

The Disappearing World

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(pp 7-47)

I always know immediately whether we're going to love each other. You know: true love. Things used to be different. A compliment might suffice. A glance of more than just three seconds, a casual touch, a belly laugh. Someone saying I was beautiful. Someone thinking I was something special. It used to take so little for me to conflate admiration with love. With age, I've come to recognize the difference between someone who looks at me and someone who really sees me.

I know that I'm beautiful. Perhaps it's no longer as obvious as it used to be, but I'm beautiful nonetheless. And I am most beautiful in the late afternoon sun when the shadows of the plane tree leaves dance over me and the fading light casts me in gentle gold. That's a good time for an initial encounter. Usually, I could tell when their heartbeat fluttered and their senses grew sharp. They were perceiving me for the first time, and it did not take more than a breath before they began to see us in union: They inside me and I, myself, around them. Every road led them to me. Calm but brimming with excitement. They wanted those dancing shadows on their faces, too. They forgot the rush, the urgency of their lives—paused for a moment—then continued on deliberately, as though leaving a piece of themselves behind with each further step toward me.

Each of them felt such a yearning for change. Which is why I had to change myself, as well. Most of them started by removing my outermost layers. Some with caution; others greedily. But all wished to undo the traces of those who came before them. They wanted to be my beginning, my protagonist. Nothing of them who had touched me before them should remain perceptible. Each wanted to go deeper, penetrate further, draw closer to the core they each believed encapsulated my true being.

"The human skin has seven layers," Victor said on the day of his departure, thrusting a fingernail like a dull knife below my outermost. And then his warm hands caressed the wound. He was the first to love me. For a long time, no other loved me as he had.

I permitted myself be loved: by the girl who curled up and whispered in the night that I had saved her. By the tailor with the rosy cheeks. The window fitter. The garden maid. All of them needed a place to plumb their depths, and I was satisfied by providing this for them. I was their sanctuary, their cave, their vault, and their music room. It never took them long before they told me their secrets, before they hung their pictures on my walls. All of them had, in one way or another, been robbed of their former homes. And so, they came to me because I obliged and became their new one. For me, the knowledge that I still had something to offer—even after all these years—sufficed. I needed only to be there. And they delivered themselves to me unafraid, for there was nothing in me to fear. And things were good this way. It could have remained like this until the end. But then came Marta.

In the measure of my life, our time together was short. So short, in fact, that I can hardly speak of it. A few months are not enough to truly know who someone is. The others' stories unfolded slowly inside me over the years. Eventually, I learned what makes up a human being: movement,

language, customs, possessions. But Marta remained a flicker—fleeting, yet immense. In the beginning, I was pleased that she did not go out. I know this sounds bad: like I wished to confine and keep her for myself. But it was not about me at all. It had to do with her conduct, with her demeanor. Marta moved like a person walking for the first time on a tightrope, desperate to hide her fears. And yet those fears were palpable in her every step. I think she must have been exhausted, and for this reason, slow. Much too slow for the outside world. She would have been blown away without my walls' protection. When I first saw Marta, the city was under the sway of the East Wind. It had gathered its strength over the sea and released it through the urban canyons. It blew the fiercest in September and October, desiring to sweep summer away where it still clung to the asphalt. And so, it was good she did not venture out.

She, too, told me I was beautiful. Like so many before her. And yet, I knew at once that Marta meant something different. Her fingers plied my walls with such certainty, as though she had no doubt that they concealed something alive within them. Even Victor never touched me with such tenderness.

Marta. Sometimes she spoke aloud in the room when no one else was present. At those times, she spoke only to me. She wanted to know whether people who had never left someone could be happy, and seemed at those times, as though she yearned to hear a no. I would have liked to answer. Tell her I had seen so many unhappy people in my time. Happiness did not give a damn about your conduct. It settles down and builds itself a nest there where you permit it residence. I have many stories I could tell of this. For example, I could tell of Mrs. Song who moved on her wedding day into Apartment 273 and dwelled there until she died. Mr. Song was her first and only man. He was choleric; and she, a bride at seventeen with humble aspirations of building their lives together and sometimes of holding each other's hand in the face of the tremendous hardships that being human brings. But Mrs. Song got nothing of her dream. Mr. Song roared and bellowed her entire lifetime, each and every day, while Mrs. Song shrank more and more before the force of his rage. By the evening she lay herself to rest in their marriage bed for the final time, she had grown tiny as a child.

I wanted to tell all this to Marta, but I thought it was too soon. She would not yet have heard me. But perhaps this was a foolhardy assumption. I should have asked her all the questions right away: Why are you here? When did you lose your passion? What are you doing when you organize your files with such concentration? What are you thinking when you stare out the window for hours? What are you afraid of, Marta? And do you also feel a premonition, quiet but clear, that this thing between us will be something special?

Marta was already certain before entering the stairwell. She'd often passed along this street, especially during the many walks she took when she was new to the district. At this point, it's been several months. Her walks have grown infrequent and her gaze, less attentive. But she has not forgotten how beautiful she finds this house. It's probably the lighting. The light is always extraordinary here. Even when heavy clouds hang only a few blocks away between the rooftops of the high-rise buildings, even when their facades and the big river accentuate the grayness of the sky; everything here stays brilliant. Marta examines the green paint peeling like fish scales from the wall of mailboxes. She runs one hand slowly over the mailbox for apartment 551, thinking it all may well have been for the best: these past weeks of stress, the anger, the sadness, the goodbyes. This feeling of having left her own body behind and observing it from a distance—the way it moves, the way it sits, the way it lies. The way it makes and subsequently devours food. The way it doubles over, grows pale, falters. The way it cries as though it were returning to childhood after long decades of confusion. Marta's metamorphosis into a rubbernecker unable to look away from her own catastrophe. The suspicion that henceforth there will be nothing more than constantly observing her own life. It was all so very exhausting, and it still is, although it's starting to get better. It feels now like someone pointing an old camera in her face and struggling to refocus the blurry image. As if some displaced piece of her were slowly shifting back into its rightful place.

If it were not for the loss of her mother, Marta would not be here at all—standing in the foyer of this old building with its rounded, recessed balconies, its wood-paneled walls, and its long-abandoned reception. She would not be listening to the rustling of dry leaves through the half-open entry, nor would she feel the warm air gathering in her coat sleeves.

Perhaps this is not a mistake after all. Perhaps, she thinks, it is her best chance for things to turn out differently.

Marta inhales deeply, holding her breath for a few seconds behind tightly pursed lips. This is a different house, with a different mailbox. And she is no longer the same person. Only one thing has remained unchanged: She is still a woman with little use for new things. She likes jackets other people have already worn, furniture whose surfaces tell a story, and houses that have been occupied for generations. She was never one for religion; Marta believes in science and humanity—although her faith in humans has been tested by recent years. But then again, she remains convinced that some things just are the way they are because they are supposed to be that way. And Marta is supposed to live in old buildings.

She searches for the little key in her left coat pocket and opens the mailbox. There is a bigger key inside it, just like she expected, with a bit of red yarn tied around one end. She removes the key, closes the mailbox, and begins to climb the stairs. Marta moves slowly. The floor is interesting. Yellow linoleum at first; a red carpet in the middle that swallows the sound of her footfall. This carpet has seen better days; it's faded but unsoiled. Here and there, it's beginning to fray. There are a few puckers and pleats. Just like me, Marta thinks. Concrete in the stairwell. She passes two boarded-up elevator shafts. High ceilings. So high, the builders must have wanted to leave room for all the thoughts that gather overhead in the course of a day when the space inside Marta's head becomes too narrow. Of course, Marta had not yet been born when this house was built, and no one designing a house would have taken her mind's needs into consideration anyway. But still. The walls are old, and the plaster is crumbling, leaving behind little superficial hollows in every shape and size. It doesn't help that someone painted over all of it with the same shade of yellow. Marta picks out the outline of Australia. A horse's head. And the profile of a woman in a

top hat. She hears whispers when she runs the flat of her hand along the wall—rough fingertips over piano keys.

The second floor smells like turpentine and sesame oil. She hears raised voices on the third, maybe a television or an early dinner conversation. A ceiling light with two broken triangles of glass is leaning against a wall of the fourth floor.

Almost every hall is darkened. Marta does not encounter anyone. Most of the apartments are probably empty. Their residents must have moved out years ago. Marta can't think of anyone who would choose to move into such an old building. Anyone but her. She's thinking of shaking heads and worried glances, of mouths that first appeal and then implore: Don't do it.

Marta reaches the hall with her apartment. The sunlight hardly pierces the hallway. Further down, an emergency exit sign is burning through its green. A shabby, old ceramic pot painted with pale blue water lilies guards the landing. An actual lily is growing inside it, and the potting soil smells like it's been freshly watered. Marta's hands are tingling. She places the key into the door lock, opens the apartment, and enters the empty room. It's dusty. There are cobwebs strewn between the blades of the ceiling fan. Marta can see the river and dozens of office towers on the opposing bank. Even up here, she can hear the murmur of plane tree leaves through an open window. The light is still extraordinary, even through the film on the windowpanes. It's so beautiful, someone should paint it. Maybe she will try to do this herself someday, Marta thinks, pacing a few steps deeper into the room. Beside the passage to the smaller room, there's space for her books and files. She thinks of her writing desk and knows immediately that it will go in front of the window. In front, but turned so she can only see the outside world when she moves her head. Perhaps some time later she will place the desk directly in front of the window, to test her courage. But until then, she'll face the wall with the opening to the narrow kitchen. The one with the peeling wallpaper. Marta lays two fingers on the floral pattern as though trying to find a pulse. The faucet in the kitchen leaks, and the two floor tiles directly in front of the stove are broken.

"This time's gonna be good," she says to the room, despite it all.

On the second morning, Marta's awakened by a knock at the door. It's a cautious knocking. Quiet, as though they don't want to disturb her. But it's consistent, nonetheless. It carries on for more than a minute. Marta rubs the sleep from her eyes and sits up, scooting to the edge of the bed to listen. She wants to make sure the noise is actually coming from the door to her apartment. She wants to make sure it's not the sound of some repair work in the hallway or the adjacent flat. But she's pretty sure they aren't renovating the building, and as far as she can tell, all the other apartments on her floor are abandoned.

Marta throws on her coat; the collar still smells of summer. She walks to the door. "Hello?" The knocking stops. She waits for a moment and thinks she can hear the sound of footfall in the stairwell. She opens her door a crack. There's a porcelain bowl with three peaches on the threshold. They smell so intense she's surprised she couldn't smell them through the door. Marta steps out into the hallway, but there's no one to be seen or heard. And so, she scoops up the bowl from the floor, reenters her apartment, and closes the door behind her. One of the peaches is overripe. Marta holds it under the faucet in the kitchen until she's washed all the white fuzz away. Then she takes a bite. The juice runs over her fingers and drips into the sink. She hasn't had such fruit in years. It makes her feel greedy, immoderate. She isn't even hungry. But she can't stop. She stuffs her face with both of the other peaches. They're still sweet, but less juicy. Their scent hangs in the kitchen like an insistent perfume. It doesn't lessen, even after Marta opens a window. She spends the whole day licking her lips, searching for any sticky trace of leftover fructose.

A week later, someone knocks again. And again, there's no one there when Marta answers. But there is a plate with golden yellow cubes of fresh cut mango beneath a sheet of plastic wrap. This time, Marta goes all the way to the stairwell, walks a few steps up and down, stands still, and listens. But there's no one to be found. And so, she takes the plate and returns to her apartment. Normally, she would have called her mother now.

"Maybe you have a secret admirer" she would say, holding the camera too close in front of her face.

"Yeah, sure," Marta whispers. She nudges the plate of mangos back and forth across her desk. Somehow it all seems so strange. Particularly, the voraciousness with which she devoured those peaches last time. Was she being careless? Would a normal person be more wary? Marta feels a bit ashamed.

"Have you met anyone at all? It would be a good thing to make a friend there," her mother would say.

"Why's that?"

"You should know the people in your building."

"In case I run out of rice?"

"In case you need help."

"I didn't know anyone in my last building."

"But you didn't live alone."

"Yeah, well." Marta says this aloud, thinking she might as well have lived alone during those last months with Cem. Even though they'd shared the apartment. And even though they had still laid a hand on one another's neck or shoulder or forearm from time to time just for the reassurance they were still capable of touching at all.

It's only now that it occurs to her that she really always is the one who leaves. Probably because she's the kind of person who always rushes ahead. Or because she brings so much patience to every other aspect of her life that nothing remains for her relationships. In any case, she'd stopped loving Cem ten months ago, and he'd known it for the last eight. He'd said nothing, and he'd done nothing about it. What could he have done besides feeling sad and waiting for one of them to find the courage to end it? Cem had not found the courage, and so Marta had left.

Marta is good at separations, and she keeps notes on each and every one. Okay, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration: But she keeps a list. Marta's first separation was her parents'. It was loud and left a giant coffee stain behind on the wall above the stove. Her separation from the house in which she'd spent her childhood followed. She and her mother left together. Her father stayed behind. He loved the house far too much to give it up. It was a pretty, winding building with very uneven floors on which Marta had played marbles. Her father had painted each room a different color. Marta swam through the blue hallway that was an ocean and called the egg-yolk yellow kitchen the Sun Planet. With the kitchen's south-facing windows, the name was a good fit. Every morning, Marta's father fried three eggs on the Sun Planet and their yolky eyes gazed out at Marta from the pan. Marta gaped back in satisfaction until the slimy film on the eggs vanished. The walls of the bathroom were painted a purple so dark it looked almost black after sunset, and when Marta sat in the bathtub in the evenings, she sometimes pretended she was the teeny-tiny inhabitant of a blackberry. She also imagined how her grumpy neighbor in the adjacent drupelet sat in his bathtub at the same time, though she could not imagine he had painted a single wall of his house colorfully. Only the bedroom she shared with her parents was painted white. And there Marta often lay awake at night wondering whether white was a color, at all. She never came to a conclusive answer, but she still remembers this white bedroom as the saddest of all rooms:

defenseless somehow and without any possibility of retreat. When her mother decided to leave, Marta said her goodbyes to the entire house. She only didn't grieve for the bedroom. Her father leaned against the stove on the Sun Planet, and he smiled through his tears.

"Adieu, my little astronaut," he said in a brave voice, raising one hand to his temple in salute. Marta did it back, smiling through her tears of her own.

Many other separations followed these initial two. From her best friend in the eighth grade, Mai, with whom she used to thumb through glossy magazines in the supermarket until Mai's parents decided to move abroad. Separations from beloved objects, too. Like the see-through umbrella she'd left on a tram while on vacation. Later came a few apartments, as well. Her first and her second boyfriend. A handful of affairs. Marta had logged her separation from Cem in the books as Number 26.

"There are people who never experience a separation in their entire lives." Marta stares at the cubed mango. "Do you think they're happy that way?" She tries for several minutes to imagine what her mother would have said. But she can't. Sometimes Marta is afraid the sound of her mother's voice will fade away, just like the smell of her clothes and the memories of how she moved her body. All those things that can't be captured in a picture. "Do you think they're happy?" Her mother would probably have said it's a silly question. And she would have been right. Marta often asks silly questions. She removes one corner of the plastic wrap from the plate of mango, then stares out the window while she waits for the aroma to rise.

Her view is striking. Usually she's just staring at her laptop, a book, or maybe at the wallpaper in front of her while seated at her desk. Sometimes she dives so deeply into her research in the morning that she doesn't kick back to the surface before early afternoon for air. The world in front of Marta's window is comprised of the muddy river and those narrow container ships crowding its waters. Of the trees that line the riverbanks. Of the single vertical bar of high-rise buildings, their quicksilver facades filled with offices and with apartments that are barely distinguishable from the offices around them: floor-to-ceiling windows, grey venetian blinds, largescale prints hung over exposed concrete walls. Marta thinks there must be colossal kitchen islands made of marble somewhere inside these apartments loaded with fruit bowls and pyramids of apples which the residents swap out the moment their waxed peels no longer sparkle. Ceiling-height ficus trees in beige planters and cabinet displays with culinary herbs growing under blue light. In front of these high rises, a few low residential buildings still remain. Marta counts their windows. Most of these old buildings have no more than three floors. Their roofs are flat; laundry is drying in the sun on some of them. She does not see any people. High above the buildings, contrails from airplanes rend white stripes across the sky.

Initially, Marta does not notice the changes. But then one afternoon in late September, only weeks after her move, they suddenly become impossible to overlook. Reading by the window, Marta has just scooted her chair out of the glare from the bright sunlight when she notices four stately trees being torn from the earth on the riverbank. A procession of cranes and excavators is advancing down the promenade. They draw level with the line of foliage before diverging to approach the individual trees like some giant predatory animals stalking their prey. Steel claws sink into branches; trees are ripped from the ground. Their root systems, Marta thinks, are even bigger than their crowns. Between the mighty arms of root hang clumps of dirt so dry they shatter before the onslaught of the excavators, enveloping the houses behind them in enormous clouds of dust. Marta documents the entire process in her notebook. After less than an hour, the heavy equipment has moved on. But the churned-up bit of riverbank remains. Marta wonders where they are taking the

trees, and how deep the craters they left behind extend down into the earth where once their roots had grown. She's thinking of Cem and how he kept his collection of succulent cuttings in a neat line of jam jars on the windowsill in their living room for two and a half years. He'd never planted them. It's weird how much Cem's aimlessness had bothered her when in truth she'd actually loved watching the tiny root systems growing behind glass.

A short time later, Marta notices the water level of the river changing. Waves are crashing against the harbor wall at a conspicuously lower level than before. Marta opens the window and takes a picture so she can compare the water level again tomorrow. Lukewarm air billows past her into the apartment, bearing the smell of salted butter and sweet corn in with it.

Late that evening, Marta is watching one of the old apartment buildings disappear. Or is there something funny happening with her eyes? This time she sees neither excavators nor cranes. Maybe it has something to do with the distance. It's hard to put in words, but it seems to Marta like the top floor of the building is getting thinner. The bright orange of its façade is fading; the contours are beginning to blur. More and more holes are gaping through the bricks. They spread like ink on blotting paper until they meet, uniting in still greater emptiness. The glass of the office building behind is shining through them. Suddenly, spots are dancing before Marta's eyes like she was staring at the sun. She keeps pressing her eyelids until the fourth floor disappears completely. The strangest thing about the whole process is that nothing remains. Nothing at all. No rubble, no furniture. It's like some infection has consumed the building from within. Of course, she knows that this can't be. It must be some kind of hallucination. An optical illusion. Or she has somehow just missed the loading of the dump trucks and their eventual departure completely. But from her window, things look much the same: This was not a brutal attack with heavy artillery, it was more like a minimally invasive surgery. "You've got a vivid imagination," her mother would have said.

Marta keeps as exact a record as she can. She jots down incidents in bullet points, and when something good occurs to her at night in bed or while brushing her teeth, she records a voice memo and transcribes it later. When she has doubts about her own perception of events, she marks this with question marks in extra thick bold lines. Then she files her notes in the appropriate folder and crosschecks them against previously recorded demolitions or cases of disappearing buildings. She tries to maintain the same process she'd seen her mother do. This constant record-keeping has become her duty now, the way in earlier days it would have been standard practice for a son to take over the family business from his dad. Marta thinks to herself that she's taken over the woman's duty in the same way, just as it was laid out before her. The writing down, the checking, the filing.

From this day forward, Marta only leaves the building on rare occasions. But she does proceed each day to the foyer, hoping to run into someone else by chance in the stairwell or at the mailboxes. She goes at different times of day, sometimes early in the morning, then at noon, and then at 5:30 in the afternoon. She knows from the fruit platters alone that she can't be the only person in the building. They've been appearing at her door multiple times a week. And the potting soil around the lily on the landing never completely dries out. But Marta doesn't have a clue who her neighbors might be. One Wednesday morning, she remains standing for a few minutes in front of the wall of mailboxes, staring out at the reception hut by the main entrance of the building. It's boarded up, but through the glass she can still make out a couple notes someone many years ago must have pinned to the wall there. The writing is so small Marta can't make most of it out. One lined piece of paper contains someone's sketches of dried lotus flowers. Maybe the last porter of the building drew them, a somewhat languid fellow in constant need of a second job who spent his

days dreaming of a bohemian life somewhere in the sunny south. The lines are inexact, constantly interrupted like scribbles during a long phone call, as though he had been doodling on the side. Marta takes three steps toward the front door of the building.

Her mother would have said: "Hurry up with it and go."

"But why?"

"This is no kind of life."

Marta can hear the street behind the entryway: the humming of electric motors, the cicada song bidding farewell to late summer. The jumble of human voices—people with briefcases in their hands and earbuds in their ears. The swish of rice straw brooms against the sidewalk.

"And why would it be some kind of life if I were to go out and play along?"

"Because no one should spend all their time alone."

Her mother had always worried about Marta being a bystander, a loner. Worried about her inability to engage with most people around her. But Marta had always disagreed. She still had a pulse, didn't she? A heartbeat. She still woke up in the morning and went to bed at night. That was a life. Marta turns around. The big clock over the wall of mailboxes says 7:35. A slim man is walking toward her from the stairwell.

"Good morning," Marta says and is surprised by the sound of her own voice: darker than usual. It's only then she realizes how little she has spoken over the past days. The man gives her a friendly nod. He approaches mailbox 345 and raps against it with one knuckle of his slender hand, as if testing the ripeness of a watermelon. Then he shakes his head. Shrugging his shoulders, he looks up, trying to meet Marta's gaze. The man has tiny wrinkles around his eyes and thin, pale grey hair, flecked with a few remaining streaks of black. He's wearing a loose-knit chestnut vest over his button-down shirt and seems cautious—slight, but not yet brittle.

"Are you expecting mail?"

The man hesitates, as if considering whether he really wants this conversation. "My wife," he says, "sits up in her room all day waiting. She waits every day. She's been waiting for thirty years now. But only the wrong letters arrive. She won't even check herself anymore, so I still check for her. But my luck's no better than hers." He sighs and hesitates again. Then he looks Marta directly in the eye. "And what are you waiting for?"

Marta had wanted to ask what the right letter would be, the one his wife has been waiting for so long, but she was too slow. "I just moved in."

"Alone."

"Yes."

The man measures Marta's face. "You are still young," he says like a doctor making a diagnosis. "Unusual that you would choose to live here."

"Hmm. Well, I came here and... I don't know. It's just a very beautiful building."

"Yes, that's true. Very beautiful indeed."

Marta notices a thin shopping bag draped over the crook of his left arm. She can see a silver wallet inside it. It's a nice wallet. The man follows her gaze, and he smiles. The morning sunlight is shining directly in his eyes, and he squints. He blinks, relaxing his face, and his pupils look like rock candy.

"I'm off to the market," the man says. "The pears are especially good right now."

The pears. Marta considers mentioning the fruit platters, but for some reason, she refrains. She likes this man, and she's enjoying the small amount of uncertainty between them. Or perhaps she just doesn't want to hear it could have been someone else. Surely it must have been this neighbor who handpicked a ripe mango, peeled it, and then divided its flesh into perfect little cubes

with a paring knife. He'd arranged those cubes on a deep dish and already been on his way to the door when he'd turned on his heels and decided to cover them with a sheet of plastic wrap. He'd stood before Marta's door, placed the mango on the floor, knocked, and quickly disappeared. This image doesn't quite correspond for Marta with the man standing before her. But on the other hand, only men have ever made her fruit platters before. Her father, for example. Or Cem.

“Would you mind getting me some, too?” She can already feel her ears blushing.

“The fall is coming. Everyone should be eating pears now,” the man says, without averting his eyes from the sun. “I'll come by tomorrow afternoon.”

On his way out, he lifts his right hand above his head in the quick semblance of a wave. And then he disappears without ever turning back in her direction.

Routines. Routines are good. Routines are everything. The day begins at six. Mr. Yi hasn't needed an alarm clock in years. He always wakes up two or three minutes before the hour and lies there feeling the inside of his body. The way his abdominal wall rises and falls. He runs his still sluggish tongue clockwise against his gums, gathering the drowsy warmth of the night inside himself like a glowing coal and willing its embers to wander out into his limbs. He has to pay particular attention to his feet. His feet are always cold. Probably ever since the winter of 1982 when he only had one pair of shoes—too narrow and with tattered soles—and the cold spread through the cracks in the rubber, biting deep between his metatarsals and his heel. At 6 o'clock on the dot, Mr. Yi sits up and leaves the bed, feeling the rough fibers of the carpet before slipping naked toes into his plastic slippers. He straightens up, feeling old. Then he lifts his arms above his head and balls his two fists like the Buddha. He takes the first steps of the day before turning to regard his sleeping wife. She has her back to him, sleeping on her side with the white-grey comforter still clenched under one arm. Her breathing is light and regular. Backlit from the sun through their thin curtains, her silhouette looks like a hilly landscape at the onset of winter. Mr. Yi's not sure whether he can still truly abide her, but he's glad she's there.

He pads to the kitchen and puts some water on to boil. When the kettle starts to whistle he opens a window, switches on the radio, and lets the world in. If it's not a windless morning (a rare occurrence in this part of the world, except for a few very humid mornings in high summer), the ends of the wax tablecloth flutter where they protrude beneath the glass tabletop. He picks up his wife's cup, adjusting the lid to one side, and he fills it with hot water. Then he sits cross-legged by the window and waits. She never wakes up before 8, and so the early hours of the day are his alone. On market days, Mr. Yi goes shopping after first making his rounds to all the trash cans in the area collecting bottles. Sometimes this means he only gets very overripe fruit by the time he makes it to the market. But he doesn't mind. On other days, he simply listens to the radio, bobbing his leg to the melody of old pop songs. Sometimes he just listens and stares at the clock above the kitchen door, watching time pass by. Some mornings—but only rarely—he lights up a cigarette and blows the smoke out of the window. Observing the men smoking on the street below, he can't help but find them in bad taste. The way they hold their cigarettes between their thumbs and index fingers. The way they pinch their faces when they take a drag, as though they were doing something very inconvenient. The way they flick their glowing cigarette butts on the sidewalk, knowing full well that the streetsweeper will have to come behind and clear them away. It's not a good look, no. And it always seems like play acting. Mr. Yi goes to great lengths to do things differently. When he was young, he'd only ever lit up for the feeling. He'd taken one or two puffs and then let the cigarette burn to ash. Back then, he'd also gone to the mailbox every day, until at some point he'd decided that it wasn't worth it. It's far more efficient to just go on market days—Tuesday, Wednesday, and Saturday—when he's going out anyway. From time to time, Mr. Yi goes out on Sunday, too, even though he knows no mail has been delivered. On these days, he bows three times before the wall of mailboxes like a shrine, in hopes that the new week will bring about a change of fortune. In truth, he's long since run out of hope. And he does this now more out of custom or perhaps a sense of longing for some kind of change: rockfall, a storm after a long drought, a bridge closure. That would be nice. Some kind of disturbance, some interruption in the eternal monotony. Stare at the mailbox, open the hatch, nothing, close the hatch. There had been a phase when he had yearned for night because he always dreamed of finding a tiny treefrog behind the dark green

mailbox door. The frog would sit there, staring back at him. But it has been years now since he's had this dream. He no longer expects any mail now, only the inevitable.

He's certain his wife will soon enter the kitchen over the wooden doorsill. He has long since overcome the need to wonder whether he should put these hours to better use before she wakes. He'd always been reluctant to wait for his wife back when she used to tell him she'd be home from the factory by three after her morning shift. She was rarely home by five. He'd always assumed she'd carried on with colleagues after work, drinking and playing cards. And it had hurt him that she did not feel any urge to return to him after work, so he'd resolved to never worry and never to be jealous again. He simply awoke one morning and decided to be independent. And ever since that day, he had enjoyed the waiting. He wasn't always patient, but he valued those minutes he did not have to share with anyone.

The bedroom floorboards are creaking. And there's her wet cough. Better than a dry one—the moisture will dissipate after her first meal of the day. She always needs a moment, but to his relief there's only ever been one single day in their entire life together when she refused to get out of bed. He hears her shuffling footfall, closes the window, and turns the music down. She doesn't like it when the world has already made itself at home in their apartment before breakfast.

"Dearest," he exclaims, feeling like somebody else when he says it. "How did you sleep?"

She ignores the question and takes a seat. He stares at the skin on her forearms, dry and covered with freckles. How did that happen? When did she start looking so old? He hadn't noticed. When you spend your life with someone, or at least intend to do so, you only notice changes when they get so glaring you can't miss them. She's slumped over, but she's always sat this way. It's quite possible that her back was never straight. She's always hunched her shoulders like they were being tugged forward on two strings. Surprising, really, that she doesn't have a hunchback. One of his favorite songs is playing on the radio. Mr. Yi used to go dancing to it back when he was young. He returns the kettle to the stove, slides her cup beside it, and turns up the music almost imperceptibly.

"Did you have bad dreams again?"

"No."

It's the first thing she says every morning. It doesn't matter what question he asks. He fills her cup to the brim and sets it down on the table before her. She turns to him and nods in thanks. Her eyes are milky. "Did you check the mail?"

"Yes. Nothing."

He lowers his eyes, concentrating on the music. He hates disappointing her again, even when he knows it's not his fault the letter hasn't come. It's odd how he's gotten used to everything—every voluntary and every involuntary routine—but he hasn't gotten used to this. She sips her water, looks away. If he doesn't go to her now, seat himself across from her, take her hands in his, and hold them until she finally raises her head and meets his eyes, she'll slip away for the rest of the day. Sometimes he doesn't feel like rescuing her and remains leaning where he is with the edge of the countertop pressing into the small of his back. He just lets it happen. But not today. Today he has the strength. He shuffles to the table, takes his seat, grasps her hands, meets her eyes, and holds her tight.

"My flower," she says, as though just noticing he's there. Then she removes her weathered hands from his only to lace them back around his own. His own aged hands. Suddenly, he feels like crying. Only he doesn't remember how that works. Many years ago, she'd written him a song and sung it to him on a karaoke machine in the middle of the market square. It was the first time

she had called him *flower*. And he'd thought it was awfully cheesy. Awfully beautiful. He hadn't thought of this in a long time.

Back then, she had only just told him she was expecting. She'd known it herself for a while, but she hadn't inducted him into her secret yet. Initially, because she'd wanted to truly experience the moment for herself. Every single one of those hundred feelings between fear and anticipation, she had said. They were both twenty-four and had been married for a year. They were making good time—everything going according to plan, even if this plan had never really quite felt like their plan. Their mothers had been so worried they would not get married before their twenty-fifth birthdays. At family gatherings, his mother had taken him aside and whispered in his ear that his auntie was asking again when they were planning on getting engaged. That her brothers were starting to doubt his girlfriend's intentions: Did she, perhaps, have money problems? Another lover? Or—worst of all—did she simply not like his family? After all, she hadn't been over for dinner in a while, and the jujubes she'd given his mother for her last birthday hadn't really been the finest quality. Anyone who knew even the slightest bit about dried fruit could have seen that.

He felt nothing but contempt for his family's gossip. Except for his mother. He felt bad for his mother. He could see the way that she was growing smaller. The way she tucked her chin into her collarbone when she ran into her siblings. The way what they thought about her and her son mattered to her so much. That someone might say of them that it was obvious such an independent woman would raise a loner of a child—this was something to be avoided at all costs! The fact that they had remained single of their own free will played absolutely no role for their families whatsoever. Sometimes Mr. Yi was amazed by the way women over the entire world had fought so hard, had won their emancipation so dearly, and yet nothing of this had reached the inner circles of his family. In the end, they loved the narrow confines of their own familiarity above all else.

Mr. Yi would not have needed a formal engagement at all. Of course, he had dreamed of a life together with this woman ever since he had taken her on their first date for a walk along the shores of the still frozen lake. Back then, she had done fifty squats and fifty pushups every morning before reading thirty minutes of poetry and made only the sly observation that if she were to live to be more than one hundred, she would need to train both body and mind. He was fascinated by her. He had never met a woman like her before, and he had been certain he wanted to be with her forever—or at least, for as long as possible. But marriage had never been an essential component of his dream. So when he did ask her to marry him, he had really been asking on account of his mother. For the glow in her cheeks. For the pride she would exude when she linked arms with him on their way to the department store in the neighboring city to examine the shelves of porcelain plates and leather shoes and overpriced lighters emblazoned with dragons and good luck charms—forgetting her usual distaste for throwing money away. To this day, he's still not sure whether his wife had only agreed simply to please her own mother as well.

Their marriage had also been a farewell party because they—like nearly every other couple at the time—had decided to build their life together in the city. It was a celebration of the utmost extravagance. There was more food than could fit on serving plates or in their bellies. So much hard alcohol, one could have set the entire village ablaze. More guests than acquaintances. There was so much tulle on her wedding dress that he could not find his way through it on their wedding night, and so they hadn't slept together until the next morning. The sex was bad, although at the time he could not have said what would have made it good. With time, it did get better. He had the feeling his wife was slowly getting used to him, used to the weight of his body on hers. He, on the other hand, had to get used to sweating in front of her; she never broke a sweat. But sometimes he experienced a fleeting, if consummate feeling of happiness when she lay exhausted by his side

from the coupling of their two bodies, and she held his hand as though she might otherwise slip away. They had it good. But one year later, when she got pregnant, it was not joy she felt, but anger. She told him he couldn't understand, but she had the feeling she was sacrificing herself—the body she had only just come to know—for some new and unknown being. Yi tried to imagine what it might feel like if a tiny creature were growing in his belly, but it didn't work. And she still bore the child all the same.

Sun was a darling boy. He was their darling from the moment the midwife wiped the vernix from his face, and he did not stop being their darling when the first peach fuzz appeared above his upper lip. Mr. Yi reminded him of this at every opportunity, even when Sun was already a young man and Yi could irritate his son with such commentary and make him roll his eyes. During the weeks after Sun's birth, Yi carried him around the apartment every evening, tracing the outline of an enormous infinity sign. "He is already wise. He is a very wise person," Yi would say while carrying the infant child to bed to nurse. His wife only nodded. Sun was peaceful, but not quiet. He cried as often as other babies do, but he had an inner peace Yi otherwise knew only in far older people. People whose lives had long since ceased to wander. And Sun had given him this impression from the start. And so, it was all the more surprising when he began to speak of *somewhere else* the month before his nineteenth birthday. Sun's eyes followed his words as they began to search the rooftops of the houses on the far horizon through the thin glass windows during their meals at the kitchen table.

"Baba, have you ever been somewhere else?" Sun asked one morning before he had so much as touched his food. And because Yi took too long in formulating his answer, Sun soon turned to his mother.

"Mama, what about you?"

"Somewhere else? You know the answer: We come from the North where in the white winters the earth and sky are so much alike you can't see a horizon."

Though he had never been this way before, Sun looked impatient and unsatisfied. Even as a teenager he had always had the ability to make his counterpart feel valued and important, no matter how uninteresting their words really were. But things were different that morning. There was an urgency in Sun, an impatience; he flapped his legs like a small child who had played too many video games. Yeah, Sun already knew their story from the North, he'd heard it a hundred times.

"That's not what I meant," he said, but he was already too late. His mother had seized the opportunity to speak about her homeland once again.

"You nearly go crazy without a horizon. Humans aren't made for such landscapes, Sun. We need to know where down ends and up begins. Remember that. Each year, this drove someone in our village mad."

"Mm."

"Insanity is not fun at all. Many of them died."

"Mm."

"To escape this icy hell, they ran wild-eyed into the arms of death. Your own grandfather, for example. Your wonderful grandfather. Suddenly it was like he had received a call. It was only the sharp whistle of the wind, but he no longer knew the difference..."

"...I know. 'And so, he took his gun...'"

"...and so, he took his gun, and rushed out into the blizzard, the relentless..."

At this point his mother always made an excessive pause and fumbled for the closest glass or cutlery. Sun never knew whether she expected him to finish the story. But he knew how it went on. This wonderful grandfather disappeared into the snow with his gun and was eaten by a polar bear. Actually, no one was ever certain whether it had been a polar bear, for brown bears were far more common in the region. But in any case, when the storm retreated and the villagers ventured back out of doors, a neighbor had found the gun and the headless, armless remains of his grandfather in a great frozen pool of blood. This neighbor stared out and claimed to see a snow-white bear receding in the distance. And so the story had been told ever since. And so, his mother had retold the story this very morning when Sun actually had wanted to know something entirely different.

“There was no way it could have been a brown bear. Your grandfather was far too extraordinary a man to have been eaten by such an ordinary creature.”

“Of course. But that’s not what I meant,” Sun repeated, making another attempt. “Where would you go if you weren’t here?”

What kind of questions were these? Yi did not have an answer. It bothered him because he had to ask himself whether he really wanted to be here at all. Here in this somewhat shabby apartment; here in this house; here on this dirty river; here with his darling, demanding son and his tired, crotchety wife who had not called him *flower* in far too long. In that moment, two pieces of white bread sprung from the toaster, and Yi was reminded of the promise he’d made to himself at his son’s birth. He’d wanted to be a good father, one who only struck his child on the rarest of occasions and took even his most ridiculous questions seriously. He blinked, examining Sun for a while.

“Lisbon,” Yi decided. “Perhaps I would like to be in Lisbon.”

“Why?”

“They say the sea there is still blue. I like mild winters. And there is good fish, I saw it on TV. You know I can’t live without fish.”

“Good,” Sun replied, finally cramming a slice of peach into his mouth.

It always made Yi happy when Sun ate his fruit. “Have some more pineapple, it’s particularly good right now. I got the very last one,” he said, and Sun obliged. It also made Yi happy when his son followed his advice.

At dinner, they all sat around the table together, and everything was as it was before: no questions about somewhere else, only observations about the here and now. The soup wasn’t too salty, the clock in the kitchen was two minutes slow, he needed a new sweater because his old one was already coming apart at the seams. Sun could study macroeconomics. It would be good for him to study for a few semesters and then see how he felt. Art of any sort was something better suited for a hobby. Chewing mouths, rattling plates. Sun cleared the table and went off to fetch the chessboard from the hall. Yi’s wife was doing dishes. Three satisfied automatons. At some point, Sun moved a chess piece, said “Goodnight!” and disappeared into his bedroom. Yi knew his son would still be reading a novel for hours, and eventually he advanced his knight on the board. F3. Just like he always did. Night fell, and morning came. But by morning, Sun had vanished, taking all familiar routine with him. The world had become strangely foreign, Yi’s wife, Yi’s own body.

They had become orphaned parents. Their kitchen table: a place for only two. And although it had already been this way before, many years ago, their twoness no longer provides the same feeling of completion. At one time, they had been whole as two. Now there is something missing and he had dedicated his final strengths to making sure this absence does not become an inadequacy. If

they had never had a child, would their twoness still suffice today? Perhaps not. Yi has observed similar things transpire with couples who never lost a child. Observed the way closeness transforms into a sort of narrowness; nests transform into a cage. He's heard verbal reflexes that had once been expressions of love. Sun's chair now occupies the hallway, closer to the door. It's waiting there as if to call their child home. But it's there, too, so they are not forced to see its emptiness at every meal.

She calls him *flower* again after so many years and cries only a little doing so. Yi wanders his own thoughts, and the memories of his child are like a garden. At first, he ventures only cautiously along the little paths between the beds. At some point, he encounters the anger. Then the desperation. Yi waltzes through the garden of his memories like a bulldozer, trampling everything flat until the soles of his shoes push deep into the soil. Of course they had tried to find him. Of course. They had done everything.

"This just happens sometimes, unfortunately," the police officer had said without meeting their eyes. He'd stared only at his screen, chewing on a bit of dried beef like a dog. Unfortunately, sometimes people's lives just shatter and cannot be put back together. Everything is broken, and you just have to go on. In English, his son's name means sun. But Sun was always more like the moon: a cold heavenly body. A bit of the essence is lost with each translation.

Yi unfolds his hands. She wipes her tears away and snuffles back her snot.

"The peaches have that smell again this year, don't you think?" he asks, pointing at the bowl full of fuzzy fruit just to be safe. These are the last ones; some already have brown spots on them. When you bite into them, you have to suck the juices through the gaps between your teeth to not waste anything.

"Don't you think?" he repeats.

She nods slowly, but she isn't listening.

He says, "A young woman's moved in."

He'll probably be holding conversations with himself all day.

"I think it's a bit strange: Such a young woman in this old house. I think she's very intelligent. She must work for the university or some private research institute. She dresses like someone from the university. And the way she examines everything: She's very slow and very exact. Like a scientist. It would not surprise me at all if she always carried around a measuring tape."

She rises, slowly, bracing herself against the table. All her movements have grown slow. She pushes back the chair with her thighs, and its wooden back strikes against the wall, leaving another grey line. Nothing deep, no indentation.

"I think she's all alone. No one ever comes to visit, and she doesn't seem to ever leave the house. I met her downstairs at the mailboxes, and she asked if I could get her some pears."

She pushes herself past him wearily and shuffles from the room. She'll head to the bathroom next and emerge ten minutes later without closing the toilet seat or opening the little window. Then she'll retreat to the bedroom to stare at the plants in the sunroom. Maybe, if she's feeling up to it, she might bring in the clothes on their drying racks and wipe away the dust from the desert with a microfiber cloth. It's reached the city a bit earlier than usual this year. And he'll take out the old chessboard and rearrange the pieces exactly as they were the night Sun disappeared.

In his mind, he's doing his son's laundry. Yi saved all Sun's shirts and pants, along with the school uniform he'd already outgrown. In the initial years after his disappearance, they used to

take his clothes from the suitcase and spread them out across their dresser. They'd wash and iron each and every piece for hours like two people possessed. It's a good thing, he thinks, that they had finally given this up. These objects have long since lost Sun's scent. Just as they have long since lost the sympathies of those around them. He can no longer even expect any understanding from relatives when they call from time to time to talk about their doctor's appointments and their pain and their medication, and he tells them he will never get over the loss of his son. In their eyes, enough time has passed now. No one cares if Yi thinks clocks are humanity's most useless invention.

Only sometimes—most recently in March—he puts a stool in front of the dresser, takes down the old suitcase, lays it out on the rug, opens it, and lays one hand on his child's clothes. And then he loses everything for a few days. Loses his routine, can no longer even feel his body in the morning—no warmth inside of him, no spark. Yi doesn't even notice his cold feet. He no longer sees himself in the mirror or his wife in their apartment. Kneeling before the suitcase, he feels like a failure. Someone who could not move forward. Someone who will never assuage his yearning. There are months when he forgets the suitcase, but eventually, he'll hear its call again. And when he gives into it, he becomes a ghost. And so, Yi does Sun's laundry in his mind today instead and plans his day. He's going to wash three pears, he thinks, and bring them upstairs to Marta. He'll knock and ask a couple questions. And in between, he'll think of Belém Tower and the Atlantic. Marta will have new stories to tell, and this is good. It's been a long time since there have been new stories in this house.