

1

Before the party Pat spent an hour crying in her bedroom—her and Harry’s room, their old room—and used up a stick of concealer trying to hide the crinkled half-moons under her eyes. She left the girls with the neighbors. She put on lipstick. At the party she asked Sam Kwan for a light.

It was a cold October night in 1974. They smoked back then, everybody did. This was before Pat’s two children became Sam’s and before there were three children, before they grounded the oldest when Pat found a pack of Newports in her room. By then they would have forgotten their own youth, or rather, they would hold their children to higher standards. The children would be confident and happy—they’d feel entitled to happiness—and for that Pat and Sam would resent them.

Pat told Sam she used to live in the city, but now she lived in Jersey. Some friends had invited her to the party, so she’d driven out to her old neighborhood in Queens. “Where I live,” she said, “it’s like the country, but there’s a train to the city.”

Sam told Pat he lived in Brooklyn and never went to New Jersey. “It must be nice to have trees and grass.”

The apartment was a dump, the room too hot and crowded, the moss-green carpet balding in patches, like a neglected lawn. To the right of the sunken couch was a folding table with a paper plate of pretzel crumbs, a six-pack of beer, and a plastic jug of deli gin.

“What’s the guy’s name that lives here?” Pat asked in Cantonese.

Sam recognized the words and said, “I have no idea. My friend Ben invited me.”

Sam’s laugh was a joyful bark, and Pat thought she saw, through his thick eyeglasses, the glint of a troublemaker.

The music surged. Annabelle Uy leapt off the couch and started shaking her hips, rear end plump and wide like a bakery bun.

“Dance, Pat, dance,” Annabelle shouted, pointing to Pat, and Pat looked at Sam and he shrugged—why not.

Even if she didn’t care that much about dancing, Sam’s willingness to do so made him more appealing. They danced, not terribly, but not particularly well. Their shoulders remained hunched, feet rooted to the floor. Their arms swung slowly but they moved closer to one another.

PAT + SAM BY LISA KO

The next day Pat's mother called and said, "I don't know how you do it, all alone in that big house with two little children. All alone and nobody to help you. I don't see why you can't move back to Chicago already."

"All right, Ma," Pat said. "I met someone."

"Who?"

"He's Chinese. We're going out next Saturday."

"Oh?"

"He has a good job. And he knows all about the kids and Harry."

"And he's still talking to you? There must be something wrong with him."

"Nothing's wrong with him!"

"But he'll want his own house."

"He likes New Jersey. He thinks it's nice."

Her mother made a pleased, cooing sound.

2

He had never been with a woman longer than four months, and that was years ago, in Hong Kong, with a girl named Helen whose voice could peel the skin off babies. Sam was just her type; locked up, quiet-angry, a kid who had lived in ten different homes after his father left and his mother went to find work in Singapore. In Hong Kong he had wanted to be a musician. He put on his one good outfit and went to the Sunday afternoon tea dances when he could afford it, screamed and danced to The Lotus belting out I'll be waiting I'll be waiting I'll be waiting, the chorus pressing into him like a thumb against a vein. He could strum a guitar and keep a beat but that's as far as his music dreams went. His high school teachers said engineering was the way to get a student visa, so he put engineering on his application and Nebraska gave him a full scholarship. After four long years in Omaha he boarded a bus for New York, watched the flat fields of the Midwest bump by as if they were unspooling toilet paper, ready to flush down the drain.

New York was a platter of girls: towering blondes with custard tits, smooth-skinned babes with sultry lips. When Sam talked it felt like his words were criss-crossing in the air, scrambled before they landed. Things that sounded fine in his mind left his mouth and entered women's ears in

some garbled syntax. “Nice dress,” he said, and they looked at him like he’d groped them on the subway. “Buy you a drink?” They’d recoil like he’d spit in theirs.

He went to record stores and jazz clubs and sat alone in the back. What they saw: A scrawny Chinese guy, barely any meat on his bones, five-foot-seven on a good day, Coke-bottle glasses, cheap clothes, an underfed accountant’s underfed accountant loser brother. They saw a man who couldn’t dance. They heard a man who couldn’t sing. But in his leaky water-balloon heart, Sam could sing and dance. In the apartment he shared with a rotating cast of roommates, he locked the door to his room and played records on his turntable, James Brown and Maceo Parker, Sly Stone. It felt like being unraveled.

I lost someone, my love
Someone who’s greater than the stars above
I wanna hear you scream!

He hadn’t lost a love like that. His father—that was a loss, but not of a real person, only the idea of father. Yet there was always a feeling of incompleteness, a reaching for, a wanting of. Some thread left unstitched. The missing chunk. Late at night in his room, he dreamt of meeting a woman who would understand all of that, who’d be able to listen to music and feel the notes crawl up her spine, who would sing along, who would dance with him, who would leave him alone.

His buddy Ben lived with a girl named Lily in a studio apartment in Chinatown that smelled like overcooked eggs, both of them skinny enough that they’d sometimes share clothes. The idea of living with a girl seemed as improbable to Sam as waking up on the moon. Shacking up, Ben called it. He cheated on Lily with a college girl who wore matching dresses, shoes, and panties and a rich jook-sing with a Pomeranian that slept in her bed and woke him up by licking his toes. “We’re too young to be tied down,” Ben told Sam, and Sam pictured himself splayed out on his back, limbs spread, hands and feet tied snugly to four posts in the ground, Helen from Hong Kong triple knotting the ropes.

Pat was a woman with very little curve to her, smooth hips and flat ass, dark hair permed into a frizzy halo. Behind rounded red frames, her eyes were wet and giant, her nose and mouth miniature. She had the look of a doll owl. Doll owl, Sam thought, turning the words around in his mouth.

“Fire me up.” Those were the first words she said to him, the sentence he would later see as the spark; or, on worse days, the culprit.

She wanted a light—she wanted to be fired up.

On the night of her and Sam's first official date, Pat had already spoken on the phone to her mother and Annabelle Uy.

"Make sure you look good for once," her mother said. "It wouldn't kill you to put on a little make-up and wear a dress. Wear heels because you're such a little shrimp. But not too-high heels. Remember, you don't want to be taller than the man. You haven't gained any weight, have you?"

Annabelle said, "I asked Jack Ng who asked Ben Chan who said that Sam was quiet but a stand-up guy. But really? You gotta watch out for those quiet ones. He must like you if he's going all the way out to New Jersey. Watch out!"

Pat was dressed in red slacks and a cream-colored, V-neck blouse, curls sprayed tight, mascara and eyeliner carefully applied. Sam was arriving on the six o'clock train. Lynette and Cynthia were wearing corduroys and turtlenecks, hair pulled into long pigtails. The Mulligans up the block were out of town, the Antonicellis already had plans for the night, and Pat didn't know anyone else in Warwick, so she told the girls they were going out for dinner with a friend.

When Sam asked her out she thought they could see each other just this one time, and then she'd never have to tell him about Harry and the girls.

"Can we have pizza?" Cynthia asked.

"We'll see," said Pat. "Behave yourselves, we're the guests."

At Romeo's they got looks. The barn-shaped pizzeria was noisy, the air heavy with grease. There were a few empty tables but the waitress told Sam and Pat to wait, and they stood in a small corner space by the door, the girls droopy and shivering with their backs pressed against a cigarette machine. Each time the door opened, it brought in more cold air. Family after family came in, spoke to the waitress, waited until their names were called, and sat down. Sam and Pat watched as those families flipped through menus and placed orders. When the waitress brought out a pepperoni pie and a pitcher of soda, Cynthia tugged at Pat's coat and said, "Why aren't we eating yet?"

Twenty minutes had passed and her stomach was growling. Sam's face was creased and tight. He shook his head and pushed his way to the waitress. "Why are we still waiting?" He pointed to Cynthia and Lynette. "Children are waiting." It sounded like he was shouting.

The waitress had a nose like a soft banana, a small pouch of fat under her otherwise thin face. She was taller than Sam, and as he shouted at her, she took a step back.

"We haven't been seated. You seated those families first, and they came in after us." Sam pointed to the family eating the pepperoni pie, then back at the waitress, jabbing a finger.

The waitress looked at him as if he was in speaking another language. "Pardon me?"

Pat wanted Sam to punch the waitress. She wanted to punch the waitress herself. Sam stood there, glaring, his hands shoved into his coat pockets.

"Say something," Pat whispered.

Sam said nothing. She felt relieved that he didn't make a scene. How would she have explained it to the girls? Maybe they had imagined everything, maybe there really weren't any tables available, maybe all the families that came in after them were close relatives of the waitress and they were just being paranoid.

"Let's go," Sam said. It was a command, a bark. Without looking back, he kicked the door open and walked out. Pat waited to see if he'd return or open the door for her, but he didn't. She took the girls' hands and pushed the door open herself.

Sam stood in the parking lot with his fists balled. "Those fuckers."

"Don't yell. You're scaring the girls."

"They think they can walk all over us!"

Pat took out her car keys and wondered if she could ever return to Romeo's. "They're not all that bad."

He took out a pack of cigarettes. "Want one?"

"I don't smoke around the girls."

Sam put the pack back into his pocket. The girls climbed into the backseat and stared at him. Pat wanted to give them a hug.

Cynthia said, "I'm hungry."

4

Trees were different in New Jersey, bigger, more colorful. The train had rolled past houses with single-car garages, three-block downtowns, stores with awnings, even an official town clock. Pat had said on the phone to look out for the green Beetle, and he spotted it when he got off in Warwick, the only car in the lonely parking lot with its lights on. Two little girls sat in the backseat, watching him.

PAT + SAM BY LISA KO

“These are my daughters. Lynette and Cynthia. Say hello to Sam.”

“Hello,” the children chorused.

Sam’s brain was flipping through the possibilities. Who were these children? Was this a set-up? Pat didn’t wear a wedding ring; she had agreed to the date. Should he get out of the car before her husband returned and kicked his ass all the way back to Brooklyn?

She put her hand on top of his. It was small and warm, clammy with sweat.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say anything earlier. I didn’t know how. My husband, Harry, well, my ex-husband, he passed away.”

“I’m so sorry.”

The girls were silent.

“It was almost a year ago.”

Only? Almost? “I’m sorry.”

Pat clapped her hands together and turned on the ignition. “I couldn’t get a sitter for tonight,” she said in Cantonese.

Sam looked at her, then towards the back seat.

“They don’t understand,” Pat said. “Their father was jook-sing, Chinese but born in America.”

“Oh?”

“We met in Queens.”

“Oh.”

“Are we going for pizza?” one of girls asked. “Do you like pizza?”

“I love pizza,” Sam said, switching back to English, even though eating cheese gave him stomach cramps.

At Romeo’s he wished they were in the city, where there were other Chinese, and later he would feel that he had backed down too easily, that he should’ve gone back inside and let the waitress know they couldn’t mess with him. He wondered if, in not doing so, he had let Pat down.

Pat drove them to another pizzeria and they ordered a pie to go, brought it back to the house, and ate it at the kitchen table. The girls drank sodas, Pat and Sam beers. The scene at Romeo's receded, somewhat. Sam was surprised at how large the house was on the inside. The ceilings were tall, and the fluffy shag carpet clean and warm. The kitchen was twice the size of his rented room, and the windows faced a tree-filled back yard. He walked around the living room full of hanging plants and children's toys and looked at framed photos on the fireplace mantle. The jook-sing husband was in some of them, and Sam noted that he wasn't too tall, although he was good-looking, with hard, chiseled features and wiry hair. The girls took after him.

There was a picture of Pat and the jook-sing husband smiling in front of a small Christmas tree strung with so much tinsel it was if the tree had metallic hair. They wore matching red plaid pants. Had this been the jook-sing husband's last Christmas? He didn't look sick. Sam looked at his deceased competition—for now he had put himself into the running—and Pat began to take on a new shape, that of a steely, vulnerable survivor. Someone who'd been wanted, before.

Then she was standing next to him. "I'm sorry," she said. "This isn't much of a date."

Sam wanted to scoop her into his chest. "It's okay." He reached over and put an arm around her shoulders, patting her at regular intervals.

"His name was Harry," she said, "and he died in a car accident."

5

Sam washed the dishes as Pat put the girls to bed. In the bathroom mirror, dark circles beneath her eyes were emerging like storm clouds, and she decided he had only asked her out because he was being kind. She brushed her tongue with her toothbrush to scrub off the cheese taste and walked downstairs. She would drop Sam off at the train station and go to sleep and wake up at six-thirty, get the girls off to Warwick Elementary and get herself to the lawyers' office on Route 17 where she worked as a paralegal—two exits south of where Harry had died—and pick the girls up from school, fix dinner, mediate when Cynthia pinched Lynette and Lynette cried, plant them in front of the television, hug them when they said they missed Daddy, and fall asleep in her work clothes at nine o'clock. She would think again about selling the house and moving back to Queens.

The kitchen was empty and the back door open. Sam was in the middle of the yard, looking at the sky. The shadows lent him solidity. His zip-up jacket was old and cheap looking but it gave him the appearance of heft. For a moment she wondered who this man was and what he was doing in her yard. Pat walked towards him, the leaves damp beneath her boots. She would have to rake them; she had never raked leaves in her life.

“I’m smelling the sky,” he said. “It smells good, the fresh air.”

“Maybe you’re not a city type after all. Maybe you belong in New Jersey.”

“Maybe,” he said, and as they studied each other through their glasses he leaned down an inch, she up an inch, and they made out like teenagers. He felt less flimsy than he looked, his hands gripping her waist, and when her mouth opened and closed she was surprised by how promptly she was turned on, how acutely she wanted more.

6

When you start to hope, then comes the danger. You begin to think that love is like song lyrics, and then you’re in trouble.

He listened to too much music and he wanted too much—a deep gnawing, a terrible hunger, an uppercut to the heart. He pictured himself standing at Pat’s doorway holding flowers in one hand and a bundle of records in the other. They could save one another from all the lonely days after lonely days.

He went to work at the drafting job he hated, marked up the Help Wanted ads, and slept fitfully in his room, thinking of dark backyards and big trees. In Pat’s backyard he had seen stars, shining so hard it was as if they were vibrating, quivering from the effort of producing all that light.

Riding the subway into Manhattan, Sam imagined being a father. He had no idea how to deal with children, never mind girls, the girls of the woman he was dating and a dead man. Walking through Midtown, he wondered if he was ready for the challenge—was he being challenged?—and his walk grew faster and stronger. Hadn’t he traveled across the world by himself? If the jook-sing husband could be a father, he could. In New Jersey there were no Chinese but the air was so clean. Not like Omaha, where open space was like strangling.

They fell into a routine. Pat picked him up at the train station on Sundays. Sam brought Lynette and Cynthia coloring books and asked them questions about their favorite TV shows. Pat told him about the accident and Sam said nothing because it scared him. He was simply listening to her, being supportive. He wondered if he could be satisfied being her second choice, if the jook-sing husband would have gone back inside the pizzeria, yet sometimes he thought that being second was better than not being a choice at all.

It would be easier if she didn’t have kids.

Pat had yet to visit him in Brooklyn, and he didn’t want to ask her, knowing it would be hard with the girls. But he wanted her to spend the night with him, to prove she was interested.

“I think you should come stay with me one night,” he said, after almost two months of Sunday visits. “I really think you need to.”

7

“So, did you make it with him yet?”

“What? Annabelle!”

“Did you, or didn’t you?”

“No!” Then Pat added, “Not yet.”

“Come on,” said Annabelle. “There’s no need to play the prude.”

“He’s come by six Sundays in a row,” Pat said.

Annabelle laughed. “Now it’s serious.”

Pat thought of the way her heart beat after she and Sam made out in the yard each Sunday, how they took their glasses off and looked at each other as if they were seeing new people. He looked bare, slippery, different.

“Maybe I’m falling in love?” she said.

Annabelle screeched and dropped the phone.

Her mother called and said, “Don’t push him away. You can’t be so picky at your age.”

Contrary to what her mother thought, Pat was still young, but she didn’t feel young. Still, Sam would be content with not knowing all the details that came before him. He wouldn’t ask.

He was still coming into focus for her. The lens would adjust, and on some days she would see him shaped into the same type of man as Harry, slim hips and swagger, all muscle, ready to fire. Harry and Pat had worked next door to one another in Queens. He did taxes. She did filing. It seemed like before she knew it, she had married him, given birth to two children, and moved out to New Jersey, envisioning life as a whimsical crapshoot, a leisurely canoe ride down a river on an endless summer afternoon, floating on a current that would take her wherever it pleased. She played along, believing that she didn’t have much of a choice, but she had chose Harry, she had chose him hard. There had been boyfriends before, mild-mannered boys that Pat

neither loved nor hated. But they had judged her passiveness to be disinterest and eventually backed away. Only Harry had seen it for what it was. An invitation. A cracked door.

She used to try to catch Harry in unguarded moments, look at him across the room as he ironed shirts in his boxer shorts, had to sit on her hands to stop herself from pushing herself into him. He had made her feel crazy and out of control, as if she'd wanted him until there was no want left in her.

Whoever came next would get the crumbs.

On other days, the lens would adjust and Sam's shape would recede, the lines of his body redrawn into another man, the illusion of cockiness fine-tuned into a shape Pat couldn't yet read.

The first time he saw her car in the daylight he asked her about the dent in the fender. She explained that it was a new car, the old one had been wrecked in the accident. The dented fender was from Pat's own accident.

"After he died I was so scared I couldn't drive on the highway. Then one day I took the car out and drove it into the pond in Warwick."

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe because he died, I was safe. Superstitious, you know?"

They were sitting at the kitchen table, their feet rubbing against one another. Pat put her hand against her mouth. Her breath wet her palm. She wanted to rewind and snatch back everything she'd just revealed.

Sam looked at her with confusion and pity. The minutes ticked by and he said nothing. He said nothing.

Pat removed her feet from his. Finally, he said, "Then what happened?"

"The car was a little banged up, but I wasn't hurt. I told everyone it was an accident, and they believed me." He put his arm around her and she felt so relieved she said, "I can get a sitter for next weekend."

At dinner in Manhattan Chinatown, Pat ate quickly and greedily. Afterwards, as they walked to Sam's apartment, she felt like a schoolgirl swinging hands with her boy. She belonged here! She was in love! She was so lucky to feel this way twice!

Don't be too proud, her mother used to tell her. A little proud is okay. Too much is not okay.

All Pat wanted was a less busy heart.

In Sam's apartment the floorboards slanted dramatically to the right, and the tiny living room held only a television set on a plastic crate and several plastic chairs. She imagined picking up his dirty beer bottles and dishes every night after work. His room was similarly small and bare, a twin mattress lying resigned in the corner, the floor coated in so much dirt that Pat was afraid to take off her shoes.

They sat on the mattress and kissed. Sam's mouth tasted like dinner. They kissed for a long time.

He got up and pulled a record from a stack of albums in the corner, placed it on the turntable that sat on an overturned cardboard box, and gently lowered the needle. The music began. It was strange music, some song she'd never heard before. It sounded like a man yelping, screaming words about losing someone.

"What do you think? Do you like it?" Sam's glasses were off, his face expectant.

"I don't know," Pat said. "It's so loud. So much screaming."

He looked disappointed, so she said, "Okay, then let's dance." They got up and danced in the space between the mattress and the wall. Pat giggled at how silly the scene was, the loud music, the sad room. Sam didn't laugh back. His face was still and serious.

No humor.

What was so serious about this shrieking music, anyway?

What was the big deal?

8

It was time to do it. It was over too soon. He was embarrassed.

She didn't understand his music. She hated his apartment. He'd seen the way her mouth pinched when she saw his room.

He hated her for that, and he hated himself for caring that the jook-sing husband had been able to buy her that huge house. Pat acted like she was too good for the city.

"Sam?"

She lay beside him, naked. He pulled the sheets over her, not wanting to see the paunch on her stomach, the floppy, ridiculous skin.

“Sam?” Pat asked again. He felt like he was being drowned. “Do you have a cigarette? Sam?”

Sam thought he was too young to be tied down, but that morning Ben had called from a pay phone in Lake Tahoe, where he was on a skiing trip. “We’re moving to California,” Ben announced. “I asked Lily to marry me and she said yes.”

Ben said it was time to make his real life start, and Sam said he hadn’t realized that what he’d been living wasn’t real life. When he put the phone down he realized that his early days in New York were over.

9

Pat exhaled smoke. The record player spun static. Sam was quiet, his hair sticking up in a cowlick. He curled away from her, breathing. Was he sleeping or only pretending to?

“You know, women sometimes take longer.”

She said it and knew she shouldn’t have. It was only their first time. It could get better. She said his name again, and he said nothing.

Outside, it was dark already. Pat heard a bus screech on the street, footsteps and voices in the next room. Four roommates, all single men. She had to use the bathroom, but she was trapped here until the roommates left.

The room was cold and she missed her girls. There were nights, alone with them in the house, that she thought she could do this life solo. It wasn’t so bad, just the three of them. On other nights, she felt like she was the only person left in the world, with two girls and a dead husband and nowhere to go, and she was so angry she wanted to smash the walls with an ax, throw chairs through the windows.

She dragged deeper on the cigarette, trying to outrun the sinking feeling. Her mother had said, “I’m so happy, I’m so relieved. I’m so happy you met a nice man.”

“Are you awake?” Pat asked now, in a last effort, and Sam didn’t respond. The space between them, imperceptible at first, became a sudden tear, threads popping from seams in one sure stroke.

But he was nice enough, she thought. He was a nice man.