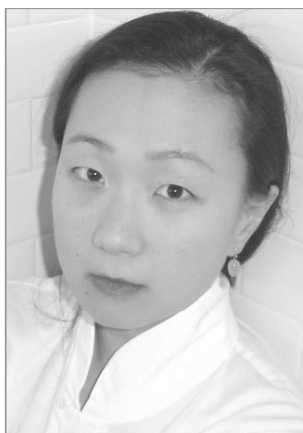


Axis of Happiness

A S T O R Y

by *Min Jin Lee*



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THE MORNING HENRY EVANS stopped by my office to tell me to go to Chicago, I was in the middle of my chapter-a-day habit: still in the Book of Hosea, much to my dismay, still in the Old Testament after years of dogged reading. This habit required skimming the day’s chapter of the Bible (usually the length of one onion-skin page), then reading the extensive commentaries in the footnotes, then finally reading the chapter again — all of this took on average forty-five minutes.

I did this at work because it was where I lived — fourteen hours a day, often six days a week. I couldn’t help knowing some of the Bible because I was a P.K. (preacher’s kid), but I’d started reading this fat copy of the NIV Study Bible with its elephant-gray leather cover because my mother left it for me along with her modest wedding jewelry when she died three years ago.

I hadn’t always liked being around my mother while she was alive. For years she’d suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. The chronic pain had given her pale, square face a kind of pinched, sour expression. The parishioners at my father’s church called my mother a saint, and I suppose she was. But as her daughter, I didn’t feel like I knew her very well, because she was so busy serving others. When I was a girl — eldest of four, the only girl, and the only one born in Korea — while my mother cooked our dinners, made meals for bedridden parishioners, and folded

the endless loads of laundry my brothers and I generated, I talked on the phone with my friends and read piles of library books. She left me alone to do my schoolwork because I was a very good student — the hope of academic greatness in my family. When she was growing up in a small town outside of Seoul, she had to drop out of high school to work; there wasn't even enough money for the oldest son to finish school, that's how bad it was.

But she was always studying, trying to improve herself. "Increase your talents," she'd say. In the States, she worked on her English by reading *People* magazine, listening to NPR on the kitchen radio, and practicing on us kids. But her l's still sounded like r's, her f's became p's, and she routinely dropped her d's. In private, my brothers and I mimicked her, and it was divine justice that on occasion, when I was especially nervous, I caught myself saying things like "ko-pi" for coffee, referring to fried chicken as "Ken-tucky," or forgetting a particle in a sentence. These slips happened to my American-born brothers too, and Ben, the youngest and the funny one, would scan the room, looking like a scout with his right hand shielding his eyes, and say, "Is mom here?" We made fun of her behind her back, but we never questioned the clarity of her thinking. When I talked back to her, she'd snap at me, "You think you're so smart from reading all those books, but how smart can you be if you've never even read the Bible from front to back?"

Of course, there was nothing I could say to this — to dismiss this type of argument, I'd have to read the book.

My mother and father based their lives on a single idea: *Salvation comes from the Lord*. My father's cousin, who was an artist, had written this in *hangul* with a calligraphy brush on a vertical rice-paper banner. When you walked into my parents' living room, the first thing you saw was that banner hung next to a framed needlepoint of Jesus' face.

I figured out early that I didn't want their life — it was a hard, thankless existence with few comforts. But I couldn't reject their religion either. By the time I was grown, I'd had Pascal's wager drummed into me: What if God did exist and I was wrong in assuming that He didn't? So I hedged my bets, as they say, and stayed out of trouble. Each Sunday, I went to church with my husband and our infant daughter, tithed our pre-tax income, paid our live-in nanny's social security and health benefits, and was scrupulous in all my dealings.

About Christianity: I felt certain that God existed, that the historical person Jesus Christ was His son, and that I'd be saved if I believed that God's son redeemed me through His death and resurrection. The logic of redemption was satisfying, and I was willing to make the necessary leap of faith. But how can I say this?

I didn't feel much for God, and I certainly didn't want to deal with Him. Sure, I would do what He said, but I didn't have to like Him.

He loved me — I had read this, and of course, had sung it, heard sermons to this effect, but I think I believed it too because it made rational sense to me; after all, I was part of His creation — you have to love your children.

But was He interested in me?

No. I didn't buy that.

My mother's neat block-style Korean letters crowded the margins of her English-language Bible. The Book of Hosea only has fourteen chapters, but her marginalia nearly matched its length. In her tiny handwriting, it was as if I could see her. Late at nights, she'd usually be seated at the kitchen table with her right hand holding a cheap ballpoint pen at the ready to underline or bracket a passage — and with her left hand, she'd be twirling her bifocals slowly to and fro as if keeping the meter of a fine piece of music. After she finished her reading, I would catch her mumbling her prayers in Korean — hushed and breathless words mingled with tears as she called out to God. She was so contrite — her head bent low, her hands folded in a tight fist. She appeared so penitent for her small sins, which I imagined to be innocent, like gossip or pride — none of the biggies like murder or adultery. At the end of the first chapter of Hosea, she had written, "How could He want so much, and how can I offer Him so little?" Of course I found her piety annoying.

Yet there I was, in my spacious office in Manhattan on the thirty-fifth floor of a glassy skyscraper, reading her Bible behind closed doors. (I never told anyone that I did this because I had these rules: never discuss religion and never proselytize. That was my father's job.) When I traveled on business, I carried her Bible in my enormous purse and read it in my hotel room. This daily reading had started out as a kind of intellectual discipline — no different than when I studied Greek and Latin at Harvard. But I kept reading because I sensed that something might come of it — nothing like a gold star from a Sunday school teacher, but something significant, like some new feeling or wisdom — and even if nothing came of it, if I ever saw my mother again, then I'd at least have the last word. *So there*. Each day, after I read my chapter, I'd close the book and wait for a few seconds for something to happen — a call to prayer or some burst of feeling. But nothing. I didn't feel anything new, and I found that I didn't have anything to say to God.

It was only ten o'clock. I'd just slogged through a tedious letter agreement, and for breakfast I'd bought some pretzels and my second diet Coke of the day from the vending machine. I hadn't slept much the night before, or for the past ten months, ever since my daughter, Leah, was born. I asked Karen to put my calls through voice mail. (My sixty-one-year-old secretary who swam laps before work was forever on my case telling me to put my head down for half an hour: "You're going to kill yourself if you don't sleep and eat better," she'd say, then she'd order orange juice with my lunch instead of the iced coffee that I'd asked for). So there I was, reading about the prophet Hosea and his rotten luck. To illustrate His own suffering, the Almighty tells Hosea to marry a faithless slut, who proceeds to betray him. I was absently following the allegorical meaning of the circumstance when I heard a boom.

Henry Evans, the managing partner of Hillary and Gould, and the New York god of corporate securities, a.k.a. King Henry, had a funny knock. Boom. It was literally one knock. I shoved the hefty Bible into the secret space I'd made for it in my top desk drawer. I grabbed a pen and pretended to write something down, and I said, "Hi, Henry," without even glancing up. Only he could have gotten past Karen.

Henry took off his Malcolm X eyeglasses and pinched the bridge of his nose together with his thumb and forefinger — he did this when his eyes were tired. He put his glasses back on and looked at me with pity.

“What?” I said.

He was taking in the full glory of what must’ve been the worst I’d ever looked in the ten years we’d worked together. “Never mind,” he said, as if he’d thought better of it.

“What, what, what?” I said. “Spit it out.”

“You’ve had better days,” he said.

With my left hand, I flipped him the bird. We had that kind of relationship.

Henry smiled a big, happy grin like everything was going to be okay after all. He was a light-skinned black man with hooded brown eyes. Recently, he’d shaved off his mustache, and it made his face look more boyish.

“So, Girl Wonder,” he said, “Early morning closing in Chicago. You’re flying out tonight.”

I still smile when Henry calls me that. Years ago, as a summer associate, I’d discovered a key issue in a research assignment that senior associates had overlooked, and since then Henry had named me Girl Wonder — G.W. for short. This was what my colleagues called me to my face or, at times, behind my back.

There was no way in hell that I was flying to Chicago that night. In all my life, I’d never been so tired. Leah got up every three hours with a crying jag lasting thirty to forty minutes before ultimately falling asleep in my arms (not that I was entirely unhappy about this, since these were the few times that I held my daughter); the Texxin deal was held up by a sadist at the S.E.C. with unanswerable comments; and I had to review a stack of badly written diligence memos and revise telephone-book-length prospectuses for a string of deals. I got up from my seat and stood in front of the credenza stacked high with piles of documents. Preparing to state my case, I leaned against the bow-fronted mahogany credenza with my arms crossed. Henry stood on the other side of the room obscuring the two framed prints of English court room scenes.

“King Henry, your grace, must I? Can’t Rodney go? Or Stephen Dunlop? I asked, referring to the fifth-year associates who needed the hours that month.

“I need someone bullet proof.”

I rolled my eyes then, because I just wasn’t in the mood.

“Don’t sass me today,” he said, dropping his voice a notch to sound like James Earl Jones.

No one said *sass* except for Henry. He wasn’t old — maybe somewhere in his early fifties, but there was something about him that made him seem eternal and, I think, melancholy. My father once said in a sermon that we were wrong to view God as being a jealous God because it took the focus away from His grief. “Imagine,” my father said, standing behind his wooden pulpit, wearing his black acetate robe over

his good blue suit from Sears, “God must have so many feelings of sadness.” If God had a face, to me it would have looked like Henry’s — a face defined by kindness and disappointment. No one knew for sure, but there was rumor that Henry’s family life wasn’t so great. His lawyer wife and kids lived in Washington, while he lived in Manhattan, but they were not divorced. In the summers, they met up in their big house in Oak Bluffs. Henry didn’t tell me anything specific, and I knew enough not to ask. To lighten his moods, I was forever cheerful around him, and I acted like the prodigy he expected me to be.

If it weren’t for Henry, it would have been impossible for me to make partner. His father had been a famous federal judge, and Henry was thought to be one of the most brilliant corporate lawyers of our time. Other partners of his stature fought for the up-and-comers who were younger versions of themselves — boys who went to prep schools with parents belonging to the right country clubs — but only Henry fought for me, a Korean girl, the daughter of immigrants, raised next to the Elmhurst gas tanks, of all things.

“Girl, you got to go,” he said, laying on the drawl.

“Can you give the girl a break?” I said. A junior lawyer could have handled most closings. I was a newly minted partner, not that it mattered, since I didn’t have any of my own clients yet.

Henry didn’t respond right away; he was irritated by my disobedience. He put his right hand in his pants pocket and jingled his change .

“You have to,” he said finally. “Because of Gavin Guare, the lawyer for the other side. Smart, but no match for you.” Henry didn’t think that many lawyers were smart. “A regular Boy Wonder,” he said, dropping the deal folders for Logos LLP on the one chair that wasn’t covered with documents. As he was leaving (he had this habit of talking while walking away) he said, “Straight purchase with some cash and stock, but the seller’s initial lawyers were buffoons. Yup, Gavin’s clever. I was going to go, but ... all right?” His voice trailed off. It was no surprise that Henry wasn’t going. He hated to travel. In a few steps Henry would be back in his office, with the door shut and his stereo quietly playing Beethoven sonatas, while he penned notes to his clients on his bluestationery.

I didn’t feel like Girl Wonder. That morning, I’d dressed in a dark brown suit jacket with its long matching skirt and chocolate brown suede boots coming up to my kneecaps. I had tied a gold-colored scarf around my neck. My straight black hair was clipped away neatly in a barrette. I looked like a chic Sunday school teacher, but in fact, I was a corporate lackey. All I felt was exhaustion.

GAVIN GUARE’S LAW FIRM lobby was furnished out of a nineties design kit — beige marble floor, huge leather chairs with modern lines, and exotic woods on the furniture surfaces. The receptionist called him, then asked me to have a seat. As it

turned out, I was the first of the closing party to arrive. That morning when I woke up in my fancy bed at the Ritz Carlton, I'd felt agitated, and after calling my husband to check in on the baby, I had reviewed the Logos file again. Henry had said Gavin was clever, and it had thrown me a little, and now I wondered if I'd be sharp enough. I sat on the enormous sofa feeling dwarfed and insignificant — the logic of their oversized furniture was working on me.

Out of habit, I recited Psalm 19. My father had made me and my brothers memorize it when we were small. "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." He said that God would give you what you needed — the right words, the necessary courage, and finally, rescue. I don't know if I believed it so much, but it comforted me. All my life, I had silently recited Psalm 19 before exams, interviews, important deals, and when anyone approached me on an empty subway platform. As I ran over it, my back straightened a little and my head lifted.

Boy Wonder came striding out of a gray wallpapered corridor off to the side of the lobby, smiled, then tucked in his chin and looked down like he was concentrating on the distance between his footsteps. He was tall, but not remarkably so — maybe five eleven, maybe six foot. The cut of his suit was conservative, a two-button, single vent pinstripe, its stitching very fine. The starched sheen of his white cotton dress shirt almost glowed. His dark eyebrows and eyelashes reminded me of Tyrone Power, a long-gone movie actor from the forties that my quirky freshman roommate had been infatuated with. She'd hung up a black-and-white photograph of him above our adjoining desks, and I couldn't help but see Tyrone Power's face whenever I glanced up from preparing my Latin exercises. Boy Wonder wasn't nearly as good-looking as the actor (his coloring was lighter than Power's), but his gaze had a similar intensity, and when he looked away from me the first time we met, I felt unnerved.

He extended his hand, and I shook it. "Gavin Guare. A pleasure," he said. His grip was firm, but not brutal. His accent was English.

"Sunny Kim. Likewise, I'm sure." What? Who said such things? I was parroting a line from a bad play, and I'd put on a faint English accent.

I looked at the floor, trying to recover, and Gavin did something odd. He picked up my winter coat and umbrella on the armchair, and he hung them up in the lobby coat closet with as much care as if they belonged to a queen. He offered to carry my litigation bag filled with closing documents, and I did something unlike me. I said, "Okay."

He led me to a vast, empty conference room and drew up the heavy metal blinds. "There's a good view of Lake Michigan from here," he said.

The white nylon cord he was holding slipped out of his grasp and snagged on his jacket button, and the front panel of his suit rode up with the blinds, tying up his right sleeve and hand. He laughed out loud — a rounded, pleasant-sounding chuckle.

“I’m such an ass,” he said. He fumbled with the twisted cord but couldn’t free himself. Turning to me, he asked, “Would you?”

He looked ridiculous with his jacket raised over his head, his right arm in the air. He was trying not to tear the lining of his jacket. When I reached over to pull down the cord, it didn’t help at all.

“Take off your jacket,” I said calmly.

He looked uncomfortable when he tried. “I don’t think I can.”

To help him, I stood tiptoe to reach the cord, and my chest brushed against his torso. If someone had walked in, it would have looked like I was hugging him sideways while his right arm pointed to the ceiling. I kept jiggling the cord.

“Got it,” I said, handing him his jacket, and pulling the cord to its lock position.

He blinked like he didn’t know what to say. Then he looked at me, his head tipped imperceptibly to the side, and said, “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

I shook my head. “Forget it,” I said, then told myself to pretend like it never happened — that I never smelled the lime and bay leaf of his aftershave, and that I never imagined him as the color green — of cypress trees and the blackish green shutters of white houses in New England.

In no time others started streaming into the conference room: paralegals carrying sheaves of paper in sets of ten and caterers setting up silver urns filled with hot drinks. The clients arrived.

I watched Gavin do his work. He always said thank you and please. I had a weakness for good manners, especially since most lawyers dispensed with etiquette. They all adored him there, a telling quality in the pyramid structure of a law firm where a partner could diminish anyone with less professional status. I grew disarmed by it all — the affectless charm, his ease of approach, his attractiveness, his hospitality and excellent diction.

He had this way of calming his clients down — he did it by noticing who needed attention, and when. Koreans call this *noonchi*, this extra sense about what was going on in the room, who was who, and what was really happening. My husband was the first man I’d ever met who had this astonishing level of *noonchi*; as a federal prosecutor, he’d used it to great advantage with juries.

My client was irritating me. I’d met Patrick Dwight, one of Henry’s mid-level clients, only once before. When he arrived at the closing, he shook my hand and remained silent after I apologized for Henry’s absence. Patrick was medium height, early fifties, red-blond hair with a widow’s peak, and freckles. Very Connecticut. He was a nice enough guy, but he was bothered that I wasn’t Henry. I couldn’t give you any proof, but I sensed that he didn’t like having a girl lawyer.

Near the end of the closing, Patrick told Gavin that he and his wife went to London twice a year. “Nothing like Christmas in London,” he said. His wife loved the theater there. “So much more original than the stuff in New York,” Patrick said.

Gavin smiled and said, with a note of apology, that he wasn't up on theater.

"Where are you from?" Patrick asked. "I can't place your accent."

"Sussex," Gavin replied, "born and bred there. Dad was a postman in Storrington."

"Really?" Patrick touched the middle of his forehead with his finger as if he were pressing an invisible button. "And where did you go to university? In the States or across the pond?"

"To Oxford. Fancy that." Gavin laughed, and Patrick laughed too.

Gavin looked over to me and smiled, and I smiled in return. We were immigrants. We had crossed oceans and surpassed our given stations in life. Patrick went back to signing the documents.

We closed in three hours — an hour under my estimated time. And except for needing to fiddle with a paragraph in the legal opinion letter, there'd been no hiccups. Henry's decision to send me was unwarranted. Gavin was clever, to be sure, but in the transaction, he was far from disagreeable. I phoned Henry from the conference room. When I told him I was finished, he sounded distracted and said, "Good, good." Then he told me that it was snowing very hard and that LaGuardia was canceling flights; even the name partner Gould, who hated land vehicles, took a train to Boston because none of the shuttles were taking off. Henry told me to stay in Chicago another night. When I protested, he said, "Fly in tomorrow morning." Then he hung up. That was how he ended his phone conversations. He never said anything like good-bye. Now the clients were gone, and I gathered my papers. Gavin brought me my coat and umbrella.

"You trying to get rid of me?" I asked.

He looked embarrassed. "Beg your pardon. I just thought you were in a rush."

"I'm kid-ding, Gavin." I said it slowly, because I realized he didn't know me at all. The person I was at the closing was only a shadow of myself. Apart from work, I could be teasing, even silly. "So, I'm stuck in your town for another night." I threw my hands up, rolled my eyes — the reflexive gesture of someone who'd always lived in cities and was used to waiting on long lines and being inconvenienced without much rationale. "Henry said bad weather in New York."

Gavin nodded. "Yes, I heard that on the radio this morning." He tucked his lips into his mouth, and he looked childish, but sort of cute too.

I felt stupid standing there, so I decided to go back to the hotel and make my work calls from my room. And I had to let Paul know that I wouldn't be home that night.

Gavin carried my litigation bag, much lighter now since the documents were distributed, and walked with me to the elevators. He hardly said a word, but he looked like he was concentrating on something. I figured he wouldn't want to wait with me for the elevator.

“Well,” I said, putting out my hand, “nice working with you.”

He blurted out, “I’d love to invite you to dinner.”

I blinked. “Dinner?”

He smiled. My feelings of competition had dissipated. I didn’t have any plans in Chicago, and he was being nice, offering to have dinner with me.

“You know, we should celebrate the closing. Do you like Italian?” His tone was earnest.

I found myself saying, “Oh, that’d be lovely.” I sounded English again, and I wanted to hit myself for being absurd. I hoped he hadn’t caught my Masterpiece Theater affectation. I rode the elevator down, and when I got off at the lobby, I sat down on the nearest chair to catch my breath. In four hours, Gavin would pick me up at the Ritz Carlton and take me to a Bolognese restaurant.

AT THE HOTEL, I phoned my husband at his office, and he told me Henry was right. The weather was awful; the snowflakes were as big as dimes. Paul liked to talk about the weather. It was one of his favorite topics. In the morning when he dressed, he watched the weather channel.

I could almost see him holding the phone at his desk at the U.S. Attorney’s Office, his head cocked, sandwiching the receiver with his shoulder. I could see his face, his round black eyes like the eyes of a dove, his glossy Chinese hair, the prominent nose and full lips. How I had loved that face the moment I’d spotted it in an intro-programming class our sophomore year. He was so handsome to me because his face had this integrity, and I wanted to know him because he looked as if he were uncertain about nothing. We were Paul Chang and Sunny Kim — the two Asian Americans in the class, simply pathetic at computers. We were a shame to our race, we had joked. When he noticed my worn copy of *Vanity Fair*, he said he preferred Trollope to Thackeray. I forgave him even though I disagreed strongly, because I thought he should get some credit for having even finished the *Palliser* series — I had only read *The Prime Minister* and *Can You Forgive Her?* In an uncharacteristic move, I asked him out for coffee. He called me the next day to buy me ice cream, and after that, we were never apart.

Paul’s intelligence had made me fall in love with him. The brain is always the sexiest organ. I had crushes on virtually every good professor at Harvard. Paul was passionate about his work in a quiet, effective way that I found appealing. We were good friends because, if you can pardon the legalism, we were separate but equal. He was magnetic and I was charismatic. He drew people in and I pursued them. At Yale Law School, our friends termed us “Best Pair.” But somewhere in the fifteen years that we had known each other, and in the dozen years of our marriage, we had lost our leisure. We were in our thirties, and we were busy — excited with our careers, our daughter, and our life in Manhattan, and even though Paul was my best

friend, we didn't talk anymore about the things we used to love — theories about politics and race, old Westerns, and nineteenth-century novels. But it wasn't as if I talked to anyone else about these things either, and so it was as if I had died to that old self. There was nothing to say, and no one to say it to.

I could hear someone at the other end trying to get Paul's attention about something, and I released him as I usually did: "You can go." I said this without telling him about my day.

"We'll talk later," he said. "Gotta hop." I heard the phone click, and I felt sad, even though this was nothing new. I often had to get off the phone with him when I was at work. We were both busy — with every moment spoken for — but I felt a loss, and I wondered, beyond the logistics of two people who share a history, a home, and a child, what else? I had never told him about my three years of Bible reading, or my anxiety that my Greek and Latin were all but lost (why did I care about this still?), and how sometimes when I went to bed at night, I'd lie awake staring at his sleeping face hoping that he would just wake up and kiss me and tell me that everything was all right.

I drew a bath for myself, and later I dressed with care for my dinner with Gavin. I curled my eyelashes and put on mascara — something I rarely did. There was a blow-dryer in the hotel bathroom, and I dried my hair, paying attention to catch the stray ends so my hair would fall neatly in one direction.

GAVIN, IT TURNED OUT, was an Oxford physics major who later taught calculus to schoolboys in Sussex while working on a novel that never got anywhere; he married an American doctor he met on a rented barge on the Avon Ring, moved to Chicago with her, and became a citizen while attending the University of Chicago Law School. He made partner five years ago. He was forty-two years old, divorced, and there'd been no children. He thought America was wonderful, so full of openness.

We were sitting in an Italian restaurant in downtown Chicago, a place he'd heard of and wanted to try but had never made the time for. He was asking me to draw a graph; he had a method of charting happiness, he said.

"X is for time and Y is for happiness. Look at the past five years of your life, then plot the intersections." Gavin folded his hands and leaned forward. Seeing the confused look on my face, he smiled and patted his suit pockets, pulling out one of his business cards — the only paper he had with him.

"So, Sun-ny, what would that curve look like?" His accent stressed the first syllable of words, and when he said my name, I could hear the sun in it. "Go on, try. It could be fun."

He was shy. I'd detected this at the closing, but here he seemed more relaxed, almost teasing, and it made me feel playful too. He was trying to draw me out, and it felt good to have someone ask me questions about myself, since I usually played

Barbara Walters in conversations. But he didn't ask me about my family life or work — the things I'd asked — but about topics I'd always wanted to thrash out.

He asked me about my college major. "You read classics at university?" he said, smiling with pleasure as if this was something he had known all along. "Who do you like?"

Surprised by his question, I confessed my long-standing interest in Thucydides. "I must have read the funeral oration half a dozen times." My voice couldn't help but brim with admiration.

"Really?" he said, his forehead wrinkling. "Not my favorite. You know that oration and his use of the parliamentary speeches are considerably suspect."

I opened my mouth, but couldn't see how to reply, not having expected him to disagree. The funeral oration of Pericles was considered immortal, and Thucydides — who had actually fought in the war, then was exiled for his efforts — was in my mind a genius chronicler.

"The old bugger died before finishing his work, thank goodness. Tended to go on a bit." He laughed.

I pretended to roll up my sleeves. "So who do you think is good?" My voice cracked.

"Herodotus. Now, he's the man." Gavin sounded like a trash-talking ballplayer, but he couldn't keep a straight face, and I laughed.

"Oh. For a moment there, I thought you were serious. I guess you're telling me that you prefer novels to history." He kept laughing, and I felt encouraged to go on. "Well, I'll give your boy Herodotus this, he had decent scope, but glibness is the quality I least admire."

Gavin stopped laughing, and he smiled at me, and it was that same smile from earlier that day at the closing. It said that we were the same even though we couldn't seem more different to everyone else. I turned from his gaze, crumpling the napkin on my lap in my fist, because he delighted me so much.

He was a partner at a law firm, and he cared about philosophy, metaphysics, and literature. Truly, this impressed me more than if he'd said he'd climbed Mt. Everest or possessed half a dozen homes.

I fiddled with the blank card that he'd given me to fill out.

"You don't have to, I mean. If you don't want ..." he said, his eyes hiding a frown.

"No, no. I'm intrigued. Wait." I rifled through my tote bag and pulled out a fountain pen Paul had given me when we graduated from law school.

I made a cross: a horizontal line for the axis of time and a vertical line for the axis of happiness. For each of the five years, I marked the symbols Y1, Y2, *et cetera*. Then I numbered from 0 to 10 to rate my happiness. Was that what he meant? I looked up for guidance. I tried not to squint. What did he think of me? I wasn't unattractive; Paul's best friend, Michael, once said I was an 8 out of 10.

“You do this all the time?” I said. “Give yourself status reports on your happiness? It’s a little strange, Gavin.”

This time he looked hurt by my tone, then his face grew composed again, as it’d been all that morning at his office. “Well, I no longer believe that life is a chronology of accomplishments. There has to be more to it than that. Don’t you think?”

“That all depends, I guess. On your belief system.” I cringed after saying this, because I didn’t want to talk about religion.

“I don’t believe in God, but I believe in possibility, in individuals, and in relationships.”

Oh, please, I thought. His knowledge of military history should obliterate his faith in humankind in about two seconds. Read the morning paper, I wanted to say.

Sensing my skepticism, he said, “Well, it’s like this: whenever something happens to me, and I don’t know what to make of it, I make this chart — to see where I am, how I’m feeling, if it’s worth it, where I went wrong, and where do I want to be. You can see things in a picture that you can’t say sometimes. It’s more honest. It tests feelings, my happiness, my sadness, my boredom, even.”

I nodded, surprised by this unexpected insight. I’d never graphed anything before, and certainly never my feelings.

“I don’t normally talk so much. Sorry.” He took a sip of wine, and his wineglass covered the thin line made by his down-turned lips. “This is probably nonsense to you,” he said.

I shook my head no. What he was saying was intriguing. I had nothing equivalent to his graph, no clever tool to assess the quality of my life.

Gavin glanced at the blank side of his business card where I had failed to plot my points.

I took a sip of wine, then began: for each of the past five years, I gave a rating of 5 (average), except for Year Four, which I gave a 1 (unhappy); so there was a straight line with a dip for Y4 — the year I had a child, leaving her for a nanny to raise — then the line resumed itself again, forming a plateau. Long horizontal line, dip, short line. In my mind, I sketched out the preceding five years, and I could see a level blue line like a taut cord stretched across a room.

“You are so smart.” I meant this. He’d illustrated the flatness of my life. I felt sickened by it. The graph was a chronology of a life devoid of any great feeling or risk.

Gavin studied my graph. Since his head was bent, I couldn’t see much of his face — just his dark hair, his long eyelashes, and a hint of his nose. He was so different from me. His clothes still looked well pressed, though he’d been wearing them all day. He wore a spread-collar white shirt and a Persian blue silk necktie beneath his gray chalk-striped suit. His face was cleanly shaven, giving him the appearance of a brightly polished coin. Gavin was losing his chestnut hair as well as a man can — it was receding evenly from front to back. His hazel eyes looked kind, but there

wasn't much light in them. He was conventionally handsome — presentable but not noticeable. He was eight years older than me. For a white guy, he was my type.

I had not dated much: I started when I was fifteen and got married when I was twenty-two. In high school, I had a Korean boyfriend, and at Harvard, I dated a Puerto Rican boy for a few months, then I met Paul, who became my first lover. Paul was born in Taiwan but raised in the Bronx, so we were both from New York City. We had met almost as children, it seemed to me. Gavin was a man, and from England. I'd never been there, and as stupid as it sounds, I could sort of pretend that England wasn't like America — by that I mean, it wasn't modern. I could hold the illusion that English people were like characters in books. Of course, this was ridiculous. I had English friends — New York City was full of ordinary Brits — but they always seemed special because of P.D. James, George Eliot, the Bronte sisters, Graham Greene, and Thomas Hardy. With the support of his nation's literature, Gavin could not help being glamorous.

The longer I was with him, the more I wanted to know how he saw me. Did he think I was funny, interesting, smart, sexy? If I weren't married, would he ask me out on a real date? Did he find Asian women attractive? Or was he one of those white men with geisha fetishes? I'd met those guys before — but Gavin didn't give off worrisome signals like asking me what country I was from or telling me his first girlfriend was Japanese.

He held his fork in his left hand, his knife in his right. He cut a small piece of veal, then deftly using his knife, he placed a bit of sautéed escarole above the veal. He ate the bite, never switching his fork to his right hand. He was following proper English form — I'd read that in a book. This was the thing with me, having grown up eating with chopsticks and using a plastic spork in public schools, I had learned how to do many things by observing and reading — even comparing how things were supposed to be done to how things worked in practice. Native or foreigner, fish or fowl, I still wanted to do things correctly. I smoothed the heavy white napkin across my lap, and when I looked up, he set down his fork and knife to pick up the business card where I'd drawn the flat curve of my happiness, and then I saw how Gavin must see me: a Korean American, Ivy-League educated corporate lawyer with an unremarkable face, shoulder-length hair, and thickish ankles. This was just work — a closing dinner — I went to them all the time; it was just the first time there were only two corporate lawyers at the table and no clients. How could I be vain enough to think that someone like him could be attracted to someone like me? A white guy had never asked me out. I didn't want him to look at my dull graph anymore. I tapped his forearm and hid my disappointment with a smile.

“How about you?” I said. “What about your happiness?”

From his wallet, he pulled out a folded piece of legal paper and told me that he'd drawn it up earlier when I left the conference room to work on the opinion letter.

I raised my eyebrows, impressed by his graph, the enormous highs and lows of

it. There were jagged cliffs, mostly going dramatically upward but with huge drops toward the valleys along the way to Year Five, then sweeping up again at the end of his line. He had optimistically drawn an arrow tip heading upward. I had to laugh.

He laughed too. “We’re quite the pair. Can you imagine our equilibrium?”

There was amusement in his eyes. “If we charted our curves on one graph.”

“I should make this confession now: I nearly failed calculus in high school.”

“Equilibrium is the point of intersection between the two curves,” he said, crossing his hands to make an X.

I coughed like I was clearing my throat.

“I didn’t have a curve really. The stability of my line is pretty dreadful.”

“Balance is a good thing. I admire that.” His ears turned a little pink. “But boredom is misery.”

The waiter came by and noticed the nearly empty wine bottle. When he asked if we wanted another, Gavin looked at me, but I shook my head no. I already felt the flush in my face. He suggested toasting with what was left in our glasses. “To more happiness,” he said.

We clinked glasses and took a sip. This felt so intimate, and I got a shivery feeling in my chest. Then I wondered if he was saying my life was boring, and I felt angry.

“Gavin Guare, I’m content with the way things are in my life.”

I sounded almost bitchy. I’d learned to talk tough from playing chicken against the boys in the streets of Elmhurst. My brothers used to say to me, “Don’t be a pussy,” so I tried to win like a boy, to attack when I needed to and to stand my ground when pushed. I was pushing Gavin back, trying to keep him from crossing a line: I didn’t want him to make judgments about my life.

He pursed his lips and looked thoughtful. He didn’t say anything, and I knew I had ruined the good feelings we had.

I folded the napkin on my lap. “Besides, isn’t being content good enough?”

His British accent turned unmistakably BBC — every syllable crisp and precise. “No, it isn’t. Content is good. But it isn’t sufficient. That’s a mistake.”

I said no to dessert. When the check came, Gavin paid, refusing my offers to pay half or whole or to leave a tip. Outside the restaurant, the streets were sparsely filled with pedestrians. Men in parkas headed home carrying canvas briefcases, a pair of collegekids wearing ski caps with tassels stood in front of a bar smoking dope, and an older woman in a raccoon coat peered into a darkened shop window, her hands cupping her eyes, and the old man with her glanced at his watch. We walked two blocks to where Gavin had parked the car.

GAVIN DROVE SLOWLY along Lake Michigan. We were in the silver Saab hatchback that he’d bought secondhand when he was a junior associate. It was clean but at least ten years old. I felt safe in this car. He was driving me back to my hotel. I was sad

that the evening was ending, but I was also relieved, because I was enjoying it too much. Gavin was only growing more attractive to me, and being with him made me feel adolescent and giddy. He wanted to know more about my graph. That was his way of asking me about what made me unhappy. He asked about Year Four, the dip in my graph. I asked him if I could turn the radio on, and he nodded.

It was the year I was pregnant with Leah: the delivery was horrible, my tailbone almost broke from pushing for four hours, I failed at breast-feeding, and I never recovered from the guilt of needing a live-in nanny so I could return to my job in six weeks. I was ashamed of being a part-time mother at best, and a full-time lawyer. I was thirty-four, but I knew I wouldn't have any more children; I knew this because whatever I had left over of myself would go to Leah. My own mother's job as the pastor's wife had been that of a saint, and far more consuming than being a partner at a law firm; each evening, she'd had nothing left over for my brothers and me. But there was no way that Gavin could understand this, and I didn't want to talk about it anyway. I refused to talk about Paul and Leah. If I did, it would break the spell and I couldn't pretend anymore that this was a date.

Gavin was a good driver, steady but swift in his reflexes. His hands rested loosely on the wheel. There were only a few cars on the glistening road. He asked again what happened the past year.

I folded my hands over my knees and looked down at my square-toed black leather pumps — the shoes of an affluent young New York corporate lawyer. I wished for thin strips of leather holding a pedicured foot with no stockings. Pointed, slender heels. I turned to him, trying to sound pert, almost sexy, "It was the year I was up for partner. You can imagine." I tossed this off with a wave.

He nodded while he navigated the slick roads. He frowned, and I wondered if he was disappointed with the vagueness of my answer, or if he thought I'd been tacky for flirting with him at dinner. I felt like an old woman wearing a tube top and hot pants — harmless but inappropriate.

The thing was that I wanted to stay in his car, let myself be driven along Lake Michigan, enveloped in the cloudy Chicago night. But I warned myself to get out of the car as soon as we reached the hotel, go straight to my room, shut the door behind me, rearrange the closing documents in my litigation bag, do anything but think about this man. Gavin remained silent and I stared at my hands, folded squarely over themselves like two plain sheets of paper. The only ornament on them was my wedding ring.

The evening had passed with no mention of my being married. I hadn't mentioned it, and he hadn't asked. He could have had a wonderful girlfriend, and I didn't ask, because I didn't want to know. And besides, it was likely that he had noticed my ring.

Unlike most married women in my profession, I didn't wear a diamond engagement ring. My ring looked like one of those thick metal washers that plumbers used

between pipes. When Paul asked me to marry him our senior year in college, he had done so without a ring, and for the ceremony, we bought two simple platinum bands from a jeweler for three hundred dollars. When we had money later for extras, Paul asked me if I'd like a proper ring, but I said no, because we had to get furniture and pay down our law school loans. To be truthful, I felt superior to the women lawyers sporting large diamonds because it seemed to me that they were trying to advertise what their husbands thought they were worth to the world. Maybe I was envious of them too, because sometimes I admired the rings I saw in store windows, but after so many years of not having one, Paul didn't ask anymore, and there was that balloon mortgage to deflate. My ring was identical to Paul's — masculine in its plainness — and often women commented on its stylish, minimalist look.

I would have been content to keep quiet for the rest of the drive. But Gavin would not relent about Year Four. "So you were unhappy because of the pressure. Of trying to make partner."

I nodded, refusing to explain how my life had changed that year, and how the graph expressed my controlled restlessness and the guilt and silence shadowing my life. How could I explain to him what I had just seen myself for the first time?

Gavin said that we were almost there. He had a low voice that at times held the inflection of a question. In a single day, I had caught the rhythm of his speech: the gentleness, the careful consideration of feeling, and also his hesitation. I stared at his hand as he shifted gears, the blue veins tunneling beneath his skin, and I imagined all the graphs we hid within our bodies. I had this urge to place my left hand on his right to check if it would be warm or cold — as if his body temperature would indicate something of his heart.

Gavin parked at the bottom of the hotel driveway. Not understanding why he didn't just drop me off at the door, I felt nervous and expectant.

"I'm often in New York," he said, sounding happy.

"Don't tell me — the theater there has much more original stuff than Chicago."

He laughed, looking younger and brighter than before. I felt so warmed by this that I would have stood on my head, done something equally foolish, just to hear him laugh like that again.

"When I'm there, let me take you out again."

"Sure," I nodded, pleased and filled with dread. "We'll have lunch."

"We'll have dinner. There's a wonderful bar in the Village that I used to go to when I was younger, and then this Indian place on Curry Hill," he said. I caught the enthusiasm in his voice, and for the first time that night, I felt I'd been unfair to him.

"Uh-hmm." I nodded, thinking how all those years of fancy education yielded this inarticulate woman unable to talk or think herself out of danger.

"Good-night," I said, reaching over to pull the cold metal handle of the door.

"Thanks for dinner. It was really nice working with you."

He touched my left hand, and before I had the chance to pull it away, he asked, “May I kiss you good-bye?”

“Why?” I laughed in shock. “I mean, I don’t think so.”

I looked up at the hotel building to see if the doorman could see us, but he was busy hailing a cab for another guest. Then I wondered if I had misunderstood — maybe he wanted to kiss me the way Europeans or Americans did as a greeting.

“I thought tonight was so lovely,” he said, looking hurt.

He wanted to kiss me the way a man kisses a woman. Until that moment, I hadn’t known that it was possible to feel flattered, happy, and ashamed all at once.

“I had a lovely time too.”

His eyes became crescent shaped when he smiled.

“Then I can see you again,” he said.

I shook my head slowly.

“Why not then?”

“Because. Of Paul.” There — I had said it. “I mean my husband.” Then I said, “And because of my daughter.” I drew up my left hand and showed him the ring, and though I had pretended to be single the entire evening with no suggestion of commitments elsewhere, I said to him innocently, “I thought you knew.”

Gavin stared at the ring, studying it like it was an art object with no surprise in his expression or even disappointment. Finally, he said, “It looks like pewter.”

I nodded, then said, “I’m sorry.” I gathered my coat and tote bag and held them against my chest. “I shouldn’t have come,” I continued to lie. “Henry had said nice things about you, and I was curious. We were so busy during the closing and I thought it would be good for me to get out and know more people in our field.” It sounded like such bullshit. What I should have said was that when I was waiting for him earlier that evening to pick me up, I had checked my hair and lipstick and powdered my nose twice, and I had felt like the seventeen-year-old Harvard freshman who’d wanted to try it all and be unconfined by the limits of my background; in Gavin’s car, I wasn’t just Paul’s wife, Leah’s mother, a fancy corporate lawyer who never missed worship services, not a P.K. I was a mind and a heart, full of thoughts and feelings that seemed almost illegal. I stared at my platinum ring — this thing that my father had blessed when he married Paul and me — its dull, matte finish circling my finger. Right then, I didn’t want to take all the responsibility for Gavin’s hurt feelings. He could’ve looked at my left hand.

“I thought it was obvious that I was married and a mother.”

He shook his head no, and he smiled at me kindly.

“I think I wanted an adventure,” I admitted. “I wanted to know if I was attractive to you.”

“You are. You are extraordinary.”

I bit the inside of my lower lip.

“And am I? he asked. “Am I attractive to you?”

I nodded yes, not quite believing this was happening. During dinner, I knew I was having a crush on him, but I also had a crush on Christopher Plummer in *The Sound of Music*.

“Let’s go inside and talk. It’s silly to sit here like this.”

“No. That would be wrong.”

“What would be wrong?”

“Going in there with you.”

“Why?”

Near the plateglass hotel doors, a man pushed the revolving door slowly from behind for a woman standing in one of the glass quadrants. Were they married or dating or working together — like us? And would they make love that night? A woman at my office was said to be sleeping with a married man. These things happened every day of the week, but I thought, naively, that they happened to other people. Now I was curious about them — these people who followed their feelings. But my mind returned to this one thing: Gavin had said that I was extraordinary. What made him say that? Why did it give me so much pleasure?

“You all right?” He held my hand, and I didn’t pull it away.

“Uh-hmm.” How could I tell him that I had just imagined us in bed? I closed my eyes and rested my head on the leather upholstery. I was tired, and I was spooked, because I didn’t know what to do.

He pulled me toward him, and I kept my eyes open as he closed his. The light heat of his breath passed into me. The kiss was awkward and rushed, and though I pushed him away, I was excited.

“I have to go,” I said, opening the door.

He said my name again, but I got out and closed the door, muttering, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” I rushed past the doorman’s “good evening” and ran into the open elevator.

The red light on the hotel phone was blinking with messages. Henry had called, and so had Paul. I phoned Henry first, knowing he’d still be at the office. I wasn’t ready to speak with Paul but felt I had to talk to another human being right then.

“Henry. You called.”

His voice brightened a little. “Sunny?”

“Yeah.” I cradled my head with one hand and held onto the receiver with the other. I was wondering where Gavin was headed at that moment — if he was going home or returning to the office or just driving around downtown Chicago. Where did he live? What was his middle name? I sighed audibly from fatigue.

“What’s the matter? You sound like crap. I send you to Chicago on a boondoggle closing with two nights at the Ritz Carlton, and you sound like you’re at the printers

working for your third night straight. Aren't you resting? Get a massage or something, for God's sake. Have a drink and go to sleep."

"What? What did you say?"

"You heard me."

"Wait a second. You said you sent me here because Gavin was hot shit." I raised my voice.

He yelled back, "I've never met Gavin. Who gives a rat's ass about some lawyer in Chicagowith an English accent?"

"Hold up." I raised my right hand like I was going to stop traffic. "So, why did you send me out here?"

"To rest. You were going to break down from the exhaustion. Paul thought it was a good idea too. You know, Sunny, you are so damn arrogant. You need to sleep, eat, and shit like the rest of us. Why do you think that you're so above human need?"

"What?" I was seething. "Paul knew about this?"

"It was my idea. I just talked with him because I didn't know about your child-care situation, and he said he was worried about how you weren't sleeping."

"Bastards. You have some nerve. I can take care of myself."

"Oh, shut up, Sunny."

If anyone else had said this to me, I would've killed him, but this was King Henry. He said whatever he wanted, and you had to listen. You were allowed to argue, but you were supposed to know that he meant well.

"Pay attention, Sunny. Your baby's not sleeping, the Texxin deal blew up, and on top of that, you're running three of the firm's biggest deals. You haven't taken time off since your maternity leave. I was calling a time-out for you. The Logos deal was cupcake. A first year's grandmother could have closed that deal."

I started to cry, and I turned my face away from the phone. I just wanted to lie across the bed with a towel over my head. If he and Paul hadn't airlifted me into Chicago, then I would have never met Gavin and become so confused.

Henry was waiting for me to hang up.

"Fine, you can go now," I said, my teeth clenched.

"Sunny, listen. Take the long view. If you're not going to ask for help, then accept it when it's offered to you. How else will you last?" Henry hung up, and he hadn't once called me Girl Wonder.

I shouldn't have yelled at him. Deal season was in full swing, and he was trying to make sure that I'd get through. In high school, I figured out that I had to get scholarships. So I often went to bed at two or three in the morning, and my father sometimes found me in the middle of the night with my books and papers spread out over the coffee table, and he'd tell me that sleep and prayer were what I needed. He used to quote his favorite writer, Victor Hugo: "And when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake." And when I fell

asleep on the living room sofa — for what I'd intended as a short break — I'd wake up in the morning to find myself covered with his army surplus blanket. If he could have, he would have sent me off to the Ritz Carlton, too.

I TOOK OFF MY black wool suit, put on the oversized cotton hotel robe, and phoned room service for some tea. I decided to finish up a rider agreement for another deal. It was only ten o'clock. I couldn't have slept even if I tried. Then I found myself dialing information for Gavin's home number. He was unlisted.

A few years back, Henry and I were in a conference room with three other lawyers working on a healthcare merger. As usual, I was the only associate there and the only woman on the deal. Dinner had been sent up from Schmoopie's, and we were seated around an oval conference table eating sandwiches, momentarily taking a break from the complicated transaction. Ronald, a real estate partner, started talking about sex and how men were incorrigible. Henry loved to listen to the old boys talk on and on and then shoot them down like clay pigeons. Whenever the men talked about things not work related, I sat quietly and ate my dry sandwich and pretended to look over some papers.

Ronald argued that if there were an 100 percent guarantee that a wife would never find out and a man could have a fantasy girl (movie star, supermodel, what have you) of his choice, then no matter how happy the man was in his marriage, he would cheat every time. It's man's nature to want to screw beautiful women, Ronald asserted. The other two partners, one tax and the other securities, just snorted and said stuff like, "Oh, Ronald." And I sat there wedged in between the tax lawyer and Henry, thinking that Ronald's assertion — true or false — was a pathetic testament to mankind and marriage in general. I waited for Henry to say all these things to Ronald, but he said nothing. Instead, Henry turned to me and said, "What do you think of all this, Sunny?"

I swallowed a sip of diet Coke and put the can down gingerly. I looked Henry in the eye and said, "Well. It would be arrogant to think that any marriage is immune from adultery, but one has to persist in the belief that in the face of temptation, one will do the correct thing. Because, what is the alternative, gentlemen?" I paused. "Persistent distrust. And I ask you, is it possible to live without faith?"

There was an audible *hmmm* like they were all pondering what I'd just said. I knew I sounded like a pompous ass, but I wasn't going to let a bunch of boys scare me into saying something stupid so I'd tried to sound like the Yale-trained lawyer that I was.

Then Ronald said, "Woah, Nelly. Change subject." The other partners sort of clucked like hens, and Henry laughed a deep belly laugh then said, "Did I tell you boys that Sunny is a preacher's child?"

I didn't even look at Henry when he said this.

Now, recalling what I'd said, I realized that I'd meant all of it, and when I was tempted to trespass with Gavin, I chose correctly, but I could never have guessed that afterward I'd feel so mixed up and that temptation didn't just fall away, but lingered even as I willed myself to be strong.

I wanted to see him again.

Room service came. The waiter placed the tea tray on the console. He handed me his pen, and I signed the check. He was very dignified and bowed a little as he left the room.

In a moment there was another knock, and I noticed that I was still holding the waiter's pen, so I opened the door to return it.

"Hello," Gavin said.

I gathered the collar of my robe. I had wished for this, I told myself, and I was frightened.

"I waited downstairs, hoping you'd come down, but you didn't."

I said nothing.

"May I come in?"

"I don't think so." I grasped the doorknob and stood fixed to the carpet.

"I thought I should apologize for kissing you. That was inappropriate."

"Forget it."

"That's what you said after helping me this morning."

That was how it had all begun — a cord had twisted up his jacket and I'd given him a hand. I had to laugh.

The corridor was empty. Sage green carpeting covered the long hall, and all I could see on either side of it were end tables with blue-and-white porcelain vases on top of them. Everything looked tasteful and muted. I could hear nothing, not even the chimes one usually hears from the elevators or any of the normal sounds that hotel occupants make. Didn't anyone want a bucket of ice? I held my breath and silently recited Psalm 19. *May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

Gavin stood there waiting for me to say something.

Then I thought, Well, if I really believe in God, then shouldn't I be able to resist temptation? It was a notion the devil himself might have given me.

I said with a warning look, "You won't try anything."

"No," he said.

I shut the door and wondered how I could let this happen. I thought about a church saying that Henry used: "Satan, get thee behind me." Whenever he was on a diet, Henry would mumble this phrase at the chocolate-cherry cookies set out by the caterers. Now I whispered it to myself.

Gavin turned around. "Pardon?"

"Nothing. Do you want to sit down?" Here I was, silently reciting Bible verses,

blaming the devil for letting an attractive man walk into my room. I had lost my mind.

He commented on the decor, and I wondered what people talked about in these situations, and then the phone rang, and it was Paul. “So do you want to say hello to Leah?”

“Why did you send me here?”

“You’re so tired, Sunshine. I was worried.”

Tears stung my eyes and I pulled my head back and blinked. I wanted to apologize for everything I had ever done wrong, and for being me — for wanting to know things, for wanting attention, for not being good enough.

“I’ll put Leah on. Say hello to mommy. Say hello.”

The baby would be a year old in two months, and she didn’t like the phone. She was batting at the receiver.

“Leah, Leah, this is *umma*. I miss you.” This wasn’t true. Not really. Ever since I had my child, it wasn’t as if I missed her, because I didn’t really know her, but delivering her from my body had created a permanent ache of being apart. It wasn’t that I needed to be engaged with her all the time, I wasn’t that kind of mother; taking care of the baby was sometimes incredibly tedious, but I felt peaceful when she was in her crib sleeping or just in the room with me playing with her toys. This probably sounds awful, but I liked watching her more than caring for her.

Paul handed her over to Lucinda, our nanny, and I asked him about his trial, but I hardly understood anything he said because there was Gavin seated across from me on a crimson cut-velvet armchair, staring at my bare ankles. I focused on the chalk-stripe of his suit.

“You okay?” Paul sounded concerned.

“Yeah,” I bobbed my head up and down before realizing that he couldn’t see me. “I guess I don’t know how to rest.”

“I miss you, Sunshine.”

“Hmm?” I’d heard what he said, but it surprised me. My husband rarely said sentimental things. In court, he could light fireworks, but in life, he was like my father, a soft-spoken man who managed his troubles with grace and reflection.

“Leah wants her bottle,” he said. Giving her the bottle was something he liked to do when he was home. “You’ll be back tomorrow.” He said it firmly, and hearing it reassured me.

I hung up, and I looked at Gavin. “What am I doing here?”

“Sunny, we haven’t done anything wrong. Sometimes it’s good just to talk to someone who thinks like you. You know?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“And Sunny,” Gavin smiled and gestured toward the emptiness of the room. “See?”

“Huh?”

“We’re all alone. No one can see us.”

I lowered my shoulders and tried to appear relaxed. My eyes swept across the room, and I thought of the picture book *Goodnight Moon* that I read to Leah before I put her down for the night. Near the end of the book, there is a blank page, and on the bottom of it, the line, “Goodnight nobody.” But that wasn’t right, I wanted to argue, there was no such thing as *nobody* in a room. I had been taught to believe that you were never truly alone. And then I wondered, what would my daughter’s first lie to me be? What forbidden things would she do outside my presence?

I felt the complacency of my life disappear — it was so easy to accept the idea of God’s plan when things were going your way, as if success was a direct reward for good behavior. But where was God when you wanted to stray, to know the thing He didn’t want you to know? Then I realized that He was right there with you as you were being tempted just hoping that you’d pass up the thing you wanted. The thought made me irritable, because I resented like hell being tested.

I surprised myself by saying to him, “But God can see us.”

He rose from his chair, edged toward me, and lifted my chin. “But I told you, I don’t believe in God.”

He stroked my cheek, then carefully combed my hair with his fingers. His touch was so seductive that for a second, I stopped breathing.

“You’re lucky then. You’re free to do what you like.” I moved away from him. “I made a promise.” I paused. “And what would it mean for me to not keep that promise?”

“You’d be human.”

Again, someone had to remind me of this.

He continued, “I don’t believe in God. But if I did, I think he’d forgive me. He’d want me to be happy. He’d understand if I failed his laws. And, we make promises to ourselves, too, Sunny, to be truthful, to pursue love.”

“Yes, yes.” I sounded angry because I didn’t want to do this right now — talk about religion, explain how it affected everything I did, how although I had all these questions and ambivalence about God, they were private and I didn’t want anyone to know that I was trying to figure them out.

“Gavin, I know God forgives, but He wants us to resist sin. He asks us to choose Him over the sin because He loves us and He doesn’t want sin to destroy us. Sin is forgiven, but it is irrevocable too — you cannot take it back. I hit you, I say I’m sorry, you say it’s okay, but I still hit you. You’re still hurt. Right?” My tone was nearly hysterical.

He looked confused, and concerned.

I said, “Look. I know damn well that God would forgive me if I sinned. I’m certain of it. That’s the whole point of Christ’s death and resurrection. All sins are

redeemed. But I would hurt God if I sinned, and I couldn't take that hurt back. It's like listening to your mother because you love her, not because you're afraid of punishment. Do you know what I mean?"

I felt so exasperated with what had been bred into me as a girl in Sunday school and the thousands of sermons and Bible passages that I could not shake. I hated the way these ideas tumbled out of me, and also the way I had no choice but to want to please God if I remembered that He loved me like a father. I knew that Leah had power over me, and in a way, I understood that I had some power to hurt God.

I only grew more frustrated as I watched Gavin listen patiently without defense or argument. Here I was telling him everything, saying all the things I didn't ever want to say to another human being, and he just sat there having said some bullshit about the promises that we make to ourselves to be truthful, promises to pursue love. Ha! I wanted to laugh. So I blurted out, "And besides, *you're* not pursuing love. Nonsense. You don't love me."

"I want to try." His face flushed after he said this.

"That's insane." I felt sorry as soon as I said it because he was serious. He wasn't playing around, and I realized then that this was an unusual situation for him, too, and suddenly I was ashamed of how mean I could sound when I argued.

He said quietly, "This morning. As you were helping me with the blinds ..." Gavin took a breath, "I had this wish. That you'd stay. Isn't that curious? I don't know you, but I had this sense. That you were a good person, and I wanted to be with you."

"Good? Look at me. Look where we are."

He shook his head. "Don't be simplistic. You don't trust your feelings, but I do. All day I've been trying to figure out what you remind me of and I think it's this: you're like water. You have this inner strength, this clarity."

"Water?" I said.

Right then, he was so dear to me because he was really paying attention and trying to see me and put what he saw into words, and even though what he said was sort of goofy, it was romantic too, and it had been a long time since someone had tried to be poetic with me. Also, I was full of admiration for him because it took courage for him to say this — especially to me — a girl with an obelisk on her shoulder. I was touched, but I didn't know what to say. How did he know that I wanted this attention — this kind of talking — more than anything?

"Are you saying that I'm a drink that's free? I would've preferred to be something more costly," I said it with a smile.

He moved in closer, then he kissed me again. His right hand slid into my robe and held the base of my left breast. I could feel his fingers through the fabric of my brassiere.

"And I think you're lonely too." Then he loosened the belt of my robe and opened it. He placed his hands over my shoulders and the robe fell to the floor. I was stunned

by his boldness and my own brazenness — I didn't pick up the robe; instead I watched him looking at me.

“You're lovely.”

I had never given much thought to my figure. I had gained a little weight since college and after the baby, but for the most part, I was slim enough — a size six or eight, and I was very tall, five-eight. The only part of myself that I'd ever really noticed and liked was my skin because it was evenly pale and soft. Now, over my abdomen, I saw the silvery, gray stretch marks and I remembered my other life in Manhattan.

Gavin tilted his head and kissed me again and I could taste his tongue in my mouth and I closed my eyes. His hands were now behind my back fumbling with my brassiere hooks and I could feel him moving me toward the bed. I took a step backward, picked up the robe from the floor, and without even taking the time to put it back on, I marched in my underwear to the bathroom.

THE BATHROOM DOOR was the kind that slid into the wall, and I pulled the latch to shut it. I locked myself in, not bothering to switch on the light. It was very dark and I couldn't see anything except for the glowing light switch. I lay down on the tiled floor.

“Are you all right?” Gavin said from the other side of the door.

“I need a minute.” I crawled under the marble vanity and arranged myself around the plumbing. Being under the sink felt calming and familiar, like I was playing hide-and-seek and at any moment one of my brothers would come in and find me and it would be my turn to be It.

I could see the skinny bar of light beneath the door. Gavin was still in the room somewhere but no longer standing right outside.

I finally had something to say to God.

Why are you doing this to me? How do you expect me to walk away from this?

If I never doubted the existence of God, I must admit, I also never doubted my own strength. There were lots of times in my life when I was offered the opportunity to do the very things I wasn't supposed to do — cheat on exams, snort cocaine, steal makeup — but those things had never been temptations for me in any real way. I had long ago realized that I wasn't naturally brilliant so I had to study to do well in school. I knew I would never be the most popular girl, so it made no difference what the cool kids thought of me, and because I had grown up without much money but with enough for most things, I did not care for extras. And though I knew it would be foolish to have sex with an utter stranger, I reasoned that it would be more foolish to have sex with an utter stranger who made me believe that I was extraordinary, because in truth, all my life, I had wanted to be just that.

I tucked my hand under my head and lay there on the cold tiles. I was at the end of my wits, literally unable to think myself out of temptation, unwilling to compro-

mise my desire to be special, adventurous, and exciting even if it meant that I would be adulterous. I was in danger because I knew my own strength was not enough to protect me. So I was hiding in the bathroom.

I wanted to say something else to God, but everything sounded trite or ridiculous. I knew the right thing to do was to walk out of that bathroom and tell Gavin to go home. But I didn't want to. What I really wanted was to never have been tempted at all, but now I was in it and I was scared. I recited the psalm for the third time in one day, and I heard a falseness in the closing words. God was not my Lord, not my Rock, not my Redeemer. God was more like a huge bulky mass in the room, and I had no idea what to do with Him. I wanted Him to leave me alone.

There was a telephone only two feet away from the toilet, but there was no one to call. Even if my mother were alive, I couldn't have talked to her — she was a nice church lady. My father might have understood, but he would've been disappointed in me and in himself as a father. Henry was my boss, and though he'd told me to accept help along the way, I couldn't ask him for it. My best friend was Paul.

Would any one of them love me as much if I did something as terrible as having an affair with Gavin? Perhaps. But more likely not. They were only human — weren't they? And I realized that I was crying — because no matter what anyone said, love was always conditional. People felt differently about you if you hurt them or if you let them down. Who hadn't experienced this? Only God was said to feel the same for you even when you fucked up. After all, wasn't that why prisoners clung to their Bibles? I could sleep with Gavin, and God would still love me.

I crawled out from under the sink, switched on the bathroom light, and washed my face. I brushed my hair and dusted my nose and forehead with powder. Before walking out, I put on the robe and tied the belt into a neat knot.

Gavin was sitting at the desk with his back turned away from me. He asked if I was all right, and I shrugged. He was holding a pen, and his hand covered a portion of the hotel stationery. I asked him what he was doing, although I already knew the answer.

"I'd this feeling that you were going to come out and tell me that you wanted me to go." He frowned like a child then suddenly brightened a bit. "But for the moment, I was happy." Gavin paused, stretching time through his silence. "Because there was still the possibility that you would choose me. I'd given up hope that there could be someone."

"What are you talking about?" I stared at him, surprised by this. "You're wonderful. You could have anyone."

Gavin's eyes held no expression at all. "My wife divorced me three years ago. She fell in love with someone else." Then he crossed his arms and hunched a little like his stomach hurt.

"Since Robin left, you're the first person I've met that I've had this clarity about."

I sat down and kept quiet, thinking he'd tell me more but he didn't so I said, "Gavin, I couldn't leave my husband and my child."

His mouth contorted just barely. "I know that now, but I had to be sure." He uncrossed his arms. "And I knew ..."

"Knew what?"

"That you were married. I noticed your ring at dinner. I hadn't at the closing, but I figured it out at the restaurant, and I thought you would tell me, but you didn't. I figured something happened at Year Four with your husband. I just thought ... and you had agreed to the dinner, and you seemed so happy and light."

He had pursued a married woman after what had happened to him. How could he? Then I remembered — I had wanted his attention.

"I had to know if you were happy in your marriage and in your life. That's why I made you draw the graph."

"What do you mean?"

"Because we take another course of action when we realize that we're unhappy. That's how people are. You're not happy in a job, you quit; you're not happy in your marriage, you leave; you're not happy with your family, you stop seeing them."

"But I'm not unhappy."

"But you were bored." He said this calmly, without judgment.

"That's not fair. You don't know anything about my life."

It struck me then how you could cherish your life, but for a moment, you could want something different. And if a moment was a snapshot and five years were a film rolling on, you could chart a life filled with a variety of emotions, some lighter, some darker.

Gavin murmured, "You're right. I don't know your life, but I thought maybe I could try. To make you happier."

"It would be for a moment." I shouldn't have said it. He was exasperated.

"And isn't that enough? Isn't that all that's required of us?" His mouth formed a straight line, completing his argument.

"No. A moment is not enough."

It wasn't, was it? A graduation, a wedding, a child's birth, a promotion — those were moments, but there had to be a life between these points of bright happiness. And life, if it was faithfully lived, was a quiet, shimmering line, filled with dimmer points that looked like nothing was happening, but something was, the line of happiness would be growing, faith creating the meaning between the connections.

I looked at the door.

"Shall I go now? Is that what you want me to do?"

I kept hoping for courage to rush into my heart. I wanted to break away from him without feeling like I was losing something. If he walked out of my room now, I wanted to feel righted into place again.

“How much, Sunny? Tell me. How much do you want me to go? Ten percent of you, one hundred percent?”

Stay here, I wanted to say. I bit my thumbnail and hesitated. I just didn’t trust myself. My feelings were worthless guides. In the span of one long blink, I prayed to the formless mass in my room: *Okay, you be God. Give me the words. I can’t do this by myself.*

I opened my eyes and saw the brightness of Gavin’s face. Then I remembered his question — he’d wanted to know his odds. I breathed in through my nose and the answer came. I could taste it in my mouth as if I were chewing on a piece of bread. I heard myself say, “One hundred percent. I want you to go one hundred percent.”

Gavin lowered his eyes and nodded.

I looked at his face, and his features grew dimmer and I felt his loneliness. The collar of his white shirt looked a bit wide for his long neck. I walked into his chest and tucked my arms underneath his, and felt the muscles between his shoulder blades. I felt him growing closer as he embraced me, and I fought my fear and the urge to pull away and instead drew myself closer to him. He kissed my forehead, and he sneezed.

“Gah bress...” I stopped from speaking awkwardly like my mother.

Gavin turned his head, sneezing again and again. “Pardon me,” he said.

“Bless you,” I said, and Gavin smiled ruefully.

When he left, I stood at the doorway and watched his figure recede down the hall to the elevator. He focused on the green carpet stretching ahead of him, and I imagined that he was counting his steps. The elevator doors opened, and he was gone.

I sat down on the red chair and noticed my tote bag on the floor. I opened it and poked around, the way you check your refrigerator several times a day when you’re home — because its contents nourish you and also remind you of who you are and what you like. I hadn’t read my chapter today, but I’d get to it later, and after that, I would pray. In the zipper pocket, I noticed Gavin’s business card. On the back, I saw my life plotted loosely across the horizontal line of time. I turned the card over and stared at his name, Gavin W. Guare — his initials performing a symmetry — and I tore it slowly into bits. ■