he would manage to satisfy both girls. He didn't want to get a weak performance review back at some Louisiana sorority house. The fantasy he'd had for years was turning out to be less than satisfying. Nevertheless, Jay congratulated himself, because he would never have discovered this information in any other way. No matter what, though, he could not climax—*must keep the boat afloat*, he told himself.

The girl with the long legs wrapped loosely around Jay's neck continued to thrust her pale hips toward his face. For an instant, she woke from her dreamy gaze and pulled herself away from him, adjusted her position, and then thrust on.

Casey felt herself fold inward like a dying fire—flames vanishing, the embers turning to black ash. She wondered if she could survive the moment. Her limbs wouldn't move. She felt more stupid than angry, and her pride instructed her to be composed in front of these pretty girls who were fucking her boyfriend. She inhaled deeply and looked down at her feet. She'd put on black espadrilles when she left her parent's house, and she felt ridiculous wearing shoes, because she was the only one in the room wearing any.

She couldn't look away from the three bodies, their bright skin, taut and shimmering in the low wattage of the desk lamp. The longer she looked, the less human they appeared, as if they were a primeval species.

Jay turned his neck a few degrees. "Oh, God. Casey. What happened? To your face? Are you all right?" He freed himself suddenly from the girls, saying, "Excuse me." He pulled on a pair of blue boxer shorts over his condom-covered erection. He was so upset about her face that he didn't think to explain the ménage à trois.

Casey stared at him as if she had never seen him before, then turned away. It hurt to look at him. She wanted the girls to get dressed, but they were in no rush. They didn't know who she was, only that she was intruding. Why should they rush to pick up their things?

Jay combed his tousled hair with his fingers. "This is Brenda," he said of the red-head, and the blonde's name was Sheila. They smiled genially, not thinking that the



Asian girl was Jay's girlfriend. They'd asked him if he had a girl, and he said, "No."

They were juniors from L.S.U. who'd gone into a fancy Upper East Side bar with their sorority sisters on an annual end-of-the-year trip. After several margaritas each, the sorority sisters played Truth or Dare. Jay was a dare for Sheila, and when Brenda was also dared to find a one-nighter, the girls decided that it would be safer to do a triple than to split up with strangers. They agreed on Jay. Brenda liked his pretty eyes and his jacket and tie, and Sheila thought he looked disease free.

Holding Brenda's hand, Sheila had approached Jay and asked if he'd oblige a couple of girls from out of town. At first Jay didn't understand. Then they asked if he'd ever done a neck shot. A tray of tequila appeared. "Observe," Sheila said. She rubbed lemon on Jay's neck, then dabbed coarse salt on it. Brenda licked the area and downed a shot expertly. "Your turn," they chirped like twin girls. Sheila applied juice and salt to Brenda's neck, and handed Jay his shot. Jay, seeing himself as a sporting fellow, did it perfectly on his first try. "Hey, Jay, what do you say?" Sheila asked him, proud of her rhyme. "Beats quarters," he said.

Jay's colleagues, who had dragged him to the bar after closing a deal, nearly fell down at the young man's luck. "Fuck me," one of the older men cried out, and Brenda winked at him, "No thank you, sweetie, this one will do."

Another of the men said, "Young Currie, don't be a schmuck. This is better than making a million a year. You may never, ever—" he appraised Sheila, then took some air into his lungs, "ever —" He shook his head, "get this opportunity again. Carpe diem, you get me?"

Jay left the bar with a girl on each arm, hoots and hollers of applause cresting like a wave behind him. At the apartment, Sheila tuned the stereo, and Brenda did a little dance while she took off her clothes. Not ten minutes into their dare, Casey walked in.

"Hey, there," Brenda said to Casey in a friendly voice. It crossed her mind that maybe Casey was Jay's roommate, girlfriend, or even just friend. She could be his adopted sister. None of it was very clear, and Brenda's buzz was fizzling. Her best friend's cousin, Lola, had an adopted sister who was Chinese and looked a bit like this girl, but not so tall.

Sheila hooked her brassiere. "Hi." She smiled brightly, with some flash of concern for the girl who looked like she'd been mugged or something. It was a little spooky how she didn't talk.

Casey tried to smile, but moving her face hurt. She tried to pretend she was meeting people from school or Jay's work, but she couldn't stand it. She turned and rushed to the master bath in Jay's bedroom and locked the door.

She retched a bitter liquid tasting of cigarettes. With water, she rinsed her mouth quickly, then glanced up. In the three-way mirror, she saw her face. The

right side was purple and her left eye, a curved gash above a blue-green streaked bruise. Jay knocked, and Casey opened the door to push past him as he was saying something she couldn't hear. She might have been shouting, she wasn't sure. It was like he was under water and she was standing on shore. She got to the living room, pulled her hat down over her head, slipped on her sunglasses, and grabbed her bags. She dashed out the door and ran down the flights of stairs, gulping air to calm her wild heart.

#### 4 DEFICIT

CASEY WALKED WEST toward Madison Avenue—a street she loved for its polished glass storefronts and impossibly choice wares. It was past midnight, but safer on Madison than on many streets in the world, because here the shop owners had secured their costly inventory, and by default, Casey was protected too.

Virginia Craft lived one avenue over, on Park, but no one was home for the summer, and even if Virginia's elderly parents were in, Casey wouldn't have shown up at this hour. The elder Crafts were kind people, and they would have asked her to stay, but Casey couldn't imagine what they'd say seeing her in this condition—or worse, what they would never say. They didn't have outward conflicts with their only child—adopted from a dark-haired Mexican seventeen-year-old who'd had an affair with a gringo ne'er-do-well who refused to marry her. The Crafts had gone to collect Virginia in Texas when she was two days old. Virginia once said about her adoptive parents: "I feel neutral to positive about Jane and Fritzzy, who saved me from poverty and obscurity. But I sense that I've let them down." Virginia's long-limbed parents with coin-worthy profiles had a detached manner of speaking, which trained you to follow them accordingly. Their mode of conversation encouraged restraint. To them, her father would be criminal.

Casey stopped at the Carlyle Hotel. There was no doorman in front of the revolving door. Virginia's grandmother, Eugenie Vita Craft, stayed here whenever she came to town. Old Mrs. Craft was a pleasure. She wore her white hair short and wild like a tropical bird. On her flat waist and narrow hips, she wound multiple scarves, and wherever she was, men sought her glance. Venetian rings with colored stones glistened on her freckled fingers. She was thrilling, but her only son, Virginia's father, was a disappointment. After years of therapy, Virginia analyzed him: "Grandmother's irrepressible nature blocked Fritzzy from being a grander person. There isn't enough room for him in the world. Poor baby." Virginia speculated that to avoid repeating the mother-son dynamic, Fritzzy married Jane—a woman who disliked books, sports, art, drama, fashion, sex, and politics. Naturally, Virginia and Casey discounted Virginia's parents and worshiped the grandmother.

Casey pushed her way into the Carlyle, and at the front desk, she called on her best imitation of the old Mrs. Craft. “I find myself in New York for the night. Could you possibly spare a quiet room?” The man tried not to stare at her face. He was originally from Glasgow, and long ago when he first came to New York, he’d tried to pick up a straight man in the Lower East Side and had gotten badly beaten up. That she was wearing a ridiculous hat and ski glasses and trying to sound posh made him feel even sorrier for her. He considered asking if she needed medical assistance but instead offered her an excellent room at a corporate rate.

THE NEXT MORNING, Casey woke up enveloped in crisp white bedding. Her hotel room was large with lovely striped wallpaper, a green wool mohair armchair, and beside it, an inviting reading lamp. Beneath the Roman-shaded window, there was a lady’s writing desk and in the drawer, embossed stationery. She dashed a quick note to Virginia: “Thrown out of my parents’ *casa*. I am pretending to be Lady Eugenie for a night at the Carlyle until Fate determines my course. Explanation(s) to follow. Will send return address.” She’d mail it later when she found a stamp. Afterward, Casey realized that she hadn’t eaten in nearly twenty-four hours. From the In-Room-Dining menu, she ordered Irish oatmeal, lemon ricotta pancakes, and bacon. Fresh-squeezed orange juice and a large carafe of black coffee. When the food arrived, she tipped the waiter on top of all the additional in-room charges. She told herself to disregard the cost. Casey sat down and ate with gusto. Everything tasted so wonderful.

In the bathroom mirror, she saw that the swelling in her face had worsened in spots and the colors of the bruises had deepened. It would’ve been better if she’d iced it last night. Not much could be done now. It would heal, she told herself. She stepped in the deep white tub, sampling every bottle of bath gel, shampoo, and conditioner. To dry off, she went through four fat bath towels just because she could and used up all the lotion. This was her first time in such a place, and she decided she never wanted to stay anywhere else. Yet in her head, Casey envisioned a meter, like a taximeter—clicking, clicking, clicking speedily ahead.

She dressed herself in a pair of faded linen slacks, a worn white polo shirt, and white tennis sneakers with no socks. This was what she wore when she was a guest at a summerhouse. Over the years, through Virginia’s family and Jay’s wealthy friends from Lawrenceville and his eating club, Casey had been invited to Newport, South Hampton, Nantucket, Palm Beach, Block Island, Bar Harbor, Martha’s Vineyard, and Cape Cod. The visits had taught her a great deal about manners and dress.

At the writing desk, Casey read her Bible chapter for the day, and afterward, she jotted down her verse. She’d begun this practice during her freshman year after an office-hours talk with an esteemed religious studies professor, Willyum Butler—an atheist who converted to Catholicism in his late thirties. Butler was a West Indian

from St. Lucia and educated at Cambridge. He reviewed her mediocre paper on Kant and Huxley, and sensing the student's awe and fear of her subject matter, he asked her plainly, "Casey, what do you really think of what they are saying?" Casey swallowed and confessed an attraction to agnosticism. God's existence, Casey said in a stammer, couldn't be proved or disproved. It was easier to reconcile her life with Huxley than with Presbyterian orthodoxy—the passionate belief of her joyless parents.

Willyum nodded encouragingly. "So you are a determined fence-sitter."

"Yes, I mean . . . Am I?" she answered.

Willyum laughed, and then Casey did too.

Willyum liked his student's earnest face and admired her willingness to talk about her faith. Her seriousness reminded him of his early beginnings at the university. He felt compelled to give her something—to tell her a bit about his struggle. But he didn't want her to think that he was proselytizing, because he didn't believe in that, and it would have been wrong to do so in his capacity, he thought. He loathed thumpers as much as he disliked ex-smokers. But he also believed that if there was a cure for cancer, how could he withhold such a thing? "I think, if a mind can, a mind must wrestle before declaring victory. Really wrestle. Do you understand?" Willyum did not release his frown.

Casey nodded, not knowing what to say.

"It's your soul you're fighting for."

She wanted to know what he thought of the soul—obviously he believed that it existed. But she didn't feel entitled to ask any more questions. There were other students waiting outside the closed door. At times like that, Casey felt like a bumpkin, and his kindness and humility affected her deeply. In longhand, he drafted a short reading list for her. That afternoon, she would go to the bookstore and buy Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Chesterton, Lewis, de Beauvoir, and Daly. As she gathered her things to leave, she couldn't help herself from asking:

"Do you still struggle? I mean . . . wrestle?"

"Every day, I read a chapter of the Bible."

She nodded—her father and mother did this too.

"And every day, I find a verse I cannot stomach, make peace with, or comprehend. I write it down on my calendar." Willyum opened his leather-bound diary and showed her his scratchy writing. That day, he was reading Ecclesiastes. "I pray for clarity," he said, but did not mention being on his knees, his hands folded, head bowed.

Casey rose from her chair and shook his hand good-bye, but in her mind, she was busy tucking away his proffered scrap of personal history like a jewel.

Then in the second semester of her junior year, Professor Butler was killed in a car accident with his fourteen-year-old son, and Casey went to a memorial service attended by hundreds of mourners. Seated in a back pew with no one she knew,

Casey could not stop weeping. Prize-winning poets flew in from all over the world to read in his honor. The university president and the janitor who cleaned Butler's office eulogized him. Casey regretted not having told him that each morning since their talk, she had read a Bible chapter for ten minutes and took an additional minute to scribble down her verse of the day. It wasn't wrestling exactly, but more like approaching the mat. After he died, she began going to church on Sunday, though she told no one. She still didn't feel comfortable around people who identified themselves as Christians. But she discovered an unexpected dividend—her anxiety diminished for a while, and for that, she felt grateful.

In her block print, Casey wrote out her day's verse from the book of Joshua: "When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them." What was a shekel worth today? she wondered. She closed her Bible and notebook and stored them away in her messenger bag. She checked her face. There was little she could do except pull down the brim of her beach hat and wear her sunglasses. Lipstick seemed beside the point, but she applied some anyway. It was June in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, she kidded herself. Perhaps the hotel staff would attribute her appearances to rhinoplasty. She decided to go shopping.

CLOTHING WAS MAGIC. Casey believed this. She would never admit this to her classmates in any of her Women's Studies courses, but she felt that an article of clothing could change a person, literally cast a spell. Each skirt, blouse, necklace, or humble shoe said something—certain pieces screamed, and others whispered seductively, but no matter, she experienced each item's expression keenly, and she loved this world. Every article suggested an image, a life, a kind of woman, and Casey felt drawn by them. When things were difficult—and right now they couldn't get much worse—Casey went shopping for something to wear. When she had very little cash, purchasing a pair of black tights or a tube of lipstick from the drugstore could help her get through a slump.

Casey and her college friends were ashamed of shopping. Smart girls who read books weren't supposed to be materialistic (her fellow Economics majors pegged consumers as mollified idiots, and as for religion, they invoked Marx's phrase "the opiate of the masses"), and although female intellectuals cleverly discussed sensuality and tactility in Art, smart women were not supposed to like culling or gathering more dresses. But Casey knew well from having been on both sides of the counter that even bookish girls liked to go to shops and be thrilled by a red tweed skirt or a black cloche. And equally true was the fact that smart girls wanted to be beautiful in the way beautiful girls wanted to be smart. Size-fourteen bibliophiles could love clothes as much as size-two heiresses who shopped to fill their time. Everyone scrounged for an identity defined by objects.

That morning, Casey went to Bayard Toll, though her budget recommended Lucky's, a discount warehouse. What she wanted was an image of something to wear for a job interview, and the notion of combing through the round, bulky clothing racks of Lucky's depressed her, although at other times, she'd relished the challenge of finding the treasures passed over from last season's styles. Today, she wanted luxury. She wanted to be someone else.

Bayard's third floor carried collections of modern designers. Casey shopped efficiently, and within half an hour, she'd picked up a pair of black slacks—cut narrow and made from a fine summer-weight wool, a gray skirt with parallel kick pleats on the sides, a white Sea Island cotton shirt with exaggerated French cuffs, and a navy lightweight jacket that she could wear with slacks or a skirt. These were work clothes, and they were what called to her.

A petite saleswoman named Maud relieved Casey of the clothing slung over her arm. She glanced at Casey's face, the canvas hat and mirrored sunglasses and gave her a clipped nod. Casey returned the nod. Maud's detached manner was amazing. As a fellow retail salesperson, Casey recognized that Maud's response was exactly right. Maud spoke plainly—without false intimacy. She was in her late fifties, dressed in a gray modernist sweater and slim gray pants. Her pouf of curly gray hair was streaked with even ribbons of pure white. She was a classic column. Around her neck, she wore reading glasses strung on a canvas cord, giving her an intellectual authority Casey found irresistible.

Casey normally avoided salespeople. At a store like Bayard's, the salespeople parted the pool of customers into two segments: those who wanted a best friend and those who wanted a silent servant to ring up the sales and deliver the packages to the proper address. Casey was pretending to be the latter, because she did not want to be found out. At most, she could afford to buy a garter belt on sale.

Maud brought her to a large dressing room, then hung up her selections on the forged iron rack. She looked them over.

"You've made good choices," she said. Maud's tone was deliberate, not fawning, and the comment meant something to Casey, although she heard this kind of thing often. Her taste was well developed for someone so young (Sabine's exact and slightly aggressive words), but it did not make Casey feel better about not being beautiful. She recalled Jay with the two girls and wished she were prettier, her waist narrower, her breasts fuller, her skin more luminous. Her thoughts embarrassed her.

Maud rested her pinky on her lower lip. "I have something for you."

Casey nodded, pleased by the attention, and in no time Maud brought her a suit by a German designer, the color of bitter chocolate—with a long jacket and a knee-length skirt. The fabric was wool, much like the material used for a man's suit. The jacket opening was asymmetrical and double-breasted; the price was four figures. Size 36.

“I didn’t see this on the floor,” Casey said.

“It wasn’t on the floor.” Maud smiled. “Try it.”

Crystal sconces brightened the peach-colored dressing room with a flattering light. Casey slipped off her street clothes and let the suit cover her pale figure.

There was a large-sized pair of high heels kept in the room to try on with the clothes. With her hat off, but her sunglasses still on, Casey saw an impenetrable young woman in her mirror reflection, utterly shockproof. She crossed her silver-cuffed arms with her hands fisted tightly against her chest to make an X, taking her Wonder Woman stance. This used to make Tina crack up, but Casey didn’t feel like smiling now.

The other pieces fit perfectly. Normally she made a discard pile when she tried things on, but this time there was nothing on the dressing room floor. Each piece of clothing felt essential to her new life, whatever it would be. The least expensive of all was the shirt, and that was \$300.

With exquisite care, Casey hung each piece on its hanger, taking the most time with the brown suit, and she tallied the figures in her head. Not including tax: \$4,000. Among retail salespeople, of which Casey was a member in good standing, it was a point of honor never to pay retail—that was for the customers. The sales-girls at Sabine’s termed that kind of customers “Wilmas,” short for willing mamas. You were supposed to look down at Wilma. You gave her your best advice, took her commissions, and yet you hoped if you were ever in her situation, you would not be so foolish. But there wasn’t a girl working the floor who didn’t want to have Wilma’s choices.

Casey sat down on the plush tufted ottoman. She couldn’t imagine starting her new life without these beautiful clothes—they were made for her. In the past, she had put items on hold, never to claim them. As she’d exit the shop, she’d think of who she was—the daughter of people who cleaned clothes for a living. She had no business at Bayard’s. Maud rapped on the door quietly. Casey put on her hat.

“Would you hold these things for me?” she asked.

Maud kept her expression blank, knowing what was up.

“Your name and number?” Maud asked, with a courteous smile.

Casey gave her name, then sputtered, “The Carlyle . . . Hotel.” She was looking through her handbag for the hotel room key—thinking there might be a phone number on the key folder—when she felt the tap on her shoulder. It was Ella Shim.

Ella was a girl she knew from her parents’ church. She and Casey were only a few months apart in age. Ella’s father, Dr. Shim, was an ophthalmologist at Manhattan Eye, Ear & Throat and a founding member of Casey’s parents’ church in Woodside. Once a month, Dr. Shim and Joseph Han, both elders, and Leah, a deaconess, served on the Hospitality Committee and visited bedridden and ailing congregants. Ella and her widowed father lived in a small Tudor mansion on

Dartmouth Avenue in Forest Hills. They played tennis Saturday mornings at Westside Tennis Club, where he was the first Korean member. Ella had gone to Brearley with Virginia Craft, who thought Ella's dullness was proportional to her exceeding beauty. Casey disliked Ella for no good reason and resented how she was always popping up. Ella had a bone-white complexion, small, unpierced ears, Asian eyes with the desired double-fold, dark curving eyelashes, and a deep pink mouth. She had a charming left dimple and the innocence of an infant. Years ago, during Sunday school classes, Casey used to stare at Ella's long, tapered fingers. Ella's hair was jet black, and she was often compared to the Chinese actress Gong Li.

The women at church pitied Ella since her mother died in childbirth, and they admired Dr. Shim, who never remarried after his wife's death—to them, he was a romantic ideal. At church, the mothers of sons rubbed their hands in anticipation of Ella's graduation from Wellesley—hoping that the pretty, reserved doctor's daughter might one day be theirs. But the sons did not feel comfortable around the silent beauty; in fact, few people sought her out. Hers was a beauty that alienated—she was not cold, exactly, but she did not offer warmth or ease. She possessed a kind of eerie solitude.

“Hey,” Casey said.

“Shopping?” Ella said, her voice breaking. She saw that Casey's face looked worse than it had from a distance.

“Seems that way.”

“That's pretty.” Ella pointed to the suit on top of Casey's hold pile.

“Yeah,” Casey replied. She drew a quick breath. If it were a bar, she would have lit a cigarette. “What are you doing here?” she asked curtly.

“I . . .” Ella hesitated. How was she supposed to talk to Casey, the girl she'd most wanted to befriend at church? “I just ordered my wedding dress.” She cast her eyes down, not knowing what Casey's reaction would be. Her fiancé, Ted, had convinced her that they should get married after her graduation, and she'd been swept up in his enthusiasm for their future. He was very convincing, and Ella loved him. She had never loved anyone else. Her father wasn't against it but appeared annoyed—a look flickered across his eyes—whenever Ted expressed his ambition and well-laid plans. Ted had already written up a draft of their announcement to submit to the *New York Times* and to his alumni magazines at Exeter and Harvard.

“You're getting married?” Casey sighed. “To whom, may I ask?” She smiled as if Ella were a customer.

“Ted Kim.” Ella shrugged. “I don't think you'd know him. He's from Alaska.”

“Alaska?” Casey exclaimed.

“Uh-huh,” Ella nodded.

“And where did he go to school?” It was prying and vulgar to ask, but Casey couldn't help herself.



“Harvard,” Ella said nervously. “I mean, he’s not our age. He finished business school a couple of years ago.”

“Where?” Casey said.

“Harvard.”

“Right.” Casey nodded. “How old is—?”

“Thirty.”

“Of course.” It was no way to behave. Casey ordinarily prided herself on her manners.

Ella looked down at her sandals. “Everyone’s invited. Your parents, you . . . I mean . . . if you want to come. It’s at the church. You know, like the other weddings.”

“God almighty. You’re having it at the church. You are amazing, Ella.” Casey had vowed to never have the typical Korean church wedding with about five hundred guests who showed up without having been invited, the reception with a groaning buffet of Korean food served by a team of *ahjumma* volunteers in the church basement, no alcohol in sight.

Ella heard Casey’s contempt and concealed her hurt feelings. She had come down the escalator and spotted Casey’s bruised face beneath the khaki beach hat and had taken it as a kind of sign. Ella had forced herself to see if Casey was all right, if there was something she could do for her. Ella bit her lower lip, trying to figure out how to leave, sensing Casey wanted her to.

Casey saw the pain she’d caused and felt crummy. She smiled. “Ella, I’m in a shitty mood. Nothing related to you. I’m sorry if I sounded like a bitch. Congratulations on your wedding. Really.”

“No, no, I’m sorry. I’m fine. You didn’t do anything,” Ella said.

“Well.” Casey glanced at her drugstore Timex. “I’m sure he’s wonderful. Ted, right? Lucky bastard. We should celebrate sometime. Do lunch. Something.” She felt sickened by her words. She despised lying.

Maud stood patiently watching this curious exchange between the two Asian women. At a pause, she asked Casey to spell out her name for the hold ticket.

“Never mind,” Casey said.

Maud didn’t understand.

“I want to take them. Here.” Casey opened her wallet and handed Maud her credit card.

Maud keyed in the SKU numbers for the clothes, then swiped the card.

The total was \$4,300, plus change. The hotel room would be \$400 or so. She had managed to max out her first credit card in one day. Maud handed her the receipt, and Casey signed it. She was now a Wilma.

Ella made no move to leave Casey’s side. In all their years, they had never been alone in this way. She stared at Casey’s lost expression.

“Are you free now?” Ella asked. “For lunch?”

Casey checked the girl's face, unable to believe her relentlessness.

She gave Ella a brief, discouraged nod, and Ella, without missing a beat, asked her the question her father asked her whenever she met him at his office after work:

"Tell me, what would you like to eat?"

THEIR STEAKS AND creamed spinach arrived right away, and the girls ate quietly. Casey wasn't hungry, but the idea of going to a dark steakhouse had made sense to her somehow. Thankfully, Ella didn't pry about her face. She just kept smiling, and Casey felt bad for having such a rotten attitude. Casey asked about her work.

Ella was the associate development director of an all-boys private school on the Upper East Side, where she also lived. "I believe in education. So I can raise money for that. You know, for scholarships and the endowment," Ella said, parroting her kindly boss, David Greene. "To help children who couldn't otherwise," she stopped herself, feeling stupid suddenly. No doubt Casey had been a scholarship student. "Anyway. It's a very pleasant job."

Casey observed Ella's retreat. She wouldn't take the rich girl's philanthropic comments personally. After all, she had been the grateful recipient of Princeton's largesse. Someone with these lofty ideals had passed the hat on her behalf. She and Jay had been the equivalents of amusing and tolerated peasants whose enrollment reflected the university's noblesse oblige. She asked Ella about the wedding. The idea of marrying at the age of twenty-one seemed nutty to Casey.

"I don't get it," Casey said. "Why now?"

Ella stated Ted's refrain: "When you love someone, you make a commitment."

"Forever?" Casey raised her eyebrows.

"Uh-huh," Ella answered.

Ted had forced something of a gentle ultimatum with Ella. The gist of his campaign was: "If you love me, you will marry me." He'd employed the same tactics about their having sex. He'd said to Ella, "I love you, and I want to be closer to you. If we make love, we will know each other even better. I want to know you completely, Ella. Don't you want that, too? Don't you want to know me?" What could the girl say? He wanted, so Ella gave.

"I guess he makes you happy, then." Casey nodded, trying to sound like she believed this might be a good thing.

"Yes," Ella said, searching Casey's face, wondering why she was so cynical about love.

Casey saw the question in Ella's face.

"I just found my college boyfriend in bed with two girls."

"What?" Ella said.

The shock value alone of saying such a thing made the humiliation almost worthwhile.

“They were great-looking girls.” Casey admitted. They really were. She couldn’t let go of just how pretty they were. “Never mind.” Somehow, it wasn’t funny anymore.

Ella refrained from asking anything, but kept nodding. She was still aghast that such a thing could happen.

“You’re looking at my bruises,” Casey said.

“It must hurt.”

“I had a fight with my father.” Casey laughed. “You should see how he looks.”

Ella smiled painfully. It was impossible to think of her father ever striking her.

“Are you really staying at the Carlyle?”

“Does that surprise you? Because my parents manage a dry cleaner?”

Ella shook her head. “No. No. That isn’t what I meant. Casey, that’s not fair.”

“You’re right. My inner bitch is just having a field day with you.” The brown liquid around the sirloin congealed; streaks of white fat marbled the plate.

“You found me at the wrong time, Ella. And to be honest, you’re like the last person I want to look this pathetic in front of.”

“Why?” Ella was surprised by this.

“Because. Forget it.” Casey picked up her fork and knife and cut into the meat. She wanted Tabasco.

“I’m sure you have lots of money and —” Ella said, feeling exasperated by Casey’s persistent hostility.

“No, I don’t, actually. I just maxed out my credit card because I was so pissed at you.”

“Me?”

“No. Not you,” Casey checked herself. “Me.”

Ella looked confused.

“I’m a failure. And you’re like a goddamn success parade. God. I hate myself.” Casey started to cry. “I’m sorry. As you can see, I’m not very good company. I better get going.” Casey looked at her watch, and picked up her things. “Thanks for lunch.”

“Where? Where are you going? You can’t go back home, I mean.” Ella didn’t know how to say that right. She didn’t actually know if Casey could go home or not.

Casey sighed and looked up at the tin ceiling painted a verdigris color. How did this happen to her? Then she knew: she made it happen. It was her own fault.

“And you have no money. Can I give you some money? Do you have another place to stay? I mean? May I call someone for you? Can you—”

“Stop with the questions. I’ll figure something out. This isn’t your problem. I don’t want your help.”

“What did I ever do to you?” Ella raised her voice.

“Nothing. You’ve done nothing. I’m just a very small person.” Casey smiled. “Trapped in a very big frame.”

“You could stay with me. I have an extra bedroom. Until you sort things out.”

“You have an extra bedroom?”

“Yes, you can hate me for that too,” Ella said, laughing. “All right?”

Ella was making a joke, Casey thought. Ella Shim could be sarcastic. Who knew? Casey smiled, then color rushed to her face and her eyes stung. “Please don’t be nice to me. It’s really—” she took a deep breath.

“I don’t want anything from you, Casey. I want to help.” Ella tried to think of a new way to explain this to Casey, who obviously didn’t trust anyone at all. Ted was like this. He always thought everyone had an ulterior motive—that there could never be pure altruism.

“Maybe if I were in your situation, I could ask you for the same,” Ella said. She reasoned that if Casey were like Ted, then an argument based on exchange principles might be persuasive.

“You’d never be in this situation, Ella.”

Ella narrowed her eyes, confounded by Casey’s reply.

“You are so arrogant, Casey. Anyone could be in your situation,” Ella said calmly. “Anyone at all.”

Casey examined Ella’s fine and rare features. There was a strength there she hadn’t noticed before. It was the way she held her head erect as if she had eyes in the back of her head and as if those eyes were looking straight out to the other side of the steak house. Casey had been wrong about her. And she’d been envious of a good person who’d wished her well.

“After lunch,” Ella said, “we can go and check you out of the hotel. You can come stay with me. I would love that.” Ella borrowed Ted’s assurance and the finality of his gestures—his convincing use of charisma and simple words.

Casey nodded. Today, she would have followed Maud the salesperson home.

Ella asked for the bill and paid it.

## 5 BOND

A DOZEN YEARS of ballet lessons had given Ella Shim ideal posture. She was seated on a deeply cushioned sofa in her bright living room—her back pin straight, her head bent slightly as she reviewed a recipe for lamb. There were four cookbooks tabbed with rack of lamb recipes on top of the coffee table, and a thick one spread open on her lap. The following week was Ted’s thirty-first birthday, and she wanted to re-create the dish that Ted had liked so much at Bouley, but she didn’t have the exact recipe. Ella was an accomplished cook. She loved to read cookbooks and food magazines. In high school, she enjoyed planning special menus for her father, who encouraged her interest by buying her Mauviel copper pots and installing wooden dowels in the kitchen walls so she could dry her hand-cut pasta. When church guests visited the Shim household in Forest Hills, Ella

offered them her dense orange-flavored pound cake, candied rhubarb scones with Irish butter procured from Dean & DeLuca, or Dr. Shim's favorite: *pate a choux* cream puffs with *hong cha*. At Wellesley, Ella had missed her windowed kitchen in Queens. Her current two-bedroom Upper East Side apartment, which her father purchased for her after graduation and where she and Ted intended to live after they got married, had a nice-sized kitchen with enough counter space to roll pie crust and to put up kimchee.

At the moment, she was absorbed in the taste memory of the lamb she'd eaten with Ted at the French restaurant on Duane Street. She felt she could approximate it.

Seated near her on the wing chair upholstered with crewel work, Ted was checking the movie schedule in the *Times*. He was annoyed at having agreed to see a foreign film that Ella's houseguest had recommended. From the living room, they could hear the sound of the running water from the guest bathroom. It was Saturday night, and Casey was getting ready to meet friends at the Princeton Club for Virginia's send-off to Italy.

Ella drafted a list of ingredients and cooking instructions in her loopy girls' school cursive. She was also trying to figure out how to convince Ted to help Casey get a job. His buddies from Harvard Business School dispensed favors to each other all the time.

"Ted, can't you help her?" Ella didn't look up from the orange-and-white-checked cookbook.

Ted snapped the newspaper shut. But the sight of his pretty fiancée bent over her cookbooks made him smile. He was smitten by her delicacy.

"My dear Ella," he said, making his face stern, "Your friend . . ." Ted paused. Ella had never mentioned Casey until she moved in. And now, this so-called friend who had quite a mouth on her had been camping out at Ella's place for four weeks. "Casey isn't the least bit interested in finance," Ted continued. "I doubt she knows the difference between debt and equity."

"But Ted, you didn't always know the difference either." Ella looked earnestly at him. "People have to learn things. And they have to be taught. Right?"

"Your friend already interviewed on campus with the Kearn Davis investment banking program in the spring," he said.

"And?"

"And she was dinged." Ted rolled his eyes. "What was she thinking? Your friend applied to *one* firm. What balls."

He'd applied to eight banks in his senior year at Harvard and was invited to join seven. After working for four years at Pearson Crowell, a bulge-bracket investment bank, as an analyst and later as senior associate, he got into Harvard Business School, where he was a Baker Scholar. Then he chose Kearn Davis, the sole securities firm that had rejected him as an undergraduate. In four years, Ted was made an

executive director, and he was slated to become managing director in January. He was two years ahead of his own plot.

Ella looked at him and inhaled before saying, “You have no reason to dislike her.”

“I don’t dislike her,” he said. “I’m merely being rational, Ella. Applying to just one program shows nerve and a sense of overentitlement. These Ivy League girls,” he muttered. “And it shows a lack of seriousness.” Ted folded the newspaper lengthwise, then stared her down, half-smiling. He was impressed by Ella’s insistence. Normally, she gave up fairly quickly, but Ted preferred challenges.

“Listen, sweetheart,” his voice dropped a pitch, and he sounded sincere. “I know you’re trying to help. But you know, I’ve worked hard for my good name. You can’t expect me to risk my reputation by giving my word on an individual I don’t know well, and who seems to me preternaturally unable to stick it out.”

Ella tilted her head and exhaled through her thin nostrils. Ted didn’t believe in yielding any advantage unless he had to. Two years ago, he’d spotted her at the Au Bon Pain near the Citicorp building in midtown and had pursued her single-mindedly. His colleagues and HBS friends treated her like she was a coveted prize, and she felt afraid to speak to them.

But what Ted didn’t understand was that Ella had been pursued and flattered before. She loved him because he was a boy, anxious and hungry, running from Alaska. He was the son of immigrant cannery workers and had an older brother working as a mailman in Anchorage. His sister was a former professional body builder who taught aerobics. She was raising two sons as a single mother. Ella would have loved Ted if he had nothing but his desire. She was attracted to him because he was so clear, and because he was so unflappable. But beneath all that, she saw his self-doubts that he could not concede to her or to himself—his terrors drove him. She liked all of that too.

Ted and Ella heard the pipes shutting down as Casey’s shower ended, and Ella lowered her voice. She appealed to him again, because more than anyone else, she felt he ought to understand Casey’s situation.

“She’s been sending out résumés all month, and she hasn’t heard a thing.”

“The economy, Ella. I know you feel sorry for your friend . . .”

“Her father hits her. She can’t go back home. You have to help her. She has no money, and she won’t take any from me.”

“You offered her money?” Ted made a face of incomprehension. “What is it with you, princess? You think the stuff grows on trees?”

“Ted . . .” Ella shut her cookbook.

“Tell her to get any job.”

“That’s what she’s trying to do.”

“Any job. Sell lipsticks or gloves, or whatever it is she used to do in college.”

“She might. But it’s one thing to work in retail while you’re in college, and another to do it full-time after.” She stopped herself. “Her parents don’t have any money, and her sister’s applying to med school next year. Her boyfriend cheated on her.”

Ted snorted. “That’s what you get for dating white guys.”

Ella ignored this. “But her family can’t help her. And what’s the point of succeeding, Ted, if you can’t help others with your power?”

“I help plenty of people.”

Ted sent money to his parents each month, and last year, with his enormous bonus, he bought his brother and sister their condos in Anchorage.

“I didn’t mean that you don’t help anyone.”

“Casey and her family are not my problems, Ella. And they’re not yours either. Her sister can’t take out loans for med school?” With his right hand, he pointed to his heart. He had just paid off the last of his education loans and was now putting aside money for his nephews.

“Not everyone is like you.”

She gathered the cookbooks, stacking them alphabetically, and returned them to the shelf. She had no desire to make the lamb dish. They would just go out for his birthday.

Casey entered the living room, dressed in a narrow black skirt and an ironed white shirt. Her bruises were no longer visible, and she looked pretty with her wet hair combed back sleekly, a fresh coat of red lipstick on her mouth. She hadn’t put on her shoes yet, and Ted glanced at her bare feet. For a thin girl, her calves and ankles were a little thick. *Moo-dari*, he thought, legs shaped like daikon radishes.

Naturally, Casey noticed his glance and immediately crossed her ankles.

“Good evening,” she said with a kind of mock cheer. She’d heard enough of the conversation and decided to pretend otherwise. Ted Kim was not the helping kind. Why couldn’t poor Ella see that?

“Hey, Casey,” Ted said, not caring in the least if she’d heard anything. He turned to Ella, gesturing that they should head out. “We can get tickets at the theater. I don’t think everyone in town is running to see this.” He pointed to the obscure ad for *Farewell My Concubine* in the *Times*.

“It’s very good, Ted.” Casey smiled at him. Ted was a triple-A, self-made jerk, but he was good-looking. He was five eleven and built like a runner—wiry with long legs. His black hair was cut short, and the gel he dabbed on top made his hair look damp. The top button of his dress shirt was open, and the tendons of his neck framed a hard Adam’s apple. She liked the imperiousness of his expressions. If she were interested in dating assholes, he would be an ideal candidate.

“You might even enjoy it,” Casey said. “A bright guy like you—I would think you’d like cultural enrichment now and then. A good yuppie should know more than wines and resorts. Not that you need any help in the arts or leisure department,” she said

grinning. “Or in any department, for that matter.” She smiled, having managed to sound facetious and generous at once. Casey pursed her lips shut, waiting for Ted’s retort.

He harrumphed, and Ella laughed.

“And how’s the job search going, Casey?” he said. Now he was smiling.

“Sabine said I could work accessories on Sundays starting next month, but she’s got nothing for me during the week. She replaced me when I quit after graduation. And things are slow in the accessories world,” Casey said. “You know, Ted. The economy.”

Ted smiled and lifted his chin.

“Ella’s been so good to let me stay here, but this can’t last forever. I will get a job. I hope I get a job.”

Before Ella could say anything to assure Casey that she could stay as long as she liked, Ted jumped in. “The economy will pick up. Cycles,” he said, speaking as one Economics major to another, knowing she would understand his meaning.

He picked up the paper, then dropped it on his chair. He glanced at Ella, and on cue, she rose from her seat and got her purse. She paid careful attention to him—that was what he wanted from her, and it was not hard to do.

Later, after the movie and dinner, she and Ted didn’t talk about Casey, but early Monday morning, Ted phoned the Asian sales desk, where his friend Walter Chin had said they were looking for an assistant. He didn’t think Ted should send in a friend for the gig. “Low pay, high abuse,” Walter said. And the head of the desk had anger-management issues.

Ted answered, “Not to worry; she’s not a close friend.”

Casey’s interview was set for the following day. He had only to bring her by. **N**