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Written by Janice Y. K. Lee

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JANICE Y. K. LEE

The Expatriates



Little, Brown

LITTLE, BROWN

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For Joe, of course

Prologue

The new expatriates arrive practically on the hour, every day of the week. They get off Cathay Pacific flights from New York, BA from London, Garuda from Jakarta, ANA from Tokyo, carrying briefcases, carrying Louis Vuitton handbags, carrying babies and bottles, carrying exhaustion and excitement and frustration. They have mostly been cramped in coach; a precious few have drunk champagne in first; others have watched two movies in business class, eating a ham-and-Brie sandwich. They are thrilled, they are homesick, they are scared, they are relieved to have arrived in Hong Kong—their new home for six months, a year, a three-year contract max, forever, nobody knows. They are fresh-faced; they are mid-career, hoping for that crucial boost up the ladder; they are here for their last job, the final rung before they're put out to pasture. They work at banks; they work at law firms. They make buttons, clothing, hard drives, toys. They run restaurants; they are bartenders; they are yoga teachers; they are designers; they are architects. They don't work. They are hoping to work. They are done, done, done with work. They arrive in January, after Christmas; they arrive in June, after the kids get out from school; they arrive in August, when school is about to start; they arrive whenever the company books their ticket. They come with their families or with their wives or their boyfriends, or resolutely single, or hoping to meet someone. They are Chinese, Irish, French, Korean, American—a veritable UN of fortune-seekers, willing sheep, life-changers, come to find their future selves.

These days, they always come by air, disgorged from the planes that encircle Chek Lap Kok airport. The new expatriates wait in line,

somnambulant in the fluorescent light, with their pallid skin and greasy hair, wondering if jet lag will ever be less horrendous. They present their passports, clear immigration, collect their bags, and emerge from the terminal to scatter—disappearing into the Airport Express train; queuing up for double-decker buses, taxis; stepping into the back of black Mercedes sedans bearing the emblem of the Mandarin Oriental, doors opened by white-capped chauffeurs. They are swept away and driven along the highway, so clean, so new, past villages that are just remnants of what was there before all the buildings went up, those giant complexes built to house the ever-burgeoning local population, those people who will be their colleagues, their employees, their employers, their drivers. All the expats disperse, are quickly absorbed into their new home, each quickly becoming just one more face in the crowd.

The new expatriates are tired. They have arrived, but they are not sure to what. The immediate journey has ended, but the longer one has just begun. They rest their heads on the window of the bus, on the leather headrest in the car, on the velour of the train seat, on the way to their bed in Chungking Mansions, at the YWCA, at the Four Seasons, at a friend's house, at their serviced apartment, at the house on the Peak that has been leased for them. They quiet the children, they drink a bottle of water, they drum their fingers on the seat. Hong Kong flashes frantically by. The road stretches long before them. They are exhausted. Their eyes close, and they dream of what lies ahead.

Part I

Mercy

A SLOW-ROASTED UNICORN. A baked, butterflied baby dragon, spread-eagled, spine a delicate slope in the pan. A phoenix, perhaps, slightly charred from its fiery rebirth, sprinkled with sugar, flesh caramelized from the heat. That's what she wants to eat: a mythical creature, something slightly otherworldly, something not real. A centaur. Yes, the juicy haunch of a centaur. Mercy lies in bed, not quite asleep, not quite awake, sheets crumpled around her, feeling the gnawing hole in her stomach, relishing it, savoring it.

The sun streams in through her small, smudged window. By the looks of it, it must be past 11:00 a.m., a time when most people—respectable people, people with jobs—have been at work for several hours and may already be contemplating what they should eat for lunch.

She can hear the muted sounds of the streets below. Sheung Wan, an area too quickly being discovered by the rent-hikers—those young, industrious careerists in their well-cut suits and shiny leather shoes who leave at eight thirty in the morning with wet hair and sheaves of papers shoved in briefcases. They have discovered this relatively cheap neighborhood, a short walk from Central, and have succeeded in slowly gentrifying it. The rent-hikers live among aging locals who view their encroachment with bemused silence. Every morning they pass the crazy charwoman in the lobby who barks incomprehensible Cantonese invectives at them as they walk through, fingertips pecking on their phones, pretending not to notice. These superbly energetic men and women have tried to get the charwoman replaced, started a petition, which was photocopied and slipped under Mercy's door for her signature, but all their

efforts have come to naught. The crazy woman stays all day and night, sitting on her plastic stool, bucket and mop beside her, shouting at them and at herself. It is believed she lives in a little room off the lobby, but no one has been able to ascertain the truth. No one has ever seen her do any cleaning, or leave, or come back. It's one of those Hong Kong mysteries, where she might be the landlord's demented aunt, a homeless person who has made the lobby her home, or indeed an insane millionaire who owns the building. All this conjecture and information is conveyed through messages posted in the elevator. Then suddenly one day, a direction to an online message board, to which they all migrate, leaving the wall in the elevator mercifully blank. All that remains of the shrill, slightly hysterical dialogue is a strip of yellowing Scotch tape on the plastic wall.

Mercy is hungry. She should eat. But she wants to eat a centaur's thigh, roasted over a bonfire, turned on a spit by fairies, their sparkly little faces perspiring from the heat. She is certain she will not find this when she ventures out into the small, tight streets around her. They are filled instead with equally improbable things: shiny cow innards; disembodied pigs' heads with floppy ears, stacked up in bloody piles; dried seahorses in burlap sacks. She does not find the food grotesque, instead is bewildered by how one begins to eat such items, existing as they do in such peculiar and indeterminate forms, or indeed, alive, or in quantities that would feed a village.

When she gets up, she determines, she will turn on her space heater to warm the chill of the December air. She will take out a head of organic Boston lettuce from her little refrigerator and pull apart the leaves, soak them for ten minutes, then transfer them into a spinner, where they will be centrifuged, and the sandy water discarded. She will toss the leaves in a wooden bowl with a micro spray of olive oil, a drop of balsamic vinegar, the insanely expensive balsamic vinegar that she bought at the gourmet store, so viscous it drips in a slow, thick stream. A tomato. A Persian cucumber. These will emerge, pristine, from her tiny refrigerator, chilled, perfect. She will slice them thinly

and fan them into beautiful patterns, a vegetable mandala, courtesy of the mandoline, a feast for the eyes. She will hand-crumble Parmigiano Reggiano onto the top, and then, from on high, she will brandish the mill and grind coarse crystals of pink salt from the Himalayas into fine, sparkly shavings that will float, like snowflakes, onto the pale green surface of her salad.

She will bring the salad to the table by her bed, which she will have set with a scalloped linen placemat she bought on a trip to Hanoi, with a matching napkin, and a glass with a bottle of Fiji water just next to it, ready for pouring. She lives in a two-hundred-square-foot studio, but she does not have to live like a savage.

Mercy will sit on the bed and take up her instruments: her heavy silver fork and knife, stolen from Gaddi's restaurant on a memorable night in better times. The lettuce, slightly glossed with oil, will yield as she presses the tines of her fork into it, the hole bleeding a slightly darker green as she breaks the cells of the leaf, violent death in its own microscopic way. From there, she will lift it into her mouth, a light sliver on her tongue for an instant before her teeth grind it into a small, slippery pulp that will slip down her throat. She will swallow. She will cut another piece. She will put it in her mouth and chew again. Swallow. Drink water. Drink more water. Spear another leaf. Repeat.

It is important to do things right. Otherwise, when you live alone, it can devolve very quickly. Stand on ceremony. Observe the rites. That's how you get through the day.

Margaret

It's a tricky project. The house sits atop a sloping meadow, and the clients want to flatten out the land and make an English garden—totally wrong for the landscape and the surrounding area. It is woodsy and natural there in rural Connecticut, where they are. She wonders why they didn't buy a tidy, flat plot of land near potato fields instead, or a suburban house in Darien—a tabula rasa, where they can put up high hedges and rose gardens in symmetrical rectangles and live out their Anglophilic fantasy undisturbed by the illogical terrain of the hills. They have friends in the area, they said. That is why they bought in Litchfield. But this is not her problem. Her problem is persuading them to listen to the land.

It sounds pretentious or mystical, but it's true: The land dictates what will happen to it. So it is not a problem in the end. A lot of clients try to have their way, but eventually, always, they have to yield. If not to her, then to nature. No one has enough time or money to bend nature to his will. Nature is patient, can wait for centuries.

Margaret leans over the desk, wielding her ruler and pencil. This is the part she loves most, the clean beginning, when it is only her and the land and the blank paper, all possibility, no problems. She has her drawings spread around her. She always starts by hand and ends up on the computer.

The problems come later, when concept collides with reality and human nature.

A stone fruit orchard on the east side of the garden. This will appease them. She sketches in some trees. These clients will buy them

mature. So much easier. So much more expensive. An allée of trees will provide shade for an afternoon promenade. It is part of her job to idealize life, to proffer a gracious, perfect existence in its most optimistic aspect. She knows all too well that soon the constraints of reality, budget, and deadline will alter her plan until it's almost unrecognizable. She also knows that this particular project will never get off the ground. This is not a real project. These are friends of friends who forwarded her photos and surveys and asked for her opinion. She's doing this as a favor for her friends, and she suspects that they suggested her so she will have something to do, to fill the hours, to try to still her mind. Still, she loses herself in the work.

They arrived three years ago in Hong Kong, Clarke and Margaret Reade, with their three children. He is with a U.S. multinational, she says if anyone asks, which they always do. The sound of that term always gives her a frisson: anonymous, vaguely threatening, nationalistically contradictory in terms. It reminds her of when she reads in the paper about companies with names like Archer Daniels and Monsanto, names she has only vaguely heard of but that own everything that touches people's daily lives, like toothpaste and children's aspirin and milk.

But here they always just ask, Which one? as everyone here works for a U.S. multinational. They don't see anything funny about the term. And she tells them M_ D_. Oh, yes, they say, do you know John McBride and Suzie? From Winnetka? I think John works in sourcing? So he's up in the Pearl River delta a lot? They natter on and on while she wonders if she'll ever find anyone who understands. So many people here seem hermetically sealed, as if they live in Hong Kong but are untouched by it. They live in an almost wholly American section of the former British colony, now China, and are only inconvenienced sometimes by the lack of good tomatoes or how hard it is to find a really good hamburger.

She looks up. It is noon. A gift when time passes and she is unaware. She has a lunch in town in an hour, and she has to get ready.

It is with a party planner, of all people. Clarke is turning fifty, and she wants to throw him a big celebration but has no idea how to do it and, really, no inclination either.

She showers, thinking about all she has to do. This is the last day of school before the Christmas holiday, they have a dinner party to go to tonight, and then they are leaving for vacation the next day. Suitcases need to be packed, children readied. Dressed, with wet hair, she leaves, bidding good-bye to Essie, her Filipina helper, flags down a taxi on Repulse Bay Road, slides into the plasticky backseat, fastens her seat belt. Loud Cantopop fills the interior of the cab.

"Four Seasons Hotel, please," she says. "Can you turn down the radio?"

He nods. The taxi flag goes down. They careen around corners; she holds on to the handle on the side, thighs sliding on the vinyl. Outside, despite the December date, all is green and sky and sea. They drive through the Aberdeen tunnel to emerge on the other side, where gray office buildings crowd the skyline. Margaret is reminded again how life on the South Side is the suburbs and Central, the town.

Priscilla is thin and blond, with a mess of clattery bangles down her sinewy, tanned forearm. They jangle as she lifts her arm to shake hands with Margaret in the cavernous lobby of the Four Seasons. An enormous Christmas tree looms above them. Priscilla's hair is expensively highlighted, with strands of gold.

"Nice to meet you, Margaret." She smiles. Chiclet teeth.

"Nice to meet you too," Margaret says. "Thank you for coming."

"Of course."

They go to the coffee shop, order drinks. Priscilla doesn't know, Margaret realizes. She doesn't know about G. Okay. She recalibrates to this. She doesn't know how she knows if people know her story or not, but she always does.

"Have you lived in Hong Kong long?" asks Priscilla.

"Three years now. And you?"

"Six. Do you like it?" Expats always ask one another that, after they declare their time, often with a searching look.

"I do," Margaret says. "I do."

"Good," Priscilla says. "I hate it when people complain all the time about being out here. They miss the most ridiculous things. Like Safeway or a special type of diaper. I just want to say, look around!"

Margaret is taken aback by the woman's vehemence.

"Sorry," Priscilla says, noticing. "I just think you should try to be happy where you are and not complain all the time. People here have the most extraordinary lives, and they focus only on what they're missing."

"I suppose so."

"What brought you here?" Priscilla asks, gesturing for the waiter.

"The usual. Husband."

"And you work as well?"

"Used to. Not so much anymore."

"What kind of work?"

"Landscape architecture. I design gardens for people."

"How lovely."

"Yes, it can be."

"Hard to do here in Hong Kong, though. No one has any land."

"Yes, but everything's over e-mail now anyway, although I barely work anymore. Although China could be interesting."

"Yes, China, of course."

They both stop to ponder its enormity and possibility, as happens thousands of times every day in Hong Kong, where China's proximity and power is both celebrated and feared.

Margaret tenses, waiting for the next question. She has cultivated a very accurate sense of when it might come in an introductory conversation.

"And children? Have any?"

She looks down at the menu. "I've never been here. What's good? I'm starving."

Priscilla takes it in stride. "The chopped salad, the Hainan chicken. Everything is good here."

"Oh, lovely. Chopped salad!"

They murmur the conversational inanities and order from the waiter.

"So how does this work?" she asks, after they have ordered. "I've never used someone like you before."

"You tell me what you want, I try to make it happen."

"You can guide me, though."

"Of course. This is for your husband's fiftieth, is that right?"

"Yes, in May."

"Any ideas on themes or what he'd like?"

"Half-life?" She laughs, but Priscilla does not. "Mid-century?"

Priscilla has taken out a big yellow pad on which she writes "Clarke Reade's 50th birthday" with a Sharpie. She looks up, all business. Margaret wonders why she always thinks everything seems absurd. Like it seems absurd to write the client's name and event on a yellow legal pad. With a Sharpie. No one else seems to find it the least bit strange.

"Thoughts?" Priscilla tries again.

"I haven't the slightest idea, I'm afraid," Margaret says. "Is there something you can suggest?"

After going over possible themes and venues and dates, they get the check. Margaret opens her bag, unsure of the protocol, but Priscilla waves her away. As they take leave of each other, Priscilla asks again. "Do you have children?"

Margaret gathers her jacket from the back of the chair, where she has hung it.

"Yes," she says. "They're at TASOHK, you know, the American school." She nods, looks away, past Priscilla and her bright smile.

And that's it. She has survived the moment. She walks quickly to the glass doors of the hotel lobby and pushes through to the cool air outside. She gulps and breathes.

Mercy

Hong Kong was supposed to have been a new start—if one could say one needed a new start at the age of twenty-four, which is how old she was when she came, three years ago. It is safe to say that life has not turned out the way Mercy thought it was supposed to.

But she cannot say she wasn't warned. Her mother came home ashen-faced one day when Mercy was thirteen. She wouldn't tell Mercy what had happened, but her father, dependably drunk and abrasive in the evenings, told her the bad news. Superstitious mother had gone to a fortune-teller to waste his money and find out about Mercy's future. Idiot fortune-teller had clucked his tongue at her reading, said he had rarely seen someone whose life would be so muddled. She would have bad luck. Things would always go topsy-turvy. She was not a bad person, but things would never go her way. Understand? Her father poured some more whiskey, face already tomato red.

Korean *ajumma*, busybodies that they were, were all amateur fortune-tellers themselves and liked to read faces. One Sunday, at their church in Queens, she had overheard her mother's friends talking about the composition of her face having no *bok*, no good fortune. Thin, jutting eyebrows, cheekbones that were too sharp, a chin that was so pointy it would cut away all the good. She's pretty, one said. Pretty in a cheap way, said another. That makes it worse. That will invite the bad luck. And the bad men.

Later, she found the fortune-teller's predictions in her mother's underwear drawer. She recognized the characters of her name and opened the red paper booklet. It was written in Korean and Chinese characters,

so she couldn't read it, but she took it out and asked a Korean man, a stranger on the street, what it meant. In Flushing, where they lived, it was almost like living in Seoul, there were so many Koreans. The man gave her an odd look but translated a few lines.

"This means, you are riding a fast horse with no saddle. The rider will fall." He hesitated. "And here it says, a crow cannot soar like an eagle." His eyes dropped, and he handed the book back to her. "I have to go."

A crow cannot soar like an eagle.

It was always there in the back of her mind, but what did you do with a fate like that but dismiss it as old Korean folklore that had nothing to do with her?

At Columbia, she had been disheartened to see how hard it was to do well, to stand out. When she got in, she thought, I'll show those Korean ladies who has bad fortune. But it was harder than that. In her freshman class alone, there had been an Oscar-nominated actress, a boy who'd had two poems published in the *New Yorker*, someone who had sailed around the world and been written up in *National Geographic*.

And this is the thing too. In college, Mercy had gone above her station, as she thinks of it in gloomier moments. Perhaps this was part of her misfortune. There was a whole new kind of person there, people she had seen in movies and read about in books. Rich people; really, really rich people. Kids who had drivers, who had never done a load of laundry, whose parents had private planes. Her own parents were not dry cleaners or deli owners, as some curious new "friends" had asked. Her dad had an unsuccessful import/export company with an office that was always littered with samples of ugly, Korean-made poly sports apparel, and her mom, long-suffering, helped out at her aunt's Korean restaurant and told Mercy she had only one child because she could see that life wasn't going to get any better. Mercy never apologized about her family but never volunteered information either.

Mercy never knew why she was included in this new crowd. An

accident, she thought, born of the fact that she was pretty, looked surprisingly good in a forty-dollar strapless dress from Forever 21, was always up for a dare, and that her freshman-year roommate was a friendly, pudgy Chinese girl from Hong Kong, who went downtown one Saturday in October and bought a cherry-red Mercedes convertible and whose parents had a three-bedroom pied-à-terre on East Seventy-fourth Street. Philena was a homely, uncomplicated rich girl who liked to have lots of people around, always, and included Mercy without drama, paying for everything with her black American Express card.

That first year of university, Mercy studied her classmates, the rich ones, a special breed unto themselves. She noted the soft, flabby skin of the boys, their whiskey breath, the petulant way they talked to their mothers, the way things always got sorted for them. They came from all over the world: Abdul, from Saudi Arabia, who went to London every weekend and would sometimes invite a girl from school, who would come back with six new pairs of shoes and a dress from Harrods and a story about a party at Elton John's country house, although privately Mercy thought the whole thing made them little better than escorts; or Cal, from LA, whose father was a director and who hung out with Julianne Moore on the weekends; or the boys from Manhattan, so many of them, with their hedge fund fathers, bony, raspy-voiced mothers, and limitless credit cards. The rich boys were thin-skinned, with a puffed-up bravado that was millimeters thin; if you nicked it, they collapsed.

Mercy borrowed Jimmy Choos from Philena and went to the apartments of upperclassmen (oh, the irony of that term!) in doorman buildings, where you walked in to the heady smell of pot and dirty laundry and the drone of some basketball game always in the background. There were half-empty bottles of Johnnie Walker and Jim Beam on the Corian kitchen counters, props for an always ongoing party. The boys were pigs in the way they lived, whereas the girls were princesses.

The girls burned an endless supply of $60 scented candles from Bergdorf's and did class reading under embroidered duvet covers

from Italy. They floated around in weightless cashmere hoodies that felt like gossamer, bought $1,800 handbags without blinking, paid private Pilates instructors a hundred bucks a session, got their pin-straight hair blown out shiny every three days. They went to class in groups and planned trips to Canyon Ranch. Mercy hung out at the edges and witnessed it all. She was the crazy one who'd take any dare, do anything to keep the party going.

Of course, she and Philena had a falling-out halfway through college. Mercy borrowed a silk scarf from Philena's closet and got ketchup on it. Worse, she hadn't asked to borrow it. Worse, she put it back without bothering to dry-clean it. Even worse, it was far from the first time, but it was the first time Philena minded. She usually didn't care. Mercy had exhausted even the lovely and unflappable Philena's vast reserves of tolerance. That was something.

Mercy felt herself hardening in college. She learned the way they spoke, the rich kids: a reflexive irony where the most important thing was to show you didn't care, that you were impervious to others' opinions. But, of course, the hardest shells hid the most fragile selves. Doug, a real estate developer's son from Chicago, took her out a few times, then cried after they slept together. He never spoke to her again. She told people she thought he was gay, which she did think, but it probably wasn't so nice to relay to other people.

She meandered her way through college, going home sometimes on the weekends when it got to be too much or too expensive, helping out her mom and aunt at the restaurant. Her aunt, who had no children and ran a cash business, always pressed a hundred-dollar bill or two on her afterward, although Mercy tried to refuse. Family was supposed to help, that was the rule, and she didn't expect to be paid. Still, her aunt said, "Enjoy. I remember what college was like," although she had no idea what Mercy's college life was like. She imagined her college friends coming in to the restaurant and seeing her, hair tied in a ponytail, apron soiled, carrying trays of *banchan*—spinach, lotus root, marinated bean sprouts, and cold crab—to the waiting throngs or

having a cigarette in the back with the Mexican busboys who teased her about being a college girl. Quite a far cry from her black-clad Saturday nights with them. Of course, those friends would never come to Queens, so it was just fantasy.

She toggled back and forth from the different worlds, the subway shuttling her to and fro. Her mother urged her to do premed or become a lawyer, with a desperation that made Mercy uncomfortable. She signed up for art history instead and told her mom that she could still go to law school but she needed some time to figure out what she wanted to do. She figured she was young—she had that luxury.

But that was college. After, the differences became clear. Her friends graduated and got jobs at banks, magazines, PR companies, their way paved by family connections. Mercy applied for jobs, and if she got an interview, she never got past the first round, although her grades were just as good and sometimes better. Her friends moved into one-, two-, in one case three-bedroom apartments funded by their endlessly generous parents. One of her friends, Maria, a girl from Mexico, bought a four-thousand-square-foot loft in Nolita the week after she finished college and spent the summer decorating it before deciding on a career in interior design or art consulting. Mercy went home to Queens, subsisted on temp jobs, and took the subway into the city whenever she could, for dinners in dark West Village restaurants and parties in brand-new condos. She learned to arrive late, not order food, and just toss in a twenty for the two drinks she had.

One night, at a party, she confided to a girl she knew a little that she really needed a job.

"What do you want to do?" Leslie said. She was a button-nosed blonde from Greenwich who was working as a paralegal.

Mercy hesitated. She wanted to do so many things. "I don't know. I'd like to do a lot of things. I'm interested in art. I could work at a museum. Or photography? Or a magazine?"

"Oh, wow," Leslie said. "Those are really competitive fields." She looked skeptical.

"Well," Mercy said, "those are my wishes. I don't know how to make them reality."

Leslie looked sad for a moment. "I'm sorry for you," she said, and she seemed sincere. Then she got up and poured herself another drink.

Mercy felt better, as if she had whispered a secret into a well, and expected no more, but later Leslie e-mailed her with a lead for a job, and she felt that life was okay sometimes.

Occasionally, she wished she hadn't gone to the fancy college with the fancy kids who showed her a different world. She used to go back to Queens and see some of her old friends, still living in the neighborhood, with the same boyfriends, working in their dad's accounting office, or managing the family beauty salon, and though she didn't want that life she knew they were happy. But, then, this was Queens, land of immigrant dreams, and there was an equal number of kids who had made it, walking around in the city with their six- or seven-figure salaries, who got quoted in the paper and whose parents mentioned them with every breath at church, as her mom told her whenever she got home on Sundays. "Jenny Choi, she lawyer now. Big law firm. Harvard Law School. Also has Korean boyfriend from Harvard Law. Probably marry next year."

Sometimes during the day, when she didn't have a temp job and was at home by herself, she went to her parents' room and sat at her mother's dressing table, with its bottles of Shiseido moisturizer and sunscreen, and she opened the precious small jars as she used to when she was a kid. She dipped her fingers in and brought them to her nose, capped in white cream. She sniffed the cool, viscous lotion, and the scent brought her back to when she was just eight and learning what it was to be a girl, a woman. She'd lain in bed watching while her mother sat on the stool, fresh from her bath, hair wrapped up in a towel turban, face pink and moist. Her mother swirled one finger expertly around the jar and tapped five dots sparingly on her face: forehead, nose, two cheeks, chin. Then she'd make circles around them, radiating outward until she had spread the cream all over.

Mercy remembered lying on the bed and thinking that her mother was the epitome of grown-up sophistication and beauty, that all she ever wanted was to become like her mother. She didn't remember when the scales fell from her eyes—when she realized that her dad drank and gambled away most of his small earnings, that her mother was desperately unhappy and it was making her prematurely old and gray, that she wanted Mercy to have a ticket out of this world and was scared to death it wouldn't happen, that her family was not the happy one you read about in books—but she had been happy as a child. She had loved to watch her beautiful mother put cream on her face in front of a mirror.

Where had that girl gone? The hopeful, innocent girl who didn't have to act the clown to keep up. When had it all gotten so complicated?

She began to think about leaving New York after three years of trying to find a career. She had had a string of temp jobs, answering phones at a record label, being a floating receptionist at Condé Nast, where she ran into an old college acquaintance in the elevator, who worked at *Allure* and asked her which title she was at. Mercy had answered, *Glamour*, and imagined the girl going to check the masthead right away. The masthead she was not on. She had lunch in that cool cafeteria and tried to fit in, but none of those jobs ever turned into anything permanent, although they did for other people. Then, also, she had been told to use the service entrance at the Park Avenue co-op where her friend Pru lived, still, with her parents. She had offered to bring takeout Indian from Queens for a group dinner when Pru's parents were in Europe, and the doorman had thought she was a delivery person, although she couldn't remember the last time she had seen a female delivery person. She smiled tightly, holding that stinky bag of curry, and said that she was a friend of Pru's. He hadn't even been sorry, just waved her in without interest. Of course, she made a joke about it when she walked in the door, demanded a credit card and a tip, but it was kind of uncomfortable, as if they all knew it was a little too close to possible. That Mercy was just one step away from doing those types of jobs.

All these things conspired to make her think she should try her luck somewhere else. A few friends had gone to Europe—London, Paris, but those cities seemed too expensive. There were others in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Mumbai, Seoul. She didn't want to go to Korea—her Korean wasn't good enough, and she imagined a country full of men like her dad. She e-mailed Philena, who was working at Goldman Sachs in Hong Kong, and asked what was going on in the city. They spoke English there, right? The silk scarf incident was long forgotten. Lovely, simple Philena, bored of the scene already, invited her to come and stay for a few weeks, and that's how she had gotten to Hong Kong.

In the beginning, it seemed the right move. Hong Kong was more manageable than New York, but it was still a big city—Central, with its close cropping of skyscrapers and the sea right below, with the "burbs," as her friends called the outlying residential areas, easily accessible for beach days and outdoor activities. It was easier to get jobs, although they paid almost nothing, and she started working at a weekly newspaper a few weeks after she arrived. It was a listings and features rag, with a grizzled Fleet Street hack at the helm. "Out to pasture in Hong Kong," he told her over lunch the first day before asking her out. She declined—she had that much sense—but he still let her write articles from the get-go, and she quickly got to know the city. She got her first business cards, although they were a cheesy, shiny white. Her friends from college hooked her into a social scene—young grads from Columbia and other colleges littered the city. People were friendly. She found her cheap apartment and felt that she was getting a foothold. Then the office door was locked one day, the publisher went under, and she didn't have a job again. Then it became a sort of a roller-coaster where she had a job, then didn't, then got another lead. Her longest gig was four months as a hostess at a swanky Italian restaurant in Lan Kwai Fong, but that ended when the parent company folded. She started getting letters from Hong Kong Immigration, inquiring about her status. And it was the same thing, lurching from one near-missed opportunity to another. And then she met Margaret.

Margaret seemed the answer to all her problems. The pay she offered was very high, and she offered it apologetically enough ("I know you went to Columbia . . .") that Mercy thought she could probably ask for more soon. It was not permanent work, of course, but that was fine. And then the disaster happened. The thing with G. And then it felt as if life would never be the same.

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So now she spends her mornings reading about all sorts of lives in the local newspaper, the romantically named *Far East Post*, where the smaller city items often have to do with men bludgeoning each other with choppers, the local butcher implement, and children falling out of windows when left alone by their teenage mothers. It makes her feel slightly better, reading about all the chaos, as if her own life is not so bad. But when she thinks about her life, really thinks about it, she feels short of breath. Her life! Oh, Mercy! Her life.

She also looks for stories on the Internet, in magazines. *People* usually has one, a dependably sentimental human interest story. Last month, there had been an article about a pretty teenager in Tennessee who had her arm blown off while drinking beer with friends and playing around with a gun. In another story she found, a man had driven his girlfriend's two sons to school, only he had been drunk (at eight in the morning!), and they had been killed in a car crash, because he hadn't put them in their car seats. The man survived, courtesy of his airbag. The mother had been at home, asleep. Or the famous case of the chimpanzee woman. A woman had a chimp as a pet and had sedated it before her friend came over. The chimp had reacted badly to the drug and torn the friend's face off. The victim had to have a complete face transplant, and children on the street cried when they saw her.

Mercy wants to find a story that echoes her own.

These stories always talk about the victim, and how she or he is coping. There are lots of pictures, in *People* magazine, at least, of the victim at home, disfigured or pale, chopping some sort of vegetable

on a wooden board in the kitchen while his or her loving and supportive spouse or family member looks on. There are quotes from friends about how brave the victim is, how his character has been strengthened by the tragedy. You can survive a tragedy, given time. But what Mercy wants to know is never there. The person responsible for the calamity is never mentioned. No one wants to hear about the guy who shot the gun by mistake, or the drunk boyfriend driver, or the chimpanzee's owner. The victims are richly sympathized with, and their guilty, confused perpetrators are erased from the story. They don't exist. They are supposed to disappear.

What did all those people do?

What are their stories?

She knows her own. She sits at home, eats almost nothing, looks at her dwindling bank account online, and wonders when she's supposed to start her life again, when she is allowed.