

WHAT I HAVE LEFT

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I once considered the space that exists between what people say and what they mean to be my native habitat. Until Liz. None of my adaptations or manipulations helped me understand her. I remained a foreigner in that space. Just another *lǎowài* in Shanghai.

Last year, during my search for an apartment that could be a home for us—one with a private entrance off a courtyard, a southern-facing bedroom and sliding glass door into the garden, dark wood fretwork behind the couch, a full-sized oven—she told me that all empty apartments look the same. It took me too long to realize what she meant: look all you want, Bunny Rabbit. I won't be living in any of them.

The emptying of my current apartment—the one I found for Liz but moved into alone—happened gradually. The couch where we kissed sold first, followed by the dishes (minus the ones she'd chipped), the bed we shared, the lamp with the hand-painted red silk shade that she hated. Each day I felt a steady hand slicing away at my life,

the way a surgeon might remove tumors. Or, this is just how I've been feeling for the last year.

What I have left of my four years in Shanghai is either depressing or virtuous. Either way I'll be arriving in Berlin tomorrow with two suitcases full of clothes and a cashier's check for ¥38,457.84, that will become €4,491.42. I'm 26 years old, and this is all I have in the world.

That's not entirely true. All I have are two suitcases full of clothes and a wooden box I can't bring myself to open. I could have dropped it in the dumpster at the end of the driveway; hidden it in the mondo grass in the courtyard; taken it out onto the lanai, lit it on fire, and encircled it in Chinese fireworks that would scare whatever ghosts emanated from its ashes. I came very close to leaving it in the back of the dresser, imagining the new owners piecing together my relationship with Liz from its detritus—movie stubs and a strip of photos spit out by a booth in Xiujiahua, the cryptic sticky notes we used to leave on each other's desks, the blank green envelopes I never got around to using, the letters, from Liz and from the school—but the English banker who bought the dresser didn't seem to have an imagination worthy of it, so I changed my mind.

I should've thrown it away after she left, but I don't often do what I should. And so now I have a box best suited to carry ashes or medals from war. Its lid is carved with the image of two birds, facing and circling each other around a branch of plum blossoms. I used to love it.

I imagine shoving the box into my suitcase—a checked bag I'll pretend to hope gets lost from Shanghai to Abu Dhabi to Belgrade to Berlin. But I know I can't pack it away without opening it.

I crack the lid and close my eyes, and the first thing I feel isn't a sticky note or a glossy photo. It's pearl—single strand. I don't need to bring the necklace to my teeth to know it's real. I've tasted it before.

1.

There are 15 international schools in Shanghai catering to the children of wealthy expatriates, businessmen, and their families, from Asia, Europe, America—all of them wielding the requisite foreign passports and paying the thousands of dollars in tuition. Like their students, the teachers come from all over the world, though only the Chinese instructors are from China. Native English is required, and in some schools a British or Australian accent will get you further than teaching experience. Most new teachers work in language institutes—night schools for adults—but the lucky ones find places at the international schools that provide work visas, housing, and transportation. Liz never understood that she was lucky, and she didn't know why I'd hired her.

She was Elizabeth to me then: an English major two years out of college who spoke no Chinese and had no teaching experience but who'd been hired anyway because I was lonely. I'd been living in Shanghai for three years, shouldn't have had to import new friends from America.

But there was my spare bedroom, empty for the previous year; there was the suffocating quiet.

I knew what it meant when Loneliness moved in. Loneliness took up all available space, breathed the air meant for me, absorbed the heat and left me shivering. Pretending to enjoy Loneliness's company didn't help; she was immune to reverse psychology. Loneliness needed to be driven out by loud laughter and unpredictable comings and goings. There were already countless loud and entitled Americans in Shanghai, but what did they want from me? Liz would need my help, I knew, to navigate the city and succeed at her job. "You're moving out soon," I said aloud to Loneliness, projecting confidence I didn't remotely feel. I didn't know what else to do.

It took a long time for me to ask Liz why she moved to Shanghai, and though I'm pretty sure she was honest with me, I'm not sure what she said was the truth. I'm not sure she was capable of that. At the time, I didn't wonder what she wanted from the move; I was too wrapped up in what I wanted from her.

She must have thought of her life as just beginning when she arrived here, as though she were throwing open a door that had been closed for years. She was the type of person who thought in terms of transformations and opportunities waiting to be seized.

September in Shanghai, though, is not a time for new beginnings, no matter what the school calendar says. The air here the night Liz arrived was soft and suffocating like tufted felt, the heat from the day still radiating, grimy and moist, from the concrete, glass, and tile of the city.

There is nothing new about September here, except for the construction projects that know no season dotting the city, but the Liz in my memory saw what she wanted to see. From the backseat of her van, as it hurtled away from the airport, under the Huangpu River, through Old Town and out the other side, she imagined her future written out

in neon lights. The skyscrapers were at first too close to the side of the highway for her to really see them, and so she watched the guardrails, flashing purple, blue, and green, implying speed and glamour.

She compared this to her arrival in New York City, two years prior, when she'd been one of the thousands of college graduates to arrive in Brooklyn, feeling as though she accomplished something simply by moving out of her parents' house, even though it was her father who sweated and swore his way up three flights of stairs with her futon, her dresser, her boxes of books.

The van stopped in front of her hotel and Liz got out, and after a moment of waiting for the driver to help with the bags, she hauled them from the trunk herself, offered a polite nod, and approached the door. The glass slid aside automatically in front of her, making a sound like a sword slicing through the air. She stepped into the empty lobby, listening to the echo of her footsteps, and adjusted her posture, trying to appear as though she did this sort of thing—this arriving-in-a-foreign-country-knowing-no-one-not-even-speaking-the-language sort of thing—every day. At the front desk she slid her passport to the slight woman who appeared from a door in the corner, checking into the room the school had provided without saying a word. She dragged her bags toward the elevator.

The hotel room was not exactly nice, but it was close enough. She didn't know whether to unpack or not, unsure whether this hotel room—with no kitchen, no separate living area—constituted the “lodgings” Principal Wu had mentioned in his e-mail. So she put roughly half her clothes into the small dresser, choosing them arbitrarily, and as she did, noticed a glossy green envelope lying on the dresser top. I know because I put it there.

Of some parts of this story I'm certain.

Inside the envelope was a matching green piece of paper, folded in half. On the front: *The size of the steps is*

not important, as long as they are going in the right direction.

It was hard for Liz not to feel the card was a coded message. She looked around the room, suddenly feeling as though she were being watched. I'm going in the right direction, she wanted to shout. The note felt like an indictment, a passive aggressive judgment of the kind her mother would deliver. She looked at it again and only then thought to open it.

Meet your driver outside the hotel at 7:00 am.

That was all. Liz sighed and shook her head, settling down onto the bed. It was just a note from the school after all. A bizarre one, but just a note. She had so many questions—about when her training would begin and where she would really be living—but as she turned the piece of paper over in hand, it became clear none of them would be answered tonight. Seven in the morning would come quickly, she knew, and so she fought through nerves and jetlag and forced herself to go to bed. As she lay skirting the edges of unconsciousness, she thought of Bryan and wished he could have seen her there.

Right on time the next morning, Liz's van sped along the highway away from the city, confusing her. She'd assumed without checking that the school was downtown. But they drove and drove, leaving the highway for dusty side streets lined with factories: Shanghai Lightbulb #7, and the like. Finally, after an hour's drive, they pulled into the gate behind a line of five yellow school busses. She glanced out the back window as they came to a stop and saw two more busses making the turn behind them. Children streamed off in orderly lines, moving quickly through the wide double doors at the front of the school.

For a long time I carried an image of Liz in the back of

the van on that morning, nervously fingering her necklace and chewing on her lower lip, sitting frozen in the back seat until the driver turned and waved his hand at her, as though shooing away a fly. But maybe that's not how she was.

Once she entered the school, I watched her from behind my desk, separated from her by the narrow main hallway and a wall of plate glass windows at the front of my office. The main office, really, but I always thought of it as mine. It was always so sunny.

She wore a dark brown pencil skirt that was too heavy for the season and too formal for our school, a crisp peach blouse. She had nice shoes on—teacher shoes—brown with a modest heel, and slender ankles. I thought she needed to gain 10 pounds, not out of any jealousy for her thin frame, but because she looked to need some kind of cushioning from the rest of the world, as though perhaps the angles of her knees, hips, and elbows were a danger to her. She was sharp where she needed curves, with straight, shoulder-length hair pinned back from her face. She was taller than I expected she'd be, and from the look of her slightly hunched shoulders, taller than she expected herself to be, too.

I knew she didn't know where to go, or what was expected of her. I could've gone out immediately to greet her, just as I could've left a more informative letter in her hotel room. But I let her stand there alone, wanting—perhaps cruelly—for this woman to feel a moment of terror at life here without any help. I was cruel, right from the start; there's no use trying to hide that.