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swallow

by Kristen Wu

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running water

On the news, they're broadcasting a foreign war. Bombs fall like rain on my iPad screen, and I accidentally pour too much milk in my cereal. I check the time. I should've been at work ten minutes ago. A puddle of milk is congealing at my feet. My cat, Pellet, comes to lap up the mess.

"That's disgusting," my mom says, wrapping her robe more tightly around her like it would protect her from the germs emanating from the floor.

"I would have left it if you weren't visiting," I say truthfully, haphazardly smearing a wad of paper towels to soak up the mess.

My mom sighs and leans on the counter. "Have you gotten a chance to speak to Andy recently?"

I don't respond, instead reaching into the closet to grab a helmet and my electric scooter.

Another sigh. "You know I support your decisions, but Andy was a good guy."

"Is that what they're telling you at church now?"

She winces. "He's in medical school, Rowan. Maybe he's under a lot of stress. You never know what a person is going through until you talk to them yourself."

"You should go ask him then," I quip back.

She sighs again. “Can you stop being so sad? Your life is fine. What is there to be upset about?”



I met Andrew Park during my sophomore year at UCLA. I was recently appointed as an editor for *The Daily Bruin*, and my first task was to revise his article on the value of diversity in the engineering field. I tore it apart for its simplicity, each Google doc comment more scathing than the next.

Hope this helps ;), I typed as my last comment.

The next day, I woke up to an email from apark17@ucla.edu:

TO: editor@dailybruin.com

FROM: apark17@ucla.edu

SUBJECT: Article suggestions

Dear Editor,

I would like to apologize profusely for subjecting you to such a poorly written article. I am well aware that you, a second-year English major, must have extensive experience and knowledge on the matter. Even as a graduating chemical engineering major, I have no hopes of ever even coming close to achieving the extensive domain of knowledge that you possess.

However, I did find your comments to be incredibly humorous. Particularly, the one where you wrote: “If a third grader wrote at this level, he would be expelled.” That resonated with me

greatly. On that note, I would like to extend a formal invitation to discuss my article - or anything, really - over coffee. Please let me know if this is a possibility.

Additionally, if you ever decide to remove the stick up your ass, I wish you a speedy recovery.

Best,

Andy Park

I replied to the email with my number. We ended up dating for the next four years.



The next day, I pass a homeless woman on the way to work. She's hunched in some variation of a squat, rocking back and forth while wailing like a kicked dog. Like any person in this situation, my first instinct is to look away and let the feelings of shame and discomfort linger until the end of my work commute when the office doors part and give way to an air-conditioned oasis. But I can't tear my eyes away from her. I watched her flail, exposing a mouth of pink gums and nothing else. I felt a pang of jealousy in my rib before I finally tore my eyes away and continued to walk. *Click, click, click* - my heels tapping uniformly on cobblestone.



When I walk in the office, my coworker Irene swivels around in her chair to face me.

"Are you going to the work party on Saturday?" she says, absentmindedly ripping up a Post-It note. I can see the dark circles underneath her eyes. Most likely overtime at work again, which was not very unlike her. Even so, she still looks beautiful. With her pin-straight

black hair and inquisitive oval eyes, she is the quintessential Chinese girl in every middle-aged white man's dreams.

"Is it mandatory?"

"Is a work party mandatory? Don't be stupid. I really don't want to go because I actually have hot yoga right before, but I feel like Greg is gonna kill me if I flake," she frets, spinning back and forth in her chair. Greg, our boss, adores Irene. A little too much. I've always wondered if she noticed, but didn't care.

"Do you think I'm in the running for a bonus? I feel like I did really well this quarter. Maybe I don't need to boost my chances, right? Let the work speak for itself."

We work for a Google Maps competitor named Bounce. I've been wearing Bounce merch for the past few months because I can't be bothered to do real laundry. I can tell Irene notices and is actively judging; her eyes keep flitting back and forth from my shirt to my face.

I don't feel like entertaining Irene's worries today. I open my laptop and feign work, when I'm really just selecting and deselecting random emails. I can tell she's waiting for a response.

"I'll go if you go," I finally say.

Later, at lunch, my phone dings. It's a text from a Hinge match.

Hey - are we still on for tonight? I was thinking 9PM at Lucky Catch. LMK!

I guess I have a date tonight.



David Chang is Andy 2.0, if Andy had been slightly douchier. He's another software engineer with a penchant for anime.

"You'd look great with blonde hair. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"No," I lie.

"Do you work out? I've been running a lot recently. You should follow my Strava."

"Okay."

This is how the rest of the night goes. I like being talked at, and David is good at it. I focus on my salmon and kale as the night progresses.



I begin seeing David regularly. He's easy and non-threatening - a good reprieve from work, life, everything. Tuesdays became David's day. I wish I could say David day instead of David's day, like he was nothing more than a blip in my Google calendar. But it really was David's day, as I began ritualistically preparing for his visit starting the night prior. David's day started Monday nights with a two-hour gym session to reduce the bloating and swelling from all the alcohol and salt consumed over the weekend. Then, I donned the red light therapy mask like an Asian Phantom of the Opera, except I had no talent and the audience for my aria was a mediocre tech bro who did not care if I participated in the Olympics or won a Nobel, as long as I had a tight ass and didn't gain a pound over 100 while doing it. I liked the fact that I could hate him. His douchebag tendencies were splayed out for the world to see, so it wasn't just me who hated him.



When I walk into work on Monday, I can tell Irene had been crying. Somehow, some way, the puffiness and afterglow make her look even prettier.

“What happened?” I ask.

Irene looks at me. Her eyes flit to the bathroom. I get up and go to sit in the big stall. She joins me a few minutes later. I lock the door behind her.

“What happened?” I ask again.

“It’s fucking Greg,” she says, bursting into tears. “The work party, and I was really drunk-” *Shit. The work party.* She doesn’t need to finish her sentence for me to understand.

“I get it. How do we report it? I can talk to Holly from HR, like, today, she’s really nice. I can even say it happened to me. We can’t let him-”

“I’m not going to report it.” Irene stops crying and looks at me defiantly. “I can’t.”

I’m floored. “What do you mean?”

“Rowan, what am I going to do? I make 180 here, and Greg’s going to promote me. There’s nothing I can do but suck it up.” Her voice doesn’t waver as she blows her nose in a tissue.

“Don’t you understand? There’s nothing I can do. I have to suck it up. I *will* suck it up.”

I stare at her. Irene’s long lashes, hair, perfect skin - it all looks ugly to me now.



“Have you seen what’s been going on recently?”

“Not really. I don’t follow politics like that. What’s going on?”

I sat up, clutching his blankets to my chest to convey my righteous shock.

“It’s, like, being controlled by terrorists and they’re starving babies.”

“That’s sad.”

I had to hand it to David - trying to provoke him was like getting a turtle to sprint.

“Why do you not care about anything?”

“I just told you I think it’s sad. Also, your righteous indignation feels a little forced.”

I blanched. “It’s not,” I said quickly and defensively.

David simply looked at me. “Do you want to watch something? We can even watch a documentary. Maybe CNN or something?”

I wanted to scream forever into his freshly washed pillows - he was being dead serious. We ended up watching *Succession*.

“Jeremy Strong is just pulling in those awards,” I quipped. I had never seen an episode of *Succession* in my life - but I obsessively kept track of award shows like I made money from it.

David’s face adopted a strange expression. Embarrassed wasn’t exactly the right word - it was like 25% embarrassment and 75% pity. We were lying side by side under the covers, but he extracted his hand from mine and turned to face me, criss-cross-applesauce.

Rowan-” he started. I already knew what was happening, but I was stuck in place, like I had dunked my silk pajama shorts in Gorilla Glue. There was nothing to do but stare at his clean,

white linens.

Hesitating, he reached out and grabbed my clammy hand again. I neither held it back nor pulled away. My hand was in a sweaty limbo. It was an acquiescence - *just do anything you want to me*.

“I know we aren’t necessarily exclusive, and you’re probably seeing a lot more people than just me,” he started. “But I’ve been seeing someone else, and things are getting a bit serious. If I’m being completely honest with you, I can see things going long term.”

I could feel his stare gauging my reaction, and the grip on my hand willing me to turn and face him, let him know that it was no big deal, and that I was fine. I knew I had nothing to say. It was a choice of either faking that I did, or just leaving.

“I think you know where this is heading, but I’ll be explicit for both of our sakes. I’m going to make things exclusive with her, and unfortunately we’ll have to stop seeing each other. I think you’re a great girl, Rowan, and I know you will find someone who compliments you.”

He was a walking PR response. In a masochistic way, I respected him more - I had no idea there were other women. I had simply attributed his rigid schedule to work and his Type A personality. I never had a chance. Since the beginning, I have always been relegated to Tuesdays.

“Rowan? Are you okay? You’re still more than welcome to spend the night. I just didn’t want to lead you on.”

I smiled at him. “I think it’s great you found someone, David.”

I saw his face visibly relax, and so did his grip. He squeezed my hand with the warmth of camaraderie and nothing more.



When Andy and I broke up, I told our mutual friends it was because he was moving to Massachusetts for medical school. Although this was technically true, one crucial detail was missing. I was actually planning on quitting Bounce and moving to Massachusetts with him.

Seven months before the move, Andy invited me over to his apartment. When I got there, I was shocked to see that it was cleared out. No worn out futon, no rustic bar cart. Even the paintings I got him as a gift for his birthday were missing from the walls.

“What the fuck is going on,” was all I could say.

“Rowan,” he started, holding his hands in front of him as if he was deflecting my wrath. “You cannot move to Massachusetts with me. I’m moving next week, and you can’t come. I wanted to tell you before you actually committed.”

“Why?”

“Rowan, I’m from Mass. My whole family is there.”

“So?” I stared past him, focusing instead on the empty, cream colored wall.

“My parents, they’re horrible. They would never accept you.” He hesitates. “I think your personality would be too overwhelming for them. They...I think they envisioned something different. And I don’t want to subject you to that. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“You’re scared because I’ve been committed and it’s not really unlikely that I’ll go back.”

“They don’t get mental health like that. I know I sound horrible, you have to know that these aren’t things / think-”

I cut him off. “I get it. I just want you to know that this is your decision, and nobody else’s.”

I left, and he didn't stop me.



I listlessly pack my things still left in my cubicle. It was sparse to begin with, so I’m doing this more for the pangs of nostalgia from when I first started working here. As a fresh college graduate, an offer from Bounce was like getting to walk on a pavement of gold stretching endlessly into the horizon. Now, it was no different from the dirty pavement leading to a subway stop.

Irene watched me silently. I feel the fury and envy roll of her like waves. Her perfectly manicured hands curled in and out, making crescent moon indents on her palms.

“We’ll keep in touch,” I say. “I hope everything gets better.”

“I’m happy for you,” she says back, and I can tell she means it. I smile at her on my way out.

The sunlight is warm on my skin. I pass the homeless woman again. She seems to smile at me. As I’m waiting for the crosswalk light, I read the flier on the street light.

LIFE IS HARD. TALK TO SOMEONE. Below, people have written their phone numbers alongside encouraging messages. I rip the most appealing number from the page and put it in my pocket.

cold open

“Aubrey and Brian haven’t called in two weeks.”

Patrick Shi, Wei’s husband, looks up from their dinner of braised pork, rice, and cabbage. There is a singular grain of rice stuck to the corner of his mouth. For some reason, it makes Wei’s stomach bubble with rage.

“They’re probably busy with school. Junior year is supposed to be the hardest,” Patrick says, his attention returning to the Chinese drama on his iPhone.

“That’s exactly why I’m worried. You know Aubrey can barely cook - she’s probably eating ramen every day. And Brian is so sensitive, he’s probably crying about some girl or bad friends or something. Have you tried texting them?”

Patrick waves his hand absentmindedly. “If they won’t respond to you, what makes you think they’ll respond to me?”

Wei puts down her chopsticks. Her hands tremble with anger. Patrick continues to chew, intermittently swiping out of his drama to watch TikToks.

“I feel like a single parent,” she says to no one in particular.

“A single parent who doesn’t have to work,” Patrick quips back, unfazed. “That reminds me - Andrea is being so demanding nowadays. Ever since she got promoted to manager, she’s

been pressing me about fixing this bug all week. Maybe she can use her Cornell degree to solve it. Hah! She can't do half the things I can. Goddamn Ivy Leaguers think they're so much better than us."

Wei puts her bowl in the sink, deciding to draw a hot bath to calm her nerves.

As she waits for the water to run hot, she can hear Patrick laughing at his phone from the kitchen.



The next day, while Wei is tending to her garden, Aubrey FaceTimes her.

Wei hurriedly yanks off her frayed gardening gloves, running to the shade of their gazebo to answer so she can properly see Aubrey's face clearly on the tiny screen. The shakiness of the iPhone camera makes her head hurt as is, nevermind underneath the harsh California sun.

"Aubrey, sweetie, can you hear me?"

Only half of Aubrey's face can be seen on the screen. She is distracted, her black eyes flitting from the camera to something off-screen. "Hi, Mom, are you there?"

"Yes, Mommy can hear you. What are you doing?"

"I'm just about to leave to go study with some friends. I just wanted to say hi. I'll call you later, okay?"

"Okay. What have you been eating? Are you cooking? Do you need money to buy groceries?" Wei is normally a slow and paced talker, but she finds her words clumsily stumbling over each other, rushing to get out.

“Yeah, school’s been good. I have to go, Mom, I’m sorry, I’ll call you back later! I love you!” The call abruptly ends, and Wei finds herself looking at the colorful apps crowding her phone screen. She feels a pang in her rib, but doesn’t know why.

“Busy is a good thing,” she murmurs to herself, putting her gardening gloves back on. Sweat slides down the back of her neck as she methodically checks each plant for signs of decay.



Later that day, Wei receives a text from Brian. It’s a link to a YouTube video.

Reminds me of you. Talk to you soon. Love you Mom!

Wei sends back an emoji of a child and a mother. She adds many hearts for good measure.

I will watch. I love you Brian! I hope you are feeling okay and not sad.

The YouTube video is of a young adult Asian stand-up comic, maybe mid-twenties or early thirties. He’s presumably imitating his parents using a thick Chinese accent. His pitch is sharp and grating as he performs his bit.

“You get a B in school? What can you do with B? Be homeless? No rice for you!” He howls to a roaring crowd.

Wei is perplexed. How could this remind Brian of her? She had always seen herself as a lax and understanding parent. Aubrey and Brian are? English and business majors, respectively. She never pushed them to go into science, math, or engineering. In fact, she is seen as the laughingstock of her extended family for not doing so. She scrolls through related videos, trying to understand Brian’s train of thought.

Hard knock wife, reads the title of a stand-up bit. The comic is a pregnant Asian woman with red cat-eye glasses. *How can that be possible?* Wei wonders. She clicks it.

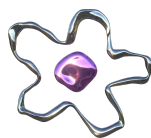
“I thought breastfeeding was supposed to be this beautiful bonding ceremony where I would feel like I was sitting on a lily pad in a meadow where bunnies would gather at my feet,” the comic starts in a low tone. There are light, anticipatory chuckles from the audience.

“NO! It just reminds you that your body is a cafeteria now. My nipples look like fingers - you can spin DVDs on them!” she shrieks, stomping her feet.

Wei suppresses a smile at the obscenities. She remembers fickle, colicky Brian - whose screams pierced through the drywall of their tiny apartment in Saratoga. His temperament frightened Aubrey - who was normally a demure and happy toddler - so badly that she would go as pale as a sheet before beginning to cry herself.

“Ali Wong,” Wei murmurs to herself. There are a dozen similar videos in the sidebar from the same comic. With the same dry, sarcastic humor, Wong dismantles the saintly image of motherhood with the precision of a neurosurgeon. Wei didn’t really know that such a critique was possible, and delivered in such an appetizing way. Completely absorbed and a bit baffled, Wei clicks the next video, and the next, until the day is gone. Patrick texts her from his office.

What’s for dinner? It reads. Wei gets up to wash the rice.



Wei began to consume stand-up like her life depended on it. It was on while she did laundry, gardened, cleaned, or cooked. In the beginning, she would giggle quietly to herself, but slowly she found it hard to suppress her laughter. Because the laundry room was next to

the office, Patrick took it upon himself to bang on the wall while Wei was doubled over and howling with laughter, her laundry pile neglected and unfinished.

“Are your shows funny?” Wei asks Patrick one day at dinner. He is scrolling through the comments of a new Chinese show he found on YouTube.

“No,” he answers, perplexed. “It’s a romance about concubines that want to marry the king while he is in love with the others, including the queen.”

Wei contemplates this over the steamed egg she had made. “That doesn’t sound very interesting.”

Patrick turns red. “And the shows you watch in the laundry room are better, huh?”

Wei says nothing as she wraps the leftover dishes in foil.



I really like the video you sent me. I have watched a lot more since then. I think the comedian you sent me is a bit mediocre. You should check these out instead. Wei texts Brian, linking the videos she’d been watching.

Recently, she began writing routines herself. They are mainly quips and jabs about the monotony of motherhood. Although her pieces aren’t fleshed out like the ones she watched on YouTube, she enjoys the process of creating the set-up and punchline. She couldn’t really describe the process of creation - the closest thing to it would be a deep exhale. By the end of the week, she had written eight pages of jokes. They are mostly a couple lines, with the longest story being a paragraph of five lines.

“The laundry is piling up,” Patrick complains.

“I’ll do it tomorrow in the morning,” Wei responds from her computer.

“What’s so important on the computer, anyway?” Patrick grumbles, closing the door to his office.



“Is that all for you today, miss?” The grocery store clerk smiles toothily at her. Her braided, auburn hair reminds Wei of the Wendy’s girl.

“Yes, thank you,” Wei responds, stuffing her groceries into the bags she brought from home. There is a red, rectangular sticker plastered on the side of the cash register.

OPEN MIC NIGHTS! Bring your friends, have a laugh. Every Wednesday 9PM @ Joe’s.

Wei pauses bagging her cantaloupes. “Excuse me, miss? Do you know anything about that?” she says, jabbing her finger at the sticker.

“Oh, yeah! There’s an open mic night for amateur comedians. You should check it out, it’s actually really fun to watch.” She reaches underneath the counter, pulling out a flier with an identical design. Turning it over to reveal a map to the bar, she circles the directions in black Sharpie and hands it to Wei with a smile. Wei smiles back bashfully, taking the flier and hurrying to her car.

As she pulls out of the lot, she can’t help but smile. How illicit it all felt!



“Where are you going?” Patrick says as Wei grabs her keys from the shelf in their living room. He seems more baffled than critical, although Wei senses the judgment dripping from

his words.

She's already prepared for this confrontation.

"I'm dropping off some sweets for the neighbors. I'll be back quickly," she says, pulling out some pastries from her bag.

Patrick snorts and returns to his phone.



The bar is actually a crowded pub tucked away in the outskirts of the city. As Wei parks her car, she sees drunken men stumbling around outside, waving bottleneck beers. Wei hasn't drunk in a long time - maybe in over twenty years. She does some breathing exercises to suppress her nerves before entering the bar.

You're just here to watch.

She takes a seat at an empty table.

The announcer is a middle-aged Caucasian man in an olive green polo and brown khakis. Wei assumes he's the owner of the bar.

"Alright, alright! It's Joe's Amateur Night again! Get ready to see your favorite local comedians fail - or fly - right here on stage! Let's give a big drumroll to -" he checks the list in his hand, "The one, the only, Big Gordon!"

Big Gordon, a stout man in his forties, takes the stage. The crowd hollers in support.

"So, I recently moved from the city to the suburbs," he starts. "It's been really interesting so far, if your hobbies include watching grass grow. Oh, and the local drama? Susan didn't

edge her lawn properly, and now HOA is gonna get her ass!”

Wei can't suppress her laughter. As comic after comic took the stage, she found herself enraptured - even by the ones that bombed.



When Wednesday rolled around again, Wei stared at the marked date on her calendar circled in red. The act of writing has been liberating, but what she really wants is to perform. She loves watching the control of a comic over the crowd, easing them into their next emotion through cleverly structured punchlines.

She had texted Aubrey a few of her jokes a few days ago in an attempt to gauge a response. Aubrey had hearted the message. *You have real talent, Mom! I really like it.* Wei felt a warm gush of appreciation for her eldest daughter.

I'll go tonight. Wei decides firmly. *It'll be a learning experience, no matter what happens.*

As she leaves, Patrick glances up at her dubiously from the couch.

“Where are you going? The neighbors need pastries again?” he snapped.

“Need some groceries for dinner tomorrow. I'll be very quick.” For some reason, Wei is hesitant to reveal the truths about her excursions.



Like last week, the bar is packed with drunken viewers and amateur comics. Smoky haze fills the air. Wei almost considers buying a drink.

“I would like to participate in open mic night,” she says to the bartender.

“Open mic night?” he stares at her, a bit baffled, before handing over the sign-up sheet. She writes her name neatly and returns it, sitting down at a table and reviewing the material she had printed out.

As she waits her turn, blustering, drunken men stumble through makeshift routines on stage. The crowd laughs, but she can tell it is directed more at the state of the comedian rather than the material itself. Her palms are slick with sweat as she goes over her jokes again and again, waiting with anticipation for the announcer to call her name.

“Wee Shy? Wee Shay?” the announcer says, squinting at the paper. He is white with a huge, red nose. He reminds Wei of Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer, and how she would convince Aubrey and Brian that it was a true story.

Wei hurriedly stuffs the papers in her bag, her heels clicking as she climbs the stairs to the mic.

“Good evening, everyone,” she says, cringing at the feedback of the cheap mic. It’s like a blanket was thrown over the bar-goers. There is a hush that falls over the crowd. The crowd’s attention is on Wei, and only Wei.

“My children never call,” she starts. “My eldest daughter can barely cook an egg, and my second son is always crying over something or other.” She pauses, waiting for the introduction to sink in. She can see some people are straining to hear her. *Have to work on projecting my voice*, she mentally notes.

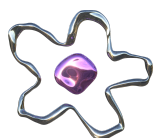
“Well, when they finally do call, the first thing I say is I am glad you are fucking alive! I guess I have to cancel the funerals I scheduled for the weekend! Another thing - where did you find my phone number? Was it right next to all your missing socks and dirty laundry? If a

two-minute phone call is too long for you, I cannot even imagine how your girlfriend or boyfriend might feel about your performance in bed.”

She waits, feeling the perspiration sliding down the back of her neck.

The bar-goers look at her incredulously. Then, they explode into laughter. Some are doubled over, just like how Wei is in the laundry room.

Wei beams, gripping the mic. She finishes her routine to the chagrin in the crowd. They love her. They really, really love her.



Patrick is waiting for her when she gets back from the bar. At first, Wei doesn't notice him. He's sitting in an armchair in their living room. The lights are all off.

“Welcome home,” he says. His voice is uncharacteristically lighthearted. Wei knows he's feigning. “Where did you go?”

“To the bar to perform my stand-up routine,” she answers simply, slipping off her shoes. She is tired, and looking forward to her bath.

“STOP LYING TO ME!” Patrick roars, jumping to his feet. He flicks the light on, revealing her mangled computer at his feet. Immediately, Wei falls to her knees, cradling the remnants of her laptop.

Everything is in here. Her mind scrambles, looking for a ledge, footing, something to hold, something to ground herself. She tries her breathing exercises as she rocks back and forth. *I can rewrite this. I can rewrite this.* She begins to cry softly. *I can't rewrite this.*

“I know you’re cheating on me,” Patrick sneers, kicking the laptop out of her hands. “You don’t think I would start to notice? You’re in there night and day, tapping on the computer. You think I’m stupid? That I wouldn’t realize?” He starts laughing as Wei weeps. “You really think I’m stupid. Now, you’ll have to work for another laptop.”

He leaves for his office.

Wei tries to piece her computer back together through her tears.



“That’s the last of it,” Brian says, breathing heavily. Aubrey is fixing the tilt of a painting in the living room. The movers had left hours ago, and the children were attending to the finishing touches of the apartment.

“It looks good,” Wei says, hugging them tightly. “Thank you, guys. It looks great.”

“Of course, Mom,” Aubrey responds. “How’s work?”

“Work is good. There were a lot of customers the other day. I like to talk to them. A lot of them have interesting and funny stories,” Wei says.

“They’re not working you too hard?” Brian quips, stretching out on the couch.

“No. I don’t have to return the carts. I think that is the hardest part. Are you guys coming to the show tonight?”

“Yes!” Aubrey and Brian say in unison.

Wei is excited for her children to finally see one of her routines. She’s been working on it for months, and she thinks that it will impress them. She’s the happiest she’s been in a long

while.

fault lines

Your father is a brilliant man.

These are words that have followed me throughout my life. Tipsy professors struggling to put on their shoes in the entranceway of our townhouse. Eager students sitting next to me as I colored pages during his office hours. Faculty stopping him in the halls trying to glean some insight from the legend himself. I would squeeze his hand impatiently as they chatted him up in hopes that a little bit of the genius would rub off on them.

His career trajectory was neat and spoke for itself: physics at MIT, Harvard, then CalTech. Hundreds of research contributions and publications. A couple theorems named after him. A breakthrough so momentous that he was tapped as a candidate for *Time's* Person of the Year. So many awards that only a quarter of them were displayed in his office, the rest shoved underneath my parents' bed in a cardboard box. Of course, he chose physics' most glamorous concentration - nuclear. Why?

Because I liked the shape of the elephant's foot.

Such a cryptic, theatrical answer from such an unassuming man.

I grew up on Plainview University's campus in Indiana. My father was offered a position as their dean of engineering, alongside a fat grant to do what he loved. It was a simple

upbringing. Mostly, it was my mother and I at our townhouse close to campus. We would play games and read books, but never watch TV.

She devoted her life to me. Sometimes, I would catch her looking at me like I was a little doll come to life, and that she couldn't believe that I was real. She was keenly attuned to my interests. When I took an interest in drawing, paints, canvases, and brushes appeared on the dining table the next day. When we went to the zoo, I flippantly suggested that I wanted to be a zookeeper in the future. We drove to the bookstore right after to buy *The Encyclopedia of Animals*, with a stuffed tiger to match. When I fell in love with the piano, she sat in on all my lessons, giving me a standing ovation after every piece. After many iterations of this, my instructor barred her from sitting in.

My father wasn't home often, and would work on campus into the late hours of the night. I used to think my mother's fiery temper and harsh discipline was a result of her missing his presence acutely while I was growing up. Looking back, she probably didn't want me to end up like her - a driven, quick-witted woman whose talents withered away as she played house in Indiana.

At seventeen, my mother left behind an impoverished family in Fujian, China, to pursue physics at Caltech. At nineteen, she was granted the opportunity to do research for world-renowned physicist Arthur Hill - a man almost fifteen years her senior. At twenty-two, she graduated with a degree in physics, a husband, and unbeknownst to her, a child. She wanted to pursue academia too. But nobody would ever address her as Dr. Lian Zhang. Instead, she became Mrs. Arthur Hill. She might as well have been one of the dusty, untouched textbooks in my father's study.



One winter day in his wood-paneled office, I told him that I didn't want to go into the sciences. I was an artist at heart - I wanted to pursue music and writing. My father wasn't livid. Thirty years of teaching will make you a patient man. Plus, I was an only child when my father's savings could comfortably support ten.

At eighteen, I left for Barnard. My mother cried and my father didn't.

"Be the best that you can possibly be," he said.

"Please don't party and die," my mother sobbed.

Four years flew by quickly. I made a lot of friends, broke some hearts, and got my own broken more times than I could count. I had decided I wanted to eventually teach piano at a conservatory.

I graduated from Barnard with little fanfare. My parents didn't attend. My father cited his research as his excuse. I was unfazed. It was in my mother's character to stay back with him, as she was terrified of traveling alone. Nothing could bring me down - my future was bright and unfettered. Maybe I would take a gap year and travel a bit on my parents' dime. I made a list of all the things I wanted to see on my flight back to Indiana.

As soon as I landed, I was perplexed to be greeted solely by my father. He wrapped me in a tight hug, a gesture unlike him. When he pulled away, I could see the worry lines creasing his aging face.

"Your mother had an episode," he started. My heart dropped to my stomach. "And she's been missing for the past three days. I didn't want to ruin your graduation. I'm sorry."



That was a month ago. According to my father, they had an argument about a topic he can't recall. She stormed out with her purse containing her wallet, keys, and passport. The car was not missing, but she took public transit frequently so this was not unusual. He had looked up and down Plainview both on foot and in a car. No sign of her. After the fifth hour had passed, he called the police.

When a wife goes missing, the first suspect is her husband. I can sense my father's paranoia, but sympathize as my mother's unpredictable moods had ruled over her all her life. This wasn't out of character for her. I can picture it so clearly, driving by some random park and seeing her sitting rigidly on a bench wrapped up in her own thoughts. These are the images that motivate me. I know finding her was only a matter of time. I know my father feels the same way, even if the stoic academic in him doesn't let him show it.

Nowadays, my routine is monotonous to prevent the days from bleeding together. I usually wake up at seven in the morning, frantically checking my phone for a fateful text that would confirm where she was. Although I had never been big on social media, I made accounts on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and more with the handle "findlianhill" with the very few photos I have of her. The case picked up a lot of traction on the internet. People loved to sink their teeth into a missing person's case because they can spin their own narratives. I grit my teeth and remind myself all publicity is good publicity. I just don't open the comments anymore.

The lead investigator of my mother's case is a burly Caucasian man with a shaved head in his mid-thirties. His name is David Clark.

"Pick a good, recent photo of your mother. Good lighting, minimal makeup, no editing. Post it everywhere you can," was his advice to me.

I painstakingly chose a picture that I thought represented her best. There weren't many to choose from, but one struck me immediately as I rifled through my parents' photo albums. It was a headshot taken by my father during her Caltech days. Her sharp, narrow black eyes held an intense storm of emotion, piercing through me like knives. Her mouth, soft and barely parted, conveyed the sheepishness and deference of a scared, little girl who left everything she knew for a foreign land. This contrast captured her perfectly.

The next day, I pushed the print towards the detective.

"This one."



"I still don't understand how you let her run away."

"Trina, I didn't *let* her run away. Stop phrasing it like that. You know how your mother gets when she's in a mood," my father says, stabbing a piece of the overcooked chicken breast I had made for dinner. We're opposite each other at the dining room table. I'm sitting where my mother usually does.

"She's never been gone for more than a day."

"You've been gone for four years. What makes you think you know her better than I do?" my father snaps, throwing his fork down and pushing his chair away from the table. He storms into his study, the door slamming behind him.

I scrape the rest of the chicken into the trash.



The first time I witnessed my mother having an episode was at my tenth birthday party. As she brought out the cake, she tripped over a ball in the grass that I had left out. The cake flew comically in the air before creating a creamy mess in the grass. The guests, my father's colleagues and their kids, stifled their laughter. The corners of her mouth twitched upwards, a feign at nonchalance, before her face contorted and tears welled in her eyes. She stormed into the house, slamming the screen door behind her. I heard her sobs and screams from the yard.

I remember the grimace on my father's face, and the flash of annoyance that followed. Nobody followed her into the house, not even me.



As I pull my car into the lot, I see a ladybug land on the corner of my windshield.

Mom? I shake my head. Suppress it.

I open the door. A bell rings, announcing my arrival.

“Hello, sweetheart, how can I help you today?” The lady working is kind and soft, with crow's feet that made deep crevices in her skin.

“Hi. My mom is Lian Hill. You've probably heard. She went missing recently. I've been checking the women's shelters. So far, nothing. Just wondering if she's ever made an appointment here?”

“Oh my, you're Trina Hill? I read about your mother on Nextdoor. Such a tragic case,” she says, making a *tsk* sound. She types rapidly on the monitor. “Usually we don't do this, but for the Hills I'll make an exception.”

“Her surname is actually ‘Zhang.’”

She looks up at me. “Is that what you want me to enter?”

“Try both, maybe?”

There’s nothing under either. I curse the ladybug.

“Tell Arthur I send my deepest condolences.” I can’t do anything but nod.



I knew my mother didn’t have many friends in Plainview, but I didn’t know she didn’t have *any* friends in Plainview. I recently had begun a search party initiative, and found it hard to rally people that I thought might recognize her. Most of the people who had reached out to me on social media were simply good Samaritans, or friends of my father.

“What did she do when I was gone? Like did she hang out with anyone?”

“I don’t know, Trina. I was always at work.” My father rubs his temples. “I was always at the lab.” His leg bounces up and down, and he pushes the fish I made tonight around on his plate. I can tell he’s agitated.

“They put Mom in the missing persons database today.”

“I know. Clark emailed me last night.”

“I talked to him today. I think they’re launching an investigation into you soon.”

He looks up. His glasses are crooked, and his eyes bloodshot.

“Probably. There aren’t any other leads,” he sighs. “It’s fine. It’ll be a waste of time, but it’s fine. It’s just their job.” He gets up, scraping his food into the trash.



There weren’t any Asian grocery stores in Plainview. When I was younger, we’d take public transit all around the city looking for one. I would nap in her lap between stops, the jolts of the bus lulling me to sleep. She’d wake me up by gently patting my hair.

“We’re here, Trina. Mommy will cook Chinese food for you,” she cooed, poking my soft stomach.

“I want chicken nuggets,” I whined, swatting her hand away. “Daddy makes me chicken nuggets. I want Daddy!”

“Mommy didn’t eat chicken nuggets when she was your age, and she grew big and strong.”

“Mommy isn’t strong,” I scoffed. She looked at me like I had hit her.

“Mommy has been alone for a long time,” she said softly. “Mommy is very strong.”



A couple days later, the Plainview Police Department officially launched their investigation against my father on the basis of a weak alibi. When he found out, he simply ran a hand through his thinning white hair, shrugging his shoulders.

“They’re just doing their job,” he told me. “It’ll blow over soon.”

On my daily scrolls through social media, I find out that Plainview is up in arms over my father's investigation. The local paper broke the news via Facebook, and a steady stream of comments in defense of him had been trickling in since the article went up.

Disgraceful. Targeting a grieving husband to hide the fact they have no leads.

WTF?? This is insane. Shame on PPD!

theres no way this is legal

JUSTICE FOR PROFESSOR HILL!!!!

Plainview university stands with prof hill

I scroll and scroll. No mention of my mother. Not a single sympathetic comment hoping she'll be found soon. Just strangers empathizing with the imagined emotional turmoil my dad might've been going through. I close the page and go back to organizing the volunteer search party.



I wake up in a panic. I check the clock. It's five in the morning.

Try to sleep. The search party is tomorrow. You'll need energy.

I close my eyes, willing my heart to stop thumping in my chest. It only grows louder, faster.

Try to sleep-

I get up. There's a box of my mother's things in the living room. Sometimes, I'll rifle through it for comfort.

I turn on my iPhone flashlight and make my way down the old, wooden steps. I curse my father for moving to Plainview, for his fame, for his narcissism, for his selfishness in shutting me out when I need him most. I feel tears welling up in my eyes. I blink them away. Tears won't do anything for me, not when there's a ghost living inside my chest.

Turning off the flashlight, I get on my hands and knees and start rummaging through the box. I'm looking for her favorite purple scarf. Something she's had since before Caltech. An item that's entirely her's, and not connected in some way to physics or my dad. During my search, my hand brushes over something that feels like leather.

Leather? Maybe a belt?

I pull it out. It feels like a small book. A journal, maybe. My heart slams against my chest. Maybe she wrote down where she was going. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

I'm sick of this chase. I want my mom back.

Breathing heavily, I turn on the flashlight.

It was her passport.

My breath turns ragged. I grip the sides of the box, feeling myself blanche. My stomach turns in on itself, threatening to release its contents.

No no no NO NO NO NONONONO...

My father had been adamant she had taken her keys, passport, and wallet. Keys, passport, wallet. Keys, passport, wallet. Things that quietly insinuated that it was possible she had fled the country.

I dump the contents of the box on the floor. Her whole life, packed in a box. I frantically search through the items. The tears come hot and fast. My hands throw things aside in search of what I know is there. I am disconnected from my body, like I'm watching things unfold from the ceiling.

My hand touches metal. Keys. Keys, passport, wallet.

I push over another photo album, and there it is. Wallet. Keys, passport, wallet.

My father is guilty.



It's been a few months since my father's arrest. Although keys in a box aren't enough to convict someone of murder, a discovery in the creek by our townhouse weeks later would suffice.

Today, I am on a mission. The drive to Plainview University is short and scenic. It's the beginning of fall semester, and classes are in full swing. College students hustle to and from class. Some are stressed, others more carefree as they chat and laugh with their friends. The chill of winter looms over the horizon, but hasn't quite marred the spirit of summer just yet.

When I reach the physics building, it's exactly how I remember it to be. I can see my mom marching up the steps with me on her hip on my father's first day of work. There is a glimmer of envy in her eye, a desperate prayer in her head that this won't be my life.

The fluorescent lights hum above me as I make my way to his office. There is no name plate. It's like the building is hanging its head in shame. I push the door. To my surprise, it gives.

The interior is empty, save a blue paper clip by the wastebasket. I run my hands over the large, wooden desk.

The other day, I found a paper that my mother had authored tucked away in my father's study. Some physics mumbo-jumbo that I will never understand.

Investigating neutron capture cross sections of radioactive nuclei. Lian Zhang. Physics 120.

After placing the paper on the desk, I leave.