THE PRICE OF EGGS IN CHINA

IT WAS noon when Dean Kaneshiro arrived at Oriental Hair Poet No. 2's house, and as she opened the door, she said, blinking, "Hello. Come in. I'm sorry. I'm not quite awake."

He carried his measuring rig through the living room, noting the red birch floor, the authentic Stickley, the Nakashima table, the Maloof credenza—good craftsmanship, carefully selected, this poet, Marcella Ahn, was a woman who knew wood.

"When you called," she said in her study, "I'd almost forgotten. It's been over two years! I hope I wasn't too difficult to track down."

Immediately Dean was annoyed. When she had ordered the chair, he had been clear about his backlog, and today was the exact date he'd given her for the fitting. And she *had* been

difficult to track down, despite his request, two years ago, that she notify him of any changes of address. Her telephone number in San Francisco had been disconnected, and he had had to find her book in the library, then call her publisher in New York, then her agent, only to learn that Marcella Ahn had moved an hour south of San Francisco to the very town, Rosarita Bay, where he himself lived. Never mind that he should have figured this out, having overheard rumors of yet another Asian poet in town with spectacular long hair, rumors which had prompted the references to her and Caroline Yip, his girlfriend of eight months, as the Oriental Hair Poets.

He adjusted his rig. Marcella Ahn was thin and tall, but most of her height was in her torso, not her legs—typical of Koreans. She wore tight midnight-blue velvet pants, lace-up black boots, and a flouncy white Victorian blouse, her tiny waist cinched by a thick leather belt.

"Sit, please," he said. She settled into the measuring rig. He walked around her twice, then said, "Stand up, please." After she got up, he fine-tuned the back supports and armrests and shortened the legs. "Again, please."

She sat down. "Oh, that's much better, infinitely better," she said. "You can do that just by looking?"

Now came the part that Dean always hated. He could use the rig to custom-fit his chairs for every part of the body except for one. "Could you turn around, please?"

"Sorry?"

"Could you turn around? For the saddling of the seat?"

Marcella Ahn's eyes lighted, and the whitewash of her foundation and powder was suddenly broken by the mischievous curl of her lips, which were painted a deep claret. "You mean you want to examine . . . my *buttocks*?"

He could feel sweat popping on his forehead. "Please."

Still smirking, she raised her arms, the ruffled cuffs of her blouse dropping away, followed by the jangling release of two dozen silver bracelets on each wrist. There were silver rings on nearly every digit, too, and with her exquisitely lacquered fingers, she slowly gathered her hair—straight and lambent and hanging to midthigh—and raked it over one shoulder so it lay over her breast. Then she pivoted on her toe, turned around, and daintily lifted the tail of her blouse to expose her butt.

He squatted behind her and stared at it for a full ten seconds. It was a good butt, a firm, StairMastered butt, a shapely, surprisingly protuberant butt.

She peeked over her shoulder. "Need me to bend over a little?" she asked.

He bounced up and moved across the room and pretended to jot down some notes, then looked around. More classic modern furniture, very expensive. And the place was neat, obsessive-compulsive neat. He pointed to her desk. "You'll be using the chair here?"

"Yes."

"To do your writing?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'll watch you, then. For twenty minutes, please."

"What? Right now?"

"It'll help me to see you work, how you sit, maybe slouch."

"It's not that simple," she said.

"No?"

"Of course not. Poets can't write on demand. You know nothing about poetry, do you?"

"No, I don't," Dean said. All he ever read, in fact, were mystery novels. He went through three or four of them a week—anything with a crime, an investigation. He was now so familiar with forensic techniques, he could predict almost any plot twist, but his head still swam in delight at the first hint of a frame-up or double-cross.

He glanced out the window. Marcella Ahn lived off Skyview Ridge Road, which crested the rolling foothills, and she had one of the few panoramic views of Rosarita Bay—the harbor to the north, the marsh to the south, the town in the middle, and, everywhere beyond, the vast Pacific.

Marcella Ahn had her hands on her hips. "And I don't slouch," she said.

Eventually he did convince her to sit in her present desk chair, an ugly vinyl contraption with pneumatic levers and bulky ergonomic pads. She opened a bound notebook and uncapped a fountain pen, and hovered over the blank page for what seemed like a long time. Then she abruptly set everything aside and booted up her laptop computer. "What do you do with clients who aren't within driving distance?"

"I ask for a videotape, and I talk to their tailor. Try to work, please. Then I'll be out of your way."

"I feel so silly."

"Just pretend I'm not here," he said.

Marcella Ahn continued to stare at the computer screen. She shifted, crossed her legs, and tucked them underneath her. Finally, she set her fingers on the keys and tapped out

three words—all she could manage, apparently. She exhaled heavily. "When will the chair be ready?"

"I'll start on it next month, on April twentieth, then three weeks, so May eleventh," he told her, though he required only half that time. He liked to plan for contingencies, and he knew his customers wanted to believe—especially with the prices they were paying—that it took him longer to make the chairs.

"Can I visit your studio?" she asked.

"No, you cannot."

"Ah, you see, you can dish it—"

"It would be very inconvenient."

"For twenty minutes."

"Please don't," he said.

"Seriously. I can't swing by for a couple of minutes?"

"No."

Marcella Ahn let out a dismissive puff. "Artists," she said.

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ORIENTAL Hair Poet No. 1 was a slob. Caroline Yip lived in an apartment above the R. B. Feed & Hardware store, one small room with a Pullman kitchen, a cramped bathroom, and no closets. Her only furnishings were a futon, a boom box, and a coffee table, and the floor was littered with clothes, CDs, shoes, books, newspapers, bills, and magazines. There was a thick layer of grease on the stovetop, dust and hair and curdled food on every other surface, and the bathroom was clogged with sixty-two bottles of shampoo and conditioner, some half-filled, most of them empty.

Dean had stayed in the apartment only once—the first time

they had slept together. He had lain naked on her futon, and Caroline had inspected his erection, baldly surveying it from different angles. "Your penis looks like a fire hydrant," she had said. "Everything about you is short, squat, and thick." It was true. Dean was an avid weightlifter, not an ounce of fat on him, but his musculature was broad and tumescent, absent of definition. His forearms were pickle jars, almost as big as his thighs, and his crewcutted head sat on his shoulders without the relief of a neck. "What am I doing with you?" Caroline said. "This is what it's come down to, this is how far I've sunk. I'm about to fuck a Nipponese fire hydrant with the verbal capacity of tap water."

There were other peculiarities. She didn't sleep well, although she had done almost everything possible short of psychotherapy—which she didn't believe in—to alleviate her insomnia and insistent stress: acupuncture, herbs, yoga, homeopathy, tai chi. She ran five miles a day, and she meditated for twenty minutes each morning and evening, beginning her sessions by trying to relax her face, stretching and contorting it, mouth yowling open, eyes bulging—it was a horrific sight.

Even when she did sleep, it was fitful. Because she ground her teeth, she wore a plastic mouthpiece to bed, and she bit down so hard on it during the night, she left black spots where her fillings were positioned. She had nightmares, a recurring nightmare, of headless baby chickens chasing after her, hundreds of decapitated little chicks tittering in rabid pursuit.

The nightmares, however, didn't stop her from eating chicken, or anything else, for that matter. She was a waif,

five-two, barely a hundred pounds. Her hair—luxuriant, butt-length, and naturally kinky, a rarity among Asians—seemed to weigh more than she did. Yet she had a ravenous appetite. She was constantly asking for seconds, picking off Dean's plate. "Where does it all go?" he asked over dinner one night, a month into their courtship.

"What?"

"The food."

"I have a very fast metabolism. You're not going to finish that?"

He scraped the rest of his portion into her bowl, and he watched her eat. He had surprised himself by how fond he'd become of her. He was a disciplined man, one with solitary and fastidious habits, yet Caroline's idiosyncrasies were endearing to him. Maybe this was the true measure of love, he thought—when you willingly tolerate behavior that, in anyone else, would be annoying, even abhorrent to you. Without thinking, he blurted out, "I love you."

"Yikes," Caroline said. She put her chopsticks down and wiped her mouth. "You are the sweetest man I know, Dean. But I worry about you. You're so innocent. Didn't anyone let you out of the house when you were young? Don't you know you're not supposed to say things like that so soon?"

"Do you love me?"

She sighed. "I don't right now," she said. Then she laid her hands on top of his head and shook it. "But I think I will. Okay, you big boob?"

It took her two more months to say that she might, maybe, be a little bit in love with him, too. "Despite everything, I guess I'm still a romantic," she said. "I will never learn."

They were both reclusive by nature, and most of the time were content to sequester themselves in Dean's house, which was tucked in a canyon in the coastal mountains. They watched videos, read, cooked Japanese dishes: *tonkatsu, oyako donburi, tempura, unagi.* It was a quiet life, free of catastrophe, and it had lulled Dean into thinking that there would be no harm in telling her about his encounter with Oriental Hair Poet No. 2.

"That cunt!" Caroline said. "That conniving Korean cunt! She's moved here on purpose!"

It was all she could talk about for three days. Caroline Yip and Marcella Ahn, it turned out, had a history. They had both lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in their twenties, and for several years they had been the best of friends—inseparable, really. But then their first books came out at the same time, Marcella's from a major New York publisher, Caroline's from a small, albeit respected press. Both had very similar jacket photos, the two women looking solemn and precious, hair flowing in full regalia. An unfortunate coincidence. Critics couldn't resist reviewing them together, mocking the pair, even then, as "The Oriental Hair Poets," "The Braids of the East," and "The New Asian Poe-tresses."

But Marcella came away from these barbs relatively unscathed. Her book, *Speak to Desire,* was taken seriously, compared to Marianne Moore and Emily Dickinson. Her poetry was highly erudite, usually beginning with mundane observations about birds or plant life, then slipping into long, abstract meditations on entropy and inertia, the Bible, evolution, and death, punctuated by the briefest mention of personal deprivations—anorexia, depression, abandonment. Or

so the critics said. Dean still had the book from the library, but he couldn't make heads or tails of it.

In contrast, Caroline's book, *Chicks of Chinese Descent,* had been skewered. She wrote in a slangy, contemporary voice, full of topical, pop culture allusions. She wrote about masturbation and Marilyn Monroe, about tampons and *moo goo gai pan,* about alien babies and chickens possessed by the devil. She was roundly dispatched as a mediocre talent.

Worse, Caroline said, was what happened afterward. Marcella began to thwart her at every turn. Teaching jobs, coveted magazine publications, awards, residencies, fellowships—everything Caroline applied for, Marcella got. It didn't hurt that Marcella was a shameless schmoozer, flirting and networking with anyone who might be of use. Yet, the fact was, Marcella was rich. Her father was a shipping tycoon, and she had a trust fund in the millions. She didn't need any of these pitifully small sinecures which would have meant a livelihood to Caroline, and it became obvious that the only reason Marcella was pursuing them at all was to taunt her.

"She's a vulture, a vampire," Caroline told Dean. "You know she won't go out in the light of day? She stays up until four, five in the morning and doesn't wake up until past noon."

And then there was the matter of Evan Paviromo, the English-Italian editor of a literary journal whom Caroline had dated for seven years, waiting patiently for them to get married and have children. He broke it off one day without explanation. She dogged him. Why? Why was he ending it? She refused to let him go without some sort of answer. Finally

he complied. "It's something Marcella said," he admitted.

At first Caroline feared they were having an affair, but the truth was more vicious. "Marcella told me she admired me," Evan said, "that I was far more generous than she could ever be. She said she just wouldn't be able to stay with someone whose work she didn't really respect. I thought about that, and I decided I'm not that generous. It's something that would eat away at me, that's bothered me all along. It's something I can't abide."

Caroline fled to California, eventually landing in Rosarita Bay. She completely disengaged herself from the poetry world. She was still writing every day, excruciating as it was for her, but she had not attempted to publish anything in six years. She was thirty-seven now, and a waitress—the breakfast shift at a diner, the dinner shift at a barbecue joint. Her feet had grown a full size from standing so much, and she was broke. But she had started to feel like her old self again, healthier, more relaxed, sleeping better. Dean had a lot to do with it, she said. She was happy—or as happy as it was possible for a poet to be. Until now. Until Marcella Ahn suddenly arrived.

"She's come to torment me," Caroline said. "Why else would she move to Rosarita Bay?"

"It's not such a bad place to live."

"Oh, please."

Dean supposed she was right. On the surface, Rosarita Bay looked like a nice seaside town, a rural sanctuary between San Francisco and Santa Cruz. It billed itself as the pumpkin capital of the world, and it had a Main Street lined with gas street lamps and old-time, clapboarded, saltbox shops and

restaurants. Secluded and quiet, it felt like genuine small-town America, and most of the eight thousand residents preferred it that way, voting down every development plan that came down the pike.

Yet the things that gave Rosarita Bay its charm were also killing it. There were only two roads into town, Highway 1 on the coast and Highway 71 through the San Vicente Mountains, both of them just two lanes and prone to landslides. The fishing and farming industries were drying up, there were no new jobs, and, for those who worked in San Francisco or "over the hill" in San Vicente, it was a murderous, traffic-choked commute. The weather was also terrible, rain-soaked and wave-battered in the winter, wind-beaten in the spring, and fog-shrouded all summer long, leaving basically two good months—September and October.

In theory quaint and pretty, Rosarita Bay was actually a no-man's-land, a sleepy, slightly seedy backwater with the gray air of anonymity. People stuck to themselves, as if shied by failure and missed opportunities. You could get lost here, forgotten. It was, when all was said and done, a place of exile. It was not a place for a wealthy, jet-setting artiste and bon vivant like Marcella Ahn. But to come here because of Caroline? No. Dean could not believe it.

"How could she have even known you were here?" he asked Caroline. "You said you're not in touch with any of those people anymore."

"She probably hired a detective."

"Come on."

"You don't understand. I suppose you think if anyone's looking for revenge, it'd be me, that I can't be a threat to her

because I'm such a loser."

"I wish you'd stop putting yourself down all the time. You're not a loser."

"Yes, I am. You're just too polite to say so. You're so fucking Japanese."

Early on, she had given him her book to read, and he had told her he liked it. But when pressed, he'd had to admit that he didn't really understand the poems. He was not an educated man, he had said.

"You pass yourself off as this simple chairmaker," Caroline said. "You were practically monosyllabic when we began seeing each other. But I know you're not the gallunk you make yourself out to be."

"I think you're talented. I think you're very talented." How could he explain it to her? Something had happened as he'd read her book. The poems, confusing as they were, had made his skin prickle, his throat thicken, random images and words—*kiwi, quiver, belly, maw*—wiggling into his head and taking residence.

"Are you attracted to her?" Caroline asked.

"What?"

"You're not going to make the chair for her, are you?"

"I have to."

"You don't have a contract."

"No, but—"

"You still think it's all a coincidence."

"She ordered the chair *sixteen months* before I met you."

"You see how devious she is?"

Dean couldn't help himself. He laughed.

"She has some sick bond to me," Caroline said. "In all this

time, she hasn't published another book, either. She *needs* me. She *needs* my misery. You think I'm being hysterical, but you wait."

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IT began with candy and flowers, left anonymously behind the hardware store, on the stairs that led up to Caroline's apartment. Dean had not sent them.

"It's her," Caroline said.

The gifts continued, every week or so, then every few days. Chocolates, carnations, stuffed animals, scarves, hairbrushes, barrettes, lingerie. Caroline, increasingly anxious, moved in with Dean, and quickly came down with a horrendous cold.

Hourly he would check on her, administering juice, echinacea, or antihistamines, then would go back to the refuge of his workshop. It was where he was most comfortable—alone with his tools and wood, making chairs that would last hundreds of years. He made only armchairs now, one chair, over and over, the Kaneshiro Chair. Each one was fashioned out of a single board of *keyaki,* Japanese zelkova, and was completely handmade. From the logging to the tung oil finish, the wood never touched a power tool. All of Dean's saws and chisels and planes were hand-forged in Japan, and he shunned vises and clamps of any kind, sometimes holding pieces between his feet to work on them.

On first sight, the chair's design wasn't that special—blocky right angles, thick Mission-style slats—but its beauty lay in the craftsmanship. Dean used no nails or screws, no dowels or even glue. Everything was put together by joints, forty-four delicate, intricate joints, modeled after a tradition-

al method of Japanese joinery dating to the seventeenth century, called *sashimono*. Once coupled, the joints were tenaciously, permanently locked. They would never budge, they would never so much as squeak.

What's more, every surface was finished with a hand plane. Dean would not deign to have sandpaper in his shop. He had apprenticed for four years with a master carpenter in the city of Matsumoto, in Nagano prefecture, spending the first six months just learning how to sharpen his tools. When he returned to California, he could pull a block plane over a board and produce a continuous twelve-foot-long shaving, without a single skip or dig, that was less than a tenth of a millimeter thick—so thin you could read a newspaper through it.

Dean aimed for perfection with each chair. With the first kerf of his *dozuki* saw, with the initial chip of a chisel, he was committed to the truth of the cut. Tradition dictated that any errors could not be repaired, but had to remain untouched to remind the woodworker of his humble nature. More and more, Dean liked to challenge himself. He no longer used a level, square, or marking gauge, relying on his eye, and soon he planned to dispense with rulers altogether, maybe even with pencils and chalk. He wanted to get to the point where he could make a Kaneshiro Chair blindfolded.

But he had a problem. Japanese zelkova, the one- to two-thousand-year-old variety he needed, was rare and very expensive—amounting to over $150 a pound. There were only three traditional woodcutters left in Japan, and Dean's sawyer, Hayashi Kota, was sixty-nine. Hayashi-san's intuition was irreplaceable. So much of the work was in reading

the trees and determining where to begin sawing to reveal the best figuring and grain—like cutting diamonds. Afraid the sawyer might die soon, Dean had begun stockpiling wood five years ago. In his lumber shed, which was climate-controlled to keep the wood at a steady thirty-seven percent humidity, was about two hundred thousand dollars' worth of zelkova. Hayashi-san cut the logs through and through and air-dried them in Japan for a year, and after two weeks of kiln heat, the boards were shipped to Dean, who stacked them on end in *boule* order. When he went into the shed to select a new board, he was always overcome by the beauty of the wood, the smell of it. He'd run his hand over the boards—hardly a check or crack on them—and would want to weep.

Given the expense of the wood and the precision his chairs required, anyone seeing Dean in his shop would have been shocked by the rapidity with which he worked. He never hesitated. He *attacked* the wood, chips flying, shavings whirling into the air, sawdust piling at his feet. He could sustain this ferocity for hours, never letting his concentration flag. No wonder, then, that it took him a few moments to hear the knocking on the door late that afternoon. It took him even longer to comprehend why anyone would be disturbing him in his workshop, his *sanctum sanctorum*.

Caroline swung open the door and stepped inside, looking none too happy. "You have a visitor," she said.

Marcella Ahn sidled past her. "Hello!"

Dean almost dropped his *ryoba* saw.

"Is that my chair?" she asked, pointing to the stack of two-by-twos on his bench. "I know, I know, you told me not to come, but I had to. You won't hold it against me, will you?"

Without warning, Caroline let out a violent sneeze, her hair whiplashing forward.

"Bless you," Dean and Marcella said at the same time.

Caroline snorted up a long string of snot, glaring at Oriental Hair Poet No. 2. They were a study in contrasts, Marcella once again decked out as an Edwardian whore: a corset and bodice, miniskirt and high heels, full makeup, hair glistening. Caroline was wearing her usual threadbare cardigan and flannel shirt, pajama bottoms, and flip-flops. She hadn't bathed in two days, sick in bed the entire time.

"When you get over this cold," Marcella said to her, "we'll have to get together and catch up. I just can't get over seeing you here."

"It *is* incredible, isn't it?" Caroline said. "It must defy all the laws of probability." She walked to the wall and lifted a mortise chisel from the rack. "The chances of your moving here, when you could live anywhere in the world, it's probably more likely for me to shit an egg for breakfast. Why *did* you move here?"

"Pure chance," Marcella told her cheerily. "I happened to stop for coffee on my way to Aptos, and I saw one of those real estate circulars for this house. It looked like an unbelievable bargain. Beautiful woodwork. I thought, What the hell, I might as well see it while I'm here. I was tired of living in cities."

"What have you been doing since you got to town? Buying lots of gifts?"

Dean watched her dig the chisel blade into a piece of scrap. He wished she would put the chisel down. It was very sharp.

Marcella appeared confused. "Gifts? No. Well, unless you

count Mr. Kaneshiro's chair as a gift. To myself. You don't have a finished one here? I've actually never seen one except in the Museum of Modern Art."

"Sorry," he told her, nervous now, hoping it would slip by Caroline.

But it did not. "The Museum of Modern Art?" she asked. "In New York?"

Marcella nodded. She absently flicked her hair back with her hand, and one of her bracelets flew off her wrist, pinging against the window and landing on some wood chips.

Caroline speared it up with the chisel and dangled it in front of Marcella, who slid it off somewhat apprehensively. Caroline then turned to Dean. "Your chairs are in the Museum of Modern Art in New York?"

He shrugged. "Just one."

"You didn't know?" Marcella asked Caroline, plainly pleased she didn't. "Your boyfriend's quite famous."

"How famous?"

"I would like to get back to work now," Dean said.

"He's in Cooper-Hewitt's permanent collection, the M.F.A. in Boston, the American Craft Museum."

"I need to work, please."

"Don't you have a piece in the White House?"

"Time is late, please."

"Can I ask you some questions about your process?"

"No." He grabbed the chisel out of Caroline's hand before she could react and ushered Marcella Ahn to the door. "Okay, thank you. Goodbye."

"Caroline, when do you want to get together? Maybe for tea?"

"She'll call you," Dean said, blocking her way back inside.

"You'll give her my number?"

"Yes, yes, thank you," he said, and shut the door.

Caroline was sitting on his planing bench, looking gaunt and exhausted. Through the window behind her, Dean saw it was nearing dusk, the wind calming down, the trees quiet. Marcella Ahn was out of view, but he could hear her starting her car, then driving away. He sat down next to Caroline and rubbed her back. "You should go back to bed. Are you hungry? I could make you something."

"Is there anything else about you I should know? Maybe you've taught at Yale or been on the Pulitzer committee? Maybe you've won a few genius grants?"

He wagged his head. "Just one."

"What?"

He told her everything. Earlier in his career, he had done mostly conceptual woodwork, more sculpture than furniture. His father was indeed a fifth-generation Japanese carpenter, as he'd told her, but Dean had broken with tradition, leaving his family's cabinetmaking business in San Luis Obispo to study studio furniture at the Rhode Island School of Design. After graduating, he had moved to New York, where he was quickly declared a phenomenon, a development that baffled him. People talked about his work with terms like "verticality" and "negation of ego" and "primal tension," and they might as well have been speaking Farsi. He rode it for all it was worth, selling pieces at a record clip. But eventually, he became bored. He didn't experience any of the rivalries that Caroline had, nor was he too bothered by the egos and fatuity that abounded in the art world. He just didn't believe in

what he was doing anymore, particularly after his father died of a sudden stroke. Dean wanted to return to the pure craftsmanship and functionality of woodworking, building something people could actually *use*. So he dropped everything to apprentice in Japan. Afterward, he distilled all of his knowledge into the Kaneshiro Chair, which was regarded as significant a landmark as Frank Lloyd Wright's Willits Chair. Ironically, his work was celebrated anew. He received a five-year genius grant that paid him an annual $50,000, all of which he had put into hoarding the zelkova in his shed.

"How much do you get a chair?" Caroline asked.

"Ten thousand."

"God, you're only thirty-eight."

"It's an inflated market."

"And you never thought to tell me any of this in the eight months we've been going out? I thought you were barely getting by. You live in this crappy little house with cheap furniture, your pickup is ten years old, you never take vacations. I thought it was because you weren't very savvy about your business, making one chair at a time, no advertising or catalogue or anything, no store lines. I thought you were *clueless*."

"It's not important."

"Not important? Are you insane? Not important? It changes everything."

"Why?"

"You know why, or you wouldn't have kept this secret from me."

"It was an accident. I didn't set out to be famous. It just happened. I'm ashamed of it."

"You should be. You're either pathologically modest, or you were afraid I'd be repelled by how successful you are, compared to me. But you should have told me."

"I just make chairs now," Dean said. "I'm just like you with your poetry. I work hard like you. I don't do it for the money or the fame or to be popular with the critics."

"It's just incidental that you've gotten all of those things without even trying."

"Let's go in the house. I'll make you dinner."

"No. I have to go home. I can't be with you anymore."

"Caroline, please."

"You must think I'm pathetic, you must pity me," she said. "You're not like me at all. You're just like Marcella."

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THEY had had fights before, puzzling affairs where she would walk out in a huff, incensed by an innocuous remark he'd made, a mysterious gaffe he'd committed. A day or two would go by, then she would talk to him, peevishly at first, ultimately relenting after she had dressed him down with a pointed lecture on his need to be more sensitive, more supportive, more complimentary, more assertive, more emotive, more sympathetic, above all, more *communicative*. Dean would listen without protest, and, newly educated and humbled, he would always be taken back. But not this time. This time was different. On the telephone the next day, Caroline was cool and resolute—no whining or nagging, no histrionics or ultimatums or room for negotiation. "It's over, Dean," she said.

The following afternoon, he went to her apartment with a gallon of *miso* soup. "For your cold," he said.

She looked down at the tub in his hands. "I'm fine now. I don't need the soup. The cold's gone."

They were standing outside on the stairway landing. "You're not going to let me in?" he asked.

"Dean, didn't you hear what I said yesterday?"

"Just tell me how I should change. I'll change."

"It's not like that."

"What's it like, then? Tell me what you want me to do."

"Nothing," she said. "You can't fix this. Don't come by again, don't call, okay? It'll be easier if we just break it off clean."

He tried to leave her alone, but none of it made any sense to him. Why was she ending it? What had he done wrong? It had to be one of her mood swings, a little hormonal blip, a temporary synaptic disruption, all of which he'd witnessed and weathered before. It had to be more about Marcella Ahn than him. She couldn't really be serious. The best course of action seemed to be to wait it out, while at the same time being solicitous and attentive. So he called—not *too* frequently, maybe once a day or so—and since she wouldn't pick up her phone, he left messages: "I just wanted to see how you're doing. I miss you." He drove to her apartment and knocked on her door, and since she wouldn't answer it, he left care packages: macadamia nuts, coffee, cream, filters, toilet paper, sodas, granola bars, springwater, toothpaste—the everyday staples she always forgot to buy.

Five days passed, and she didn't appear to be weakening. A little desperate, he decided to go to Rae's Diner. When Caroline came out of the kitchen and saw him sitting in her station, she didn't seem surprised, but she was angry. She

wouldn't acknowledge him, wouldn't come to his table. After twenty minutes, Dean flagged down Rae, the owner. "Could you tell Caroline to take my order?" he asked.

Rae, a lanky, middle-aged brunette with a fierce sunlamp tan, studied him, then Caroline. "If you two are having a fight, I'm not going to be in the middle of it. You want to stay, you'll have to pay."

"That's what I'm trying to do. She won't take my order."

"Why don't you just move to another station?"

"There aren't any other tables."

"The counter, then."

"I'm a paying customer, I should be able to sit where I want."

Rae shook her head. "Any screaming, one little commotion, and you're out of here. And no dawdling over a cup of coffee, either. The minute your table's cleared, you go."

She had a brief conference with Caroline, who began arguing with her, but in the end Rae won out, and Caroline marched over to Dean's table. She didn't look well—pale and baggy-eyed. She wasn't sleeping or eating much, it was clear. He tried to make pleasantries. "How have you been?" he asked her. She would not say a word, much less look at him. She waited for his order, ballpoint poised over her pad. A few minutes later, when his food was ready, she clattered the plate in front of him and walked away. When he raised his coffee cup for a refill, she slopped the pot, spilling coffee over the brim, almost scorching his crotch. He left her a generous tip.

He came to a similar arrangement with the manager of Da Bones, the barbecue restaurant where Caroline worked nights—as long as he paid, he could stay. He ate meals at

every one of Caroline's shifts for a week, at the end of which he had gained eight pounds and was popping antacids as if they were gumballs. It was greasy, artery-busting food. A typical breakfast now consisted of six eggs over easy, sausage, hash browns, blueberry flapjacks, coffee, orange juice, biscuits, and milk gravy. Dinner was the hungry man combo—beef brisket, half a rack of baby backs, kielbasa, blackened chicken, rice, beans, slaw, and cornbread—accompanied by a side of mashed and two plates of conch fritters. But it was worth it. Caroline's resolve, he could tell, was beginning to crack (although the same could be said about her health; she looked awful). One night, as he asked for his fifth glass of water, she actually said something. She said, "You are getting to be a real pain in the ass," and she almost smiled. He was getting to her.

But two days later, he received a strange summons. A sergeant from the sheriff's office, Gene Becklund, requested he come down for a talk concerning Caroline. Mystified, Dean drove over to the sheriff's office on Highway 1 and was escorted into an interrogation room. Gene Becklund was a tall, soft-spoken man with prematurely gray hair. He opened the conversation by saying, "You've been going over to your ex-girlfriend's apartment a lot, dropping off little presents? Even though she told you not to call or visit?"

Unsettled, Dean nodded yes.

"You've also been bothering her at her workplace nearly every day?"

"'Bothering'?"

"And you've been leaving a lot of messages on her machine, haven't you?"

"We haven't really broken up," Dean said. "We're just having a fight."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm not harassing her or anything."

"Okay."

"Did she say I was harassing her?"

"Why don't we listen to something," Becklund said, and turned on a cassette player. On the tape was a garbled, robotic, unidentifiable voice, reciting the vile, evil things that would be done to Caroline—anal penetration, disembowelment. "You think you can treat people the way you've treated me, Miss Mighty High?" the voice said. "Think again. I'm going to enjoy watching you die."

"Jesus," Dean said.

Becklund clicked off the tape. "That's just a sample. There have been other calls—very ugly. The voice is disguised. It's hard to even know whether it's a man or a woman."

"The caller used a voice changer."

"You're familiar with them?"

"I read a lot of crime novels."

"I was surprised how cheap the things are. You can get them off the Internet," Becklund said. "The calls were made from various pay phones, mostly between two and four in the morning. Ms. Yip asked the phone company to begin tracing incoming calls a couple of weeks ago. We can trace where they're being made, but not who's making them." Almost as an afterthought, he asked, "You're not making them, are you?"

"No. Is that what Caroline thinks?"

"Here's what I never understand. She *should* think that, everything in my experience says so, but she doesn't. She

thinks it's this woman, Marcella Ahn. I've talked to her, too, but she claims she's only left a couple of messages to invite Ms. Yip to tea, and to see if she would do a poetry reading with her at Beryl's Bookstore."

Dean had never really believed it was Marcella Ahn who was leaving the gifts. Maybe an enamored restaurant customer, or the pimply clerk in the hardware store, but not Marcella. Now he reconsidered. "Maybe it's not all a coincidence," he said. "Maybe it is her." Suddenly it almost made sense. "I think it might really be her."

"Maybe," Becklund said. "But my money's on you. Unfortunately, I can't get a restraining order issued without Ms. Yip's cooperation. But I can do this. I can tell you that all the things you did before—the presents, the calls, the workplace visits—weren't prosecutable under the antistalking laws until you made a physical threat. You crossed the line with the physical threat. From now on, you make one little slip-up, I can arrest you." He tapped the tabletop with his fingertip. "I suggest you stay away from her."

Dean ignored Becklund. He was frightened for Caroline, and he would do all he could to protect her. The next morning, he waited across the street from the diner for Caroline's shift to finish. When she came outside, he didn't recognize her at first. She had cut off all her hair.

She was walking briskly, carrying a Styrofoam food container, and he had to sprint to catch up to her. "Caroline, please talk to me," he said. "Will you talk to me? Sergeant Becklund told me about the messages."

She stopped but did not turn around. As he stepped in front of her, he saw she was crying. Her hair was shorn to no

more than an inch, matted in clumps and tufts, exposing scalp in some places. Evidently she had chopped it off herself in a fit of self-immolation. "Oh, baby," he said, "what have you done?"

She dropped the container, splattering egg salad onto the sidewalk, and collapsed into him. "Do you believe me now?" she asked. "Do you believe it's her?"

"Yes. I do."

"What makes one person want to destroy another?" she asked. "For what? The pettiness, the backstabbing, the meanness—what's the point? Is it fun? She has everything. What more does she want? Why is she doing this to me?"

Dean held her. "I don't know."

"It's such a terrible world, Dean. You can't trust anyone. No matter where you go, there's always someone wishing you ill will. You think they're your friends, and then they're smearing you, trying to ruin you. I can't take this anymore. Why can't she just go away? Can't you make her go away?"

"Is that what you want?"

"Yes," Caroline said.

It was all Dean needed to hear. He took her to his house, put her to bed, and got to work.

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IT didn't take long to learn her routine. Caroline had been right: Marcella Ahn never left her house until near sunset, when she would go to the newly renovated Y.M.C.A. to attend a cardioboxing class, topped off with half an hour on the StairMaster. She usually didn't shower at the Y, but would go straight home in her workout clothes. At nine or

so, she might emerge and drive to Beryl's Bookstore & Café in town for a magazine and a cappuccino. Once, she went to the Moonside Trading Post for a video. Another time, the Safeway on Highway 71 at two A.M. She had one guest, a male, dressed in a suit, an O.B./G.Y.N. at a San Francisco hospital, according to the parking sticker on his BMW. He spent the night. She didn't go anywhere near Caroline's apartment or make any clandestine calls from pay phones.

Dean didn't try to conceal his stakeouts from Caroline, but he misled her into thinking he wanted to catch Marcella in the act. He had no such expectations. By this time, Marcella had to know that she was—however removed—a suspect, that she might be watched. Dean had an entirely different agenda.

One afternoon, he interrupted his surveillance to go to a spy hobbyist shop in San Francisco. He had found it through the Internet on the Rosarita Bay Library computer—Sergeant Becklund had given him the idea. At the store, he bought a lock pick set, $34.95, and a portable voice changer, $29.95. (The clerk also tried to sell him a 200,000-volt stun gun, on sale for $119.95.) Dean paid cash—no credit card records or bank statements to implicate him later.

In the dead of night, he made a call from a pay phone in the neighboring town of Miramar to his own answering machine, imitating the taunts he'd heard in the sheriff's office with the voice changer. "Hey, Jap boyfriend, you're back together with her, are you? Well, fear not, I know where you live." Before leaving the house, he had switched off his telephone's ringer and turned down the volume on the answering machine. He didn't want to scare Caroline, even though

she was likely asleep, knocked out by the sleeping pills prescribed by a doctor he'd taken her to see at the town clinic. Still, in the morning, he had no choice but to play the message for her. Otherwise, she wouldn't have called Becklund in a panic, imploring him to arrest Marcella Ahn. "She's insane," Caroline told him. "She's trying to drive me crazy. She's going to try to kill me. You have to do something."

Becklund came to Dean's house, listened to the tape, and appeared to have a change of heart. Dean and Caroline had reconciled. There was no reason to suspect him anymore. Becklund had to look elsewhere. "Keep your doors and windows locked," he told Dean.

After that, the only question was when. It couldn't be too soon, but each day of waiting became more torturous.

The following Wednesday, before her dinner shift, he drove Caroline to Rummy Creek and parked on the headlands overlooking the ocean. It was another miserable, gray, windy day, Dean's truck buffeted by gusts. Rummy Creek was world famous for its big waves, and there was supposed to be a monster swell approaching, but the water was flat, a clump of surfers in the distance bobbing gently on the surface like kelp.

"There haven't been any phone calls all week," Caroline said inside his truck.

"I know. Maybe she's decided to stop."

"No," Caroline said, "she'd never stop. Something's going to happen. I can feel it. I'm scared, Dean."

He dropped her off at Da Bones, then drove up Skyview Ridge Road and nestled in the woods outside Marcella's house. On schedule, she left for the Y.M.C.A. at six P.M. After

a few minutes, he strolled to the door as casually as possible. She didn't have a neighbor within a quarter mile, but he worried about the unforeseen—the gynecologist lover, a UPS delivery, Becklund deciding belatedly to serve a restraining order. Wearing latex surgical gloves, Dean inserted a lock pick and tension bar into the keyhole on the front door. The deadbolt opened within twenty seconds. Thankfully she had not installed an alarm system yet. He took off his shoes and walked through the kitchen into the garage. This was the biggest variable in his plan. If he didn't find what he needed there, none of it would work. But to his relief, Marcella Ahn had several cans of motor oil on the shelf, as well as some barbecue lighter fluid—it wasn't gasoline, but it would do. In the recycle bin, there were four empty bottles of pinot grigio. In the kitchen, a funnel and a dishrag. He poured one part motor oil and one part lighter fluid into a bottle, a Molotov cocktail recipe provided by the Internet. In her bedroom, he pulled several strands of hair from her brush, pocketed one of her bracelets, and grabbed a pair of platform-heeled boots from her closet. Then he was out, and he sped to his house in Vasquez Canyon. All he had to do was press in some bootprints in the dirt in front of the lumber shed, but he was running out of time. He drove back to Marcella's, hurriedly washed the soles of the boots in the kitchen sink, careful to leave a little mud, replaced the boots in the closet, checked through the house, and locked up. Then he went to Santa Cruz and tossed the lock pick set and voice changer into a dumpster.

He did nothing more until three A.M. By then, Caroline was unconscious from the sleeping pills. Dean drove to Marcella

Ahn's again. He had to make sure she was home, and alone. He walked around her house, peeking into the windows. She was in her study, sitting at her desk in front of her laptop computer. She had her head in her hands, and she seemed to be quietly weeping. Dean was overcome with misgivings for a moment. He had to remind himself that she was at fault here, that she deserved what was coming to her.

He returned to his own property. Barefoot and wearing only the latex gloves and his underwear, he snagged the strands of Marcella's hair along the doorframe of the lumber shed. He threw the bracelet toward the driveway. He twisted the dishrag into the mouth of the wine bottle, then tilted it from side to side to mix the fluids and soak the rag. He started to flick his lighter, but then hesitated, once more stalled by doubt. Were those mystery novels he read really that accurate? Would the Hair & Fiber and Latent Prints teams be deceived at all? Was he being a fool—a complete amateur who would be ferreted out with ease? He didn't know. All he knew was that he loved Caroline, and he had to take this risk for her. If something wasn't done, he was certain he would lose her. He lit the rag and smashed the bottle against the first stack of zelkova inside the shed. The fire exploded up the boards. He shut the door and ran back into the house and climbed into bed beside Caroline. In a matter of seconds, the smoke detectors went off. The shed was wired to the house, and the alarm in the hallway rang loud enough to wake Caroline. "What's going on?" she asked.

Dean peered out the window. "I think there's a fire," he said. He pulled on his pants and shoes and ran to the shed. When he kicked open the door, the heat blew him back.

Flames had already engulfed three *boules* of wood, the smoke was thick and black, the fire was spreading. Something had gone wrong. The sprinkler system—his expensive, state-of-the-art, dry-pipe sprinkler system—had not activated. He had not planned to sacrifice this much wood, one or two stacks at most, and now he was in danger of losing the entire shed.

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THERE was no investigation, per se. Two deputies took photographs and checked for fingerprints, but that was about all. Dean asked Becklund, "Aren't you going to call the crime lab unit?" and Becklund said, "This is it."

It was simple enough for the fire department to determine that it was arson, but not who set it. The insurance claims adjuster was equally lackadaisical. Within a few days, he signed off for Dean to receive a $75,000 check. Dean and Caroline had kept the blaze contained with extinguishers and garden hoses for the twenty-two minutes it took for the fire trucks to arrive, but nearly half of Dean's wood supply had been consumed, the rest damaged by smoke and water.

No charges were filed against Marcella Ahn. After talking to Becklund and a San Vicente County assistant district attorney, though, she agreed—on the advice of counsel—to move out of Rosarita Bay, which was hardly a great inconvenience for her, since she owned five other houses and condos. Caroline never heard from her again, and, as far as they knew, she never published another book—a one-hit wonder.

Caroline, on the other hand, finally submitted her second book to a publisher. Dean was relentless about making her do so. The book was accepted right away, and when it came out,

it caused a brief sensation. Great reviews. Awards and fellowships. Dozens of requests for readings and appearances. Caroline couldn't be bothered. By then, she and Dean had had their first baby, a girl, Anna, and Caroline wanted more children, a baker's dozen if possible. She was transformed. No more nightmares, and she could nap standing up (housekeeping remained elusive). In relation to motherhood, to the larger joys and tragedies that befell people, the poetry world suddenly seemed silly, insignificant. She would continue to write, but only, she said, when she had the time and will. Of course, she ended up producing more than ever.

Marcella Ahn's chair was the last Dean made from the pristine zelkova. He would dry and clean up the boards that were salvageable, and when he exhausted that supply, he would switch to English walnut, a nice wood—pretty, durable, available.

He delivered the chair to Marcella just before she left town, on May 11, as scheduled. She was surprised to see him and the chair, but a promise was a promise. He had never failed to deliver an order, and she had prepaid for half of it.

He set the chair down in the living room—crowded with boxes and crates—and she sat in it. "My God," she said, "I didn't know it would be this comfortable. I could sit here all day."

"I'd like to ask you for a favor," Dean said as she wrote out a check for him. He held an envelope in his hand.

"A favor?"

"Yes. I'd like you to read Caroline's new poems and tell me if they're good."

"You must be joking. After everything she's done?"

"I don't know poetry. You're the only one who can tell me. I need to know."

"Do you realize I could have been sent to state prison for two years? For a crime I didn't commit?"

"It would've never gone to trial. You would've gotten a plea bargain—a suspended sentence and probation."

"How do you know?" Marcella asked. "Your girlfriend is seriously deranged. I only wanted to be her friend, and she devised this insidious plot to frame me and run me out of town. She's diabolical."

"You stalked her."

"I did no such thing. Don't you get it? She faked it. She set me up. *She* was the stalker. Hasn't that occurred to you? Hasn't that gotten through that thick, dim-witted skull of yours? She burned your *wood.*"

"You're lying. You're very clever, but I don't believe you," Dean said. And he didn't, although she made him think for a second. He pulled out the book manuscript from the envelope. "Are you going to read the poems or not?"

"No."

"Aren't you curious what she's been doing for the past six years?" Dean asked. "Isn't this what you came here to find out?"

Marcella slowly hooked her hair behind her ears and took her time to respond. "Give it to me," she finally said.

For the next half hour, she sat in his chair in the living room, flipping through the seventy-one pages, and Dean watched her. Her expression was unyielding and contemptuous at first, then

it went utterly slack, then taut again. She breathed quickly through her nose, her jaw clamped, her eyes blinked.

"Are they good?" Dean asked when she finished.

She handed the manuscript back to him. "They're pedestrian. They're clunky. There's no music to the language."

"They're good," Dean told her.

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to. I saw it in your face." He walked to the door and let himself out.

"I didn't say they were good!" Marcella Ahn screamed after him. "Do you hear me? I didn't say that. I didn't say they were good!"

Dean never told Caroline about his last visit with Marcella Ahn, nor did he ever ask her about the stalking, although he was tempted at times. One spring afternoon, they were outside on his deck, Caroline leaning back in the rocker he'd made for her, her eyes closed to the sun, Anna asleep in her lap. It had rained heavily that winter, and the eucalyptus and pine surrounding the house were now in full leaf. They sat silently and listened to the wind bending through the trees. He had rarely seen her so relaxed.

Anna, still asleep, lolled her head, her lips pecking the air in steady rhythm—an infant soliloquy.

"Caroline," he said.

"Hm?"

"What do you think she's dreaming about?"

Caroline looked down at Anna. "Your guess is as good as mine," she said. "Maybe she has a secret. Can babies have secrets?" She ran her hand through her hair, which she had kept short, and she smiled at Dean.

Was it possible that Caroline had fabricated everything about Marcella Ahn? He did not want to know. She would, in turn, never question him about the fire. The truth wouldn't have mattered. They had each done what was necessary to be with the other. Such was the price of love among artists, such was the price of devotion.