

PEOPLE DO ALL KINDS OF THINGS

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I saw Trudy's ad on the bulletin board outside the supermarket. She was looking for a dog walker. When I went for the interview she asked me if I was also willing to housesit. She'd asked me a couple questions and only one of them was about my experience—very little. It took me a while to realize she was offering me the job. I said I'd take it.

The morning she was set to leave on her trip, Trudy asked me what I was studying. I told her I was getting my TESOL certification—I wanted to teach English as a Second Language.

“Ugh. You want to teach? And your mom let you get away with it? Didn't insist on law school or something?” Trudy was bent over with her foot propped up on the coffee table. She rubbed lotion into her leg.

“She has lots of respect for teachers.”

Trudy rolled her eyes at me. “That Confucius shit.”

I told my mother I was going to teach people how to speak English. She said she was proud of me—I think she was glad I had finally chosen a career. When I'd returned from teaching for a year in Taiwan, where she's from, I'd drifted from one job to the next. She probably pictured me in front of a group of humble immigrants in a cramped classroom somewhere in Queens or midtown Manhattan, near the garment district. She was picturing herself.

“Well, then,” Trudy said. “I guess you better marry rich. I'm sure your mother's hoping you do that at least.”

I laughed. “She read my fortune. Said I was going to marry for love. She didn't look happy about it.”

Trudy nodded knowingly, and then she stood up and showed me where everything was. She opened the refrigerator and said I could eat anything inside.

“Finish the milk or it'll spoil.”

Then she showed me the dog's food, leash, and toys. She explained Gigi's schedule, and what to do if she went “wee wee” on the floor. Trudy had white couches so I was supposed to keep Gigi locked up in the small space made by the foyer and kitchen.

Trudy was going to Toronto to have some kind of surgery. I wondered what kind of surgery it was that she was leaving the country to have it. She didn't say and I didn't ask.

Then Trudy showed me the bedroom. She said she had already changed the sheets and I could sleep there if I wanted.

"I bet you want a break from your mom."

I nodded. I was living at home again while I got my certificate. I was helping out with the bills, too.

Trudy's apartment was small, just the one bedroom and the living room. She showed me how to work the taps in the bathtub. There was a trick to get the water the right temperature. The windowsill was crowded with lotions, body scrubs, and facial cleansers. Her shampoo and conditioner was the expensive kind you can't buy at Duane Reade. She invited me to use all of it.

"The only thing is, if you use the salt scrub you have to clean the tub afterwards or else you'll break your neck the next time you take a shower. It's very oily." She showed me where the cleaning supplies were.

"Just pick up after yourself. My cleaning lady comes on Thursdays. You'll probably want to leave the house then. She comes at eleven."

This week was a trial run. Trudy said she had some travel lined up for after she recovered from her surgery. She needed someone reliable to walk Gigi and to housesit. I asked her what she did. She hesitated.

“I’m a culinary student so, you know. I do some catering here and there. I have some savings.”

I told her that my uncle was an executive chef and she asked, “Is he Chinese?”

I said he was on my father’s side and then she said, “Oh, so he’s not Chinese then? So what does he cook? French? Italian? American?” She said American like the word had gone rancid in her mouth.

I told her he studied French, but he worked at a resort, so it was a little bit of everything.

“Oh, hotel food. Yeah, I hate that shit.”

I shrugged. He made good steaks.

“You know, my father owned restaurants in Hong Kong. Nice ones. Expensive ones.” She stopped and studied my face. “He was like you, half white. American. He had that same pale skin. All the girls wanted him; even the white British girls, but my mother got her claws into him. He had to die to get away from her.”

I didn't know why she was telling me all this. It just tumbled out of her.

She brushed some lint from her suede boots. "I miss him. He married my mother for her money. My grandfather hated him. Called him a playboy. He was. He had other women. My mother pretended she didn't know, like her being the wife gave her some status."

I thought that word was funny. Playboy. My mother's father died when she was a girl and when she describes him she says she remembers a handsome man in a white suit. Then she says, "Well, he was a playboy." She says it with shame tinged with a hint of pride.

Trudy stood up and turned to look at herself in the mirror in the hallway. "Being the wife doesn't always give you the power. Believe me, I know." She smiled at herself in the mirror as if I wasn't there. She had a long face and round eyes—were those her white ancestor's genes coming through? Her face without makeup was average, but when made up, like it was that day—foundation, powder, smoky gray eyeliner, and matte red lips—she was sexy.

Then she looked at me through the mirror. "I left Hong Kong when I was sixteen. I took my mother to court, and they had to give me my trust.

She didn't know my father set it up that way, with her own money. He told me though. Before he died." She frowned then. "Stomach cancer."

She picked up her keys and pulled out the handle to her rolling suitcase. "The best present my father ever gave me was an American passport."

She seemed to consider this a moment and added, "And money. My mother wanted to kill me when she found out. She thought she could use the money to control me, but once I had it, she had to let me go."

Trudy glanced at the slim, gold watch on her wrist. "I don't know why I'm telling you this, but you understand about Chinese mothers. They drive you crazy."

I gave a laugh I didn't really feel. My mother has a temper that is sparked by fear, but I doubted that she had anything in common with Trudy's mother. We had no material possessions to fight over.

I wished Trudy safe travels. When the door locks clicked, I looked around. Her apartment was small. If she had money you couldn't tell, not at first.

I tried to picture Trudy married, but I couldn't. She looked good carrying a suitcase and wearing dark sunglasses, walking away.

Trudy's bed was queen-sized even though she lived alone. The duvet was like a cloud, so I knew it was expensive. I wanted to flop down onto it but even after I heard the key turn in the lock, I waited for a few hours before I tested her bed. Just in case she forgot something. I didn't want her to catch me enjoying her things.

The extra job with Trudy was going to be my cushion. My father had recently been laid off from his doorman job. My mother pulled me aside and said she thought he went to work hung over and had gotten sloppy, but I didn't want to talk about it. She was happy to take my money, but she made me give it to her in secret so my dad couldn't see. He told us he was calling all his buddies, looking for leads, but most days he stayed home reading the paper and drinking coffee. He didn't drink-drink until it got dark. Like that made a difference.

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I'd never housesat for a stranger before. I'd done it plenty of times for my aunt, but there wasn't anything interesting in her house that I hadn't seen before. I did like looking at the photographs of her and my uncle when they were young. They were my age when they met, and in all the pictures my aunt carried herself like she knew she was beautiful—better looking than my

uncle—but she looked like she felt lucky to be with him, so she must have loved him. He appeared stoic and confident. In a few pictures, he had a wry smile on his face and that's when he looked like my father. My mother says I have the same smile, but it's not pretty on a girl. She says it makes me look like I think everything is a joke.

Besides the job for Trudy, I worked at a doctor's office. It was a nothing sort of job. Just some filing, typing, and all the boring things it takes to run a small office. Dr. Crenshaw knew I was going to school for my certificate. I had to remember to smile when I was at work because one time he saw me looking especially mopey and he half joked about writing me a prescription for anti-depressants. After that, I pretended I was happy even if I wasn't. It's not even that I wasn't happy. I was mostly bored.

I daydreamed about working in a new city, having a new life. I used to feel lucky to live in New York, especially when I went record shopping, or just walked in the East Village on a sunny day; it was like a surprise was coming around the corner. Even if it was just a weirdo in a tutu, it was something to look forward to. When I came back from Taiwan, though, I didn't find the freaks so charming anymore. When I was in Taiwan, I missed New York, but when I came back, I missed Taiwan, even though everything

had been strange and difficult to navigate. I couldn't walk down St. Marks Place anymore because I kept wondering why the punk kids didn't just go home or get jobs and stop hassling me for money. The freaks looked the way I felt on the inside—lost, bored, restless. Maybe I was depressed.

Trudy had a large makeup case in her bathroom. It was all metal and heavy. My mother had a small makeup case, the size of a breadbox. I used to love opening it up when she wasn't home and looking at all the powders and colors. Even though she worked in a factory, she put on makeup every day. I don't wear makeup often, but when I sat on the edge of my mother's bed and saw her sleepy face transform into a bright mask, I watched her techniques, thinking I might one day learn how wear a mask, too.

I told myself I shouldn't look through Trudy's stuff, but I knew I was going to look, even if I felt guilty about it. So I did. I opened the makeup case and couldn't believe how much makeup she owned. It was all expensive brands, the kind you have to buy at a department store. I wondered why she had so much makeup. It was the kind of kit I imagined someone in the theater would have—an actress or a singer or a dancer—but not a culinary student. I knew from my uncle that cooks are all cut up and burned around the hands and arms. Trudy had nice hands.

I dipped my pinkie in a pot of shimmering pink powder and I stood up and leaned into the bathroom mirror. I brushed my pinkie against my eyelids and then I kneeled back down and opened up another jar. This time the powder was bright green. I looked at my face and then I made slashes against my cheeks. I sucked them in and turned my head this way and then that. I told myself I was a warrior.

Sometimes I did the same thing at home with my mother's makeup. I slathered it on and imagined myself being another kind of woman—someone less reliable, someone less predictable—but I always rubbed it off before anyone came home.

I walked out of the bathroom and sat in the living room. I had homework to do. Mock lessons to plan. I thought about Aidan, a man in my class. Tall with dark, wavy hair and a narrow face with a skinny nose. What my friend Jessica calls my disheveled, white guy obsession. Jessica likes someone with heft, some muscle, but I'm not into that. Aidan was all lean, roopy muscle and flat planes. I stared at him in class and imagined my hand on the back of his neck. One time, he told some people that the bar he worked at had a late happy hour on weeknights. I noted the name of the bar, and stored the information for a day I might be brave enough to use it.

There wasn't anything self-conscious about Aidan, but he wasn't cocky either. He had this way of engaging us when he had to demonstrate mock lessons in front of the class. The professor said we should watch Aidan and study his techniques. He said Aidan was a natural.

Aidan also had a kindness that my expat boyfriend in Taiwan lacked. Dean was sarcastic and held his students in private contempt; he was always just on the verge of laughing at their Taiwanese accents and their clumsy attempts at English idioms. Their very earnestness was an affront to his sensibilities, but despite the evidence of his cruelty, I mistook it for a funny edginess and I wanted him until wanting him had become too foolish, too humiliating. Aidan seemed like the opposite of Dean, but I was pretty sure he had a girlfriend. Another woman in our program, Caroline, was always waiting for him outside of class. She was just like Aidan, all sunshine and confidence, but while I was attracted to those qualities in Aidan, coming from her it just sickened me. I knew that made me a bad person.

I would have to wash my face before walking Gigi. Then I decided not to. I'd be the weirdo that night. Trudy lived in the same neighborhood that I lived in with my mom and my dad. It's quiet now, but it used to be

dangerous. Either way, I know it like I know my own heart—wary and full of neglected corners.

Gigi was a big, dumb retriever. It was the name for a poodle or one of those teacup breeds. I thought Trudy and Gigi should trade names to better suit their personalities.

We walked around the corner to the tiny promenade and I admired the George Washington Bridge. Then we walked toward the park, but we didn't enter it. After Gigi did her business, I took her inside the empty schoolyard and I ran ten laps with her.

When we returned to Trudy's apartment my face was a mess. My sweat had mixed with the green streaks and run down my cheeks like toxic tears.

I washed my face and went to sleep in Trudy's bed. It felt decadent—better than any bed I had ever slept on. Trudy wasn't afraid to treat herself well. My parents made do with the same lumpy bed for years even though each of their bodies had carved twin troughs into the mattress. They thought I couldn't hear them when they argued about money at night in their bedroom. My mother's hectoring voice and my father's weary reassurances had taught me not to ask for things.

Unlike at home, I fell asleep right away.

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Trudy called two days later and said she was in recovery. She sounded groggy, but she asked me how Gigi was and surprised me when she asked me to put Gigi on the phone. I held the phone against Gigi's ear and I could hear soft murmuring sounds, but not what Trudy was saying. Gigi wagged her tail back and forth, and then when I heard my name faintly, I pulled the phone away from Gigi's ear and she barked at me like I'd taken away her toy.

When I got back on the phone with Trudy, she said she would be back the next day, a day early. "They say I'm healing fast, but I'll be zonked out on pain meds. I'll still need you for a couple more days."

I told her that someone named Edgar had left a message. He'd said that he needed a couple girls for a job in the Hamptons. She thanked me, but then said I didn't have to listen to her messages. I told her I just happened to be walking in the apartment when I heard it.

I was sitting at her desk where the phone and computer was. I wanted to check my e-mail, but I forgot the password to her Internet account. She said it was written on a sticky note inside her address book. I pulled out the drawer looking for it. Since I had begun housesitting for Trudy, I'd opened

and closed her closets and drawers. I'd eaten her cold cuts and cereal. I washed my hair with her shampoo and conditioner. I probably smelled like her. I knew I was wrong to look at all of her things, but I was curious. I had even gone through all of her cable channels and saw that she subscribed to all of the porno ones, in addition to HBO and Showtime. I lay on her bed and watched a sex scene in a dirty movie and thought about Aidan.

I opened the address book and saw the password. I flipped through the book. There weren't that many numbers. On the first page was a card she stapled there. It was black and the company name was inside a box made to look like lights on a marquee—Glamour Puss. I looked at the contact information. It was just one name, of course. Edgar. I closed the book and put it back in the drawer. I thought about it. Trudy told me that the password was in her address book and there was a good chance that I would see the card. Maybe she didn't care.

I'd opened her closet and looked at her clothes. She had all these slinky dresses in plastic garment bags. I pulled one out. It was purple with sequins and a plunging neckline. I held it up to my body and looked at myself in the mirror, but Trudy was really skinny and short. I'm taller than my mother, but thick like my father. Still, I took the dress off the hanger and unzipped it.

I pulled it as far as it would go up my thighs. It was tight around my legs, making my bottom half look like I was a mermaid in a movie. I stepped out of the dress and put it back in her closet making sure everything looked right. I picked up one of her heels. It was impossibly high. The soles were red. I stuck my foot in, but again, I was too big. I only managed to get my big toe through the peep toe. It looked fat and ugly sticking out of the opening.

As I sat at her desk, looking at my e-mail, I thought about everything I had seen. It made sense. She probably wasn't a culinary student or a caterer. She was something else—a stripper, or worse, a call girl. I asked myself if I cared. I'd been fascinated by the scantily clad women who sold betel nuts and cigarettes in glass stalls at the sides of the road in Taiwan because they seemed so different from me. I decided I only cared in as much as it surprised me. I was actually more interested in Trudy once I figured she had to be one or the other. If she was a stripper or a call girl, I decided she must have been a highly paid one. Everything she owned was expensive, so she must have been expensive, too. I felt a weird pride thinking about how much she must have earned. As if it was a reflection on me somehow.

When I saw the earrings on her dresser, I didn't think they were real. They were the dangling chandelier kind, dripping with what I thought were

fake diamonds. I tried them on. They were heavy and I felt impulsive and reckless. I decided to go to Aidan's bar and see if he was as nice a guy as he seemed. If he came home with me it would feel like a victory, but then I'd also know he wasn't too good for me. Maybe his spell over me would be broken.

The impulse to wear Trudy's earrings was like my impulse to walk around the neighborhood with all that makeup smeared on my face. I could be someone else, someone who could break hearts. I don't know where it came from. Just as I was tiring of the forced theatricality of New York, I was becoming more eccentric myself.

As I was putting my wallet in my purse, the phone rang. It was my mother. I'd given her the number reluctantly. I tried to tell her that I was heading out the door, but she was excited. She wanted to tell me about a job opening at a midtown English language institute. It was the kind that advertises in about forty different languages on the subway. She said that her friend took classes there and said they were looking for someone to teach the basic class. No experience necessary.

I should have just said I'd apply, to shut her up, but I didn't. I had already signed up with a recruiter and secured a job in Seoul. East Asia had a

pull on me because it's familiar and alien at the same time. I had a plane ticket and was set to leave a week after I graduated. It was non-refundable. I knew my parents needed my help, but I felt like if I didn't leave then, I'd never leave. I might have considered China, but my mother hates the Communists because they keep threatening to invade Taiwan, and I didn't want to agitate her that much. Since I wanted to be out of reach of the long-armed tentacles of my family, Taiwan was also out of the question, so I chose Korea because I thought Japan would be too obvious. I wanted to go somewhere far, far away.

I told her I was going abroad again.

"You can't. I need you," she said. This was why I'd made my plans in secret. I knew she'd try to stop me.

"I have to go. We'll talk about it later."

She asked me why I wanted to go so far away.

I couldn't tell her about the pressure I felt. If I stayed in New York, I had to watch them get older, and struggle, knowing that their chances at a better life had passed them by. Maybe I should have done something else—chosen a lucrative career, been the kind of woman that marries for money instead of

love. I couldn't say any of that to her. Instead, I told her I wanted an adventure.

"Do you know what I regret the most?"

"What?"

"Being so far away from my family."

"We're family."

"You know what I mean. When I first come here I am so lost, so lonely. If I know that, I would not have come."

My grandmother died in Taiwan seven years before. Grief had only been an abstract concept to me until I saw my mother cry for a woman I had only spent four summers with, with many years in between visits. She was inconsolable for weeks. Still, I was impatient to begin what I saw as my real life. I didn't want to hear my mother's regrets.

"I'm not going away forever," I said.

"Everyone says that."

"Look, ma. I can't talk right now. I have to go."

I expected some argument from her but she just said, "Fine. Go." Then she hung up on me.

The bar was dark with just a blue, neon squiggle giving out light. It was nearly empty, about 9:00 p.m. on a Tuesday night. When I looked in the mirror behind the bar, I shook my head so that Trudy's earrings swung back and forth. I felt pretty. I know I'm not an ugly girl, but it sometimes annoys me when people like my mother think telling me I'm pretty will solve all my problems. Still, at that moment, it felt important to be pretty, like it made a difference.

Aidan looked surprised to see me, but he smiled as I sat down. I told him to bring me his best cocktail and he brought me something strong with lots of fruit juice in it.

He asked me if I had a job and I said I worked for a stripper. Instead of laughing, he looked at me warily.

"Oh, yeah. Doing what?"

"I walk her dog and watch her apartment."

"Sounds like a great gig."

"It is." For some reason, I thought he might be more interested in me if I had an interesting story to tell, but he didn't ask teasing questions or seem surprised at all. It was like I had told him about boring Dr. Crenshaw and his samples of anti-depressants instead of Trudy. If I'd said the same things to

Dean, he would have bantered with me about Trudy's profession. He could be mean, but he was fun to talk to, as long as you weren't one of his targets.

I wasn't drunk, but I touched Aidan's arm anyway. He had been leaning over the bar writing some things down in a notebook and I just put my hand on his forearm and left it there, waiting for him to do something about it. I was leaning forward, thinking I was giving him something to look at, but he just looked at my face instead of my cleavage.

"Are you okay? Do you want some water?"

"I'm okay." I felt my hand grow sweaty on his arm. Then Aidan stood up straight and pulled his arm away.

"Do you want to come over and watch a movie later?" I asked.

He stood up tall, like he was a teacher about to reprimand a student, but in an authoritative manner instead of authoritarian, the way we'd been taught. He was going to let me down gently. "I have a girlfriend. Have you met her? Her name is Caroline."

"That's your girlfriend? I had no idea." I was trying to sound upbeat, but it came out sounding sarcastic. We both knew I was lying. I pulled my hand back off the bar and cradled it in my lap like it was wounded. I shook my head and Trudy's earrings brushed my cheek.

He changed the subject. “Caroline’s going to teach in China,” he said. “Did I tell you that? I’m going to see if I can get a job, too.”

The cynical part of me thought—oh great, two more white people going to help the natives, but then I thought, so what, Aidan and Caroline were good teachers, they actually wanted to help people. I could have taken the job my mom told me about and helped people who really needed to use the English I might have taught them. I was going to Korea because I was tired of helping people like my parents. I was going because it was far away. Korea was going to be just as exotic to me as China would be for Aidan and Caroline. I wasn’t any better or worse than they were, but I was jealous of them. They’d be having an adventure together while I was running away, exiling myself for selfish reasons.

I stood up from my barstool and said I hoped they had a good experience in China. “The Chinese food there isn’t going to be like it is here. My old co-workers in Taiwan couldn’t handle it.”

“I think we’ll survive,” he said.

I really hated Caroline at that moment, and then I hated myself for hating her. I lifted my hand to wave goodbye and then I walked away.

Without thinking, I let myself into my parent's apartment. They were asleep even though it was only eleven or so. I fell asleep with the earrings in, but they dug into my neck and I took them off in the middle of the night.

I woke up in a panic. I'd forgotten about Gigi.

I was leaving when my father stopped me. "I heard about your plans. You should do it. Have your adventure."

I said thanks, but it was hard to look at him. He was still in his bathrobe, and he hadn't shaved in several days. I was used to seeing him clean-shaven and in his uniform. He used to look sharp, but his edges were going soft. If my father had asked me to stay, instead of my mother, I might have, but he told me to go. Even though he looked worried, like I might be making a mistake, he never said so.

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When I walked into the apartment I could smell that Gigi had gone "wee wee" on the floor. I was just thankful she hadn't shit all over the place.

I took Gigi for a long ramble to make up for forgetting her the night before.

When we returned I saw Trudy's suitcase in the living room. She came out of the bathroom as I was wiping up Gigi's urine.

She had dark circles under her eyes. Then I noticed her chest. It was bigger. She'd gotten breast implants.

"Did Gigi have many accidents when I was gone?"

I told her that this was her first one. I said I was sorry I hadn't cleaned it up before taking her for her walk.

Trudy looked unconcerned. Then she walked into her bedroom. I wasn't sure if I should stay or not.

She called my name and I joined her in the bedroom.

"Did you notice a pair of earrings here?" She was pointing to the spot on her dresser where they had been.

I don't know why I lied. I shook my head and I felt a sick, sinking feeling.

"Damn. I forgot to put them in my safe deposit box. Maybe I misplaced them." Then she looked at me. "Did you see the cleaning lady?"

I shook my head. "I was at work."

"I'll have to call the agency later if they don't show up." She looked around the room.

I was glad I had checked to see if everything was in its place the night before. You couldn't tell that I had peeped into everything.

She sighed. “These drugs make me feel dopey. I have to go to the bank to get you your money. Can you come back at two?”

I said it was fine even though I was supposed to work at Dr. Crenshaw’s that afternoon. It always feels weird calling out sick to a doctor, but I did feel sick.

“I can’t believe I didn’t put those earrings in my box. They’re worth a fortune.”

I asked her if she needed anything and she said no, she’d see me at two.

So I left. I decided to wait an hour and then call her. When I did, I got the voice mail and I hung up.

I took the earrings and I went back to her apartment. Gigi whined, but I told her to hush. I walked into Trudy’s bedroom and put the earrings on her bedside table. Then I heard the door locks.

Trudy walked into the apartment and I walked out of her bedroom. She looked at me with a frown.

“I thought I left a book here.”

She looked at my empty hands. “Did you find it?”

“No.”

She came over and walked into her bedroom. When she came out again she was holding the earrings.

“Did you take these?”

“I borrowed them,” I said.

“Do you always borrow things without asking?”

“No.”

She looked like she was debating what to say.

“Why did you lie?”

I had always been a good girl. When I was a child, my babysitter, a teenage girl, tried to get me to help her shoplift from the supermarket and I refused, but there I was, debating whether to keep lying.

“I was scared,” I said. “I didn’t know what to say.”

“Well,” she said. “You returned them. That’s something.”

“I wouldn’t steal. I’ve never.”

“That’s nice,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I felt so sick, I didn’t understand how people could go out and commit real crimes.

“I know you are,” she said. “You’re such a nice girl.”

I looked down at my boots. “Not really.”

“Maybe not. Maybe you have secrets.”

She sounded like she wasn't impressed with the kind of secrets I might have.

“Look. You shouldn't have taken them without asking, especially since they're worth so much fucking money, but now I know you won't steal from me.”

I couldn't look at her.

“I need someone I can trust. I have a lot of shows booked and I need someone to watch Gigi.”

I looked at her when she said shows.

“I was going to tell you eventually. I'm an exotic dancer. I make a lot of money. Do you have a problem with that?”

I shook my head, no, not sure where to look, so I looked at her chest, puffy from the bandages.

“I could live off the interest from my trust, but I have expensive tastes. This job is easy.”

It sounded like she had rationalized her life using those words for a long time.

“Do you like it?” I really wanted to know how she did what she did. In college I took some Women’s studies classes and we talked about how exploitative sex work is. There were some people who said it could be empowering but those words—exploitation, and empowerment— sounded too theoretical, too divorced from emotion. I wanted to know how those words fit in with Trudy’s life, how they fit in with my life.

“I’m not going to do it forever,” she said. She sounded defensive and part of me wanted to tell her that I didn’t judge her, not the way other people probably did, but I ended up not saying anything. It seemed easier that way.

“Those earrings you borrowed? I stole them.”

I must have looked surprised because she laughed at me.

“Your mother must have told you that you have to work hard to get what you want. Bullshit. I stole those earrings from my boyfriend’s wife.”

“Doesn’t he know?”

“That’s not my problem.”

She walked over to her purse and pulled out an envelope and handed it to me.

“I’ll call you next week and we’ll go over my schedule.”

I waited a week and when she didn't contact me, I called her. I wanted to be able to give my parents a thousand dollars before I left for Korea. When I finally reached Trudy she said, "I changed my mind. I used to borrow things all the time. Then after a while I figured I might as well take what I wanted."

"I'm not like that," I said, but maybe it sounded like "I'm not like you."

"Whatever, Pearl. I already found someone else. He's a professional."

I thought about calling myself a professional dog walker with a straight face. Then I felt glad to be getting out of New York. I hung up without saying goodbye.

When my mother asked me why I wasn't walking Trudy's dog anymore I said, "She doesn't need me anymore." Then I added, "She's a stripper." I let that hang in the air and watched my mother's eyes widen.

"Really?" She knew that Trudy was Chinese, and that added to her surprise, even though it shouldn't have, as if Chinese women were more innocent somehow. After she took in the information, she said, "Better not to work for someone like that."

I knew she was mentally moving Trudy into a separate category. In her eyes, Trudy was a bad girl while I was a good girl, as if the world was that simple. I let her believe it.

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When I graduated, my mother asked me not to leave. We were in my bedroom and I was sitting on my bed when she got down on her knees and said, "Please. Don't go. I beg you."

"I have to go," I said. "I already bought my ticket."

I pulled my mother up so she was standing.

"What will I do if your father can't find a job?" she asked. Her eyes were wet, and she clutched my arm, then my hand, as if trying to keep me moored, afraid I would escape. She kept repeating, "What will I do?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know what you expect me to do." I started crying. The sobs turned my frustration into a clenched fist inside my throat. I felt like I couldn't breathe.

My father walked into my room and pulled her away from me. "You have to let her go," he said. "Don't worry."

Then he turned to me and said, "Don't worry about us. I'll find something. It's not your job to worry about us."

“I worry,” my mother said. “All I do is worry. I’m the only one who worries.” She was shouting by then and shaking.

My father ignored her and said to me, “Go have your adventure now. If you wait, you’ll have too many reasons not to.”

He turned to my mother, “I’m going to take care of you. I told you that when I married you. Trust me.”

“You give me your word, but it’s worth nothing. We can’t eat words!” Then she left the room.

My father sunk onto my bed, deflated. “I just need a break. Just one goddam break.” He pounded his hand against his thigh and then looked up at me. “You know I’m trying, right? I’m doing what I can.”

“I know, daddy. I know you are.” I didn’t want him to feel helpless, but like my mother, I couldn’t trust 100% that things would get better. Unlike my mother, though, I wasn’t going to stick around to find out for sure.

§

I thought I would be happy in Seoul, but the work was hard and I’d forgotten how lonely I had been in Taiwan with only other expats to speak English with. I would have left if I could, but I had a contract I couldn’t break unless I wanted to forfeit three months’ pay. I hinted to my mother on

the phone that I wanted to go home. I thought that would make her happy. I imagined her saying “Forget about the money, just come home,” but instead she said, “It’s not forever.” Then she sighed and said she had to go. She said long distance is expensive.

By the time my contract was up I had gotten used to living in between worlds and I didn’t see the point in going home yet.

A co-worker told me they pay Western and Eurasian women like me lots of money to strip. She said that a teacher she worked with left to become a stripper and earned way more money.

“She was like you—Western enough to look interesting, but Asian enough to not be too threatening,” she said.

Was that how my co-worker saw me, as non-threatening? I thought about Trudy. How did her customers see her? Did they think she was exotic? Is that why they liked her or was it more specific than that?

My co-worker laughed. She was white and blond, but not pretty. Her teeth were too big for her tiny mouth. “Can you imagine doing that?”

I wondered if she had ever had to live with a bad decision. I thought about my parents and how I left them when they needed me most. Then I shrugged and said, “People do all kinds of things for all kinds of reasons.”

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