

Midlife Crisis

by [Matilda Z. Halen](#) (November 2019)



Street View of Shanghai, Guan Zilan, 1965

1.

The lady who works at the tourist shop told me there is a FedEx around the corner down the street, close to a foreign bank. It's a Chinese bank. The red characters above the glass door remind me of my childhood surrounded by Chinese adults who know my mother's side of the family in that neighborhood full of old Soviet-style buildings. They'd ask my dad if I could speak any Chinese, praise my bright skin appearance and my dark-colored eyes, 'Look at this doll face, such a great fusion of you and your wife. But she would look prettier if she had your blonde hair.' In their eyes, I look like every

doll they saw during their business trips from those toy sections of the new-built shopping malls in Beijing and Shanghai after the early 90s. Me, a child whose official English name always gets pronounced wrong, is a figure of the new free world.

“Most people at my age in China watched a TV series when we were young. There is a famous line from that TV show. It says, “If you love someone, take him to New York because it’s heaven. If you hate someone, take him to New York, because it’s hell. I don’t know if the person I loved still loves me or hates me.” I remember Perry said this to me after I showed him my flight information. He took off his glasses and rubbed them with his polo shirt, “My daughter always reminds me to bring a handkerchief. She said that it would make me look like a British gentleman.”

“A gentleman is more than a handkerchief. And you can’t rub your glasses with it.” I laughed. Perry pulled out the curtain of the French window.

That day he stayed at the newest hotel in my mother’s hometown. The chairs and music at the restaurant five minutes away were beautiful. “I don’t think this is real pizza.” I told Perry.

“Young lady, this is an underdeveloped town. What do you expect? I think your dad put you here for learning about real life.” Perry switched his language back to Chinese.

“No. He wants me to visit my grandparents and practice my Chinese.” I rolled my eyes, “Hi handsome, can I have that cocktail on your menu? Yes, the blue one. Thank you.”

I didn’t explain any deeper reasons why my dear old dad wanted me to fly 15 hours then take an almost-three-hour drive here. This man who was sitting in front of me had a decent business which was an agency offering study abroad service to students from underdeveloped cities around Beijing and the

less expanded areas in Beijing with limited education resources. He travels a lot. He uses English and Chinese to communicate with me. However, I'm not sure if he could process the idea of my parents' expectation for me to try to find some roots in my life and become a better person. Even many Americans couldn't understand this. Half of the country is opposing roots, diversity, multiculturalism, half of the country is pushing others to embrace the package. What's the other layer of my parents' intention for sending me back to this town? I can't explain. I can't even explain to my cousins why their half-white, half-Chinese 'older sister eagerly wants to eat lasagna and mac & cheese with bacon.

It's been a day since I went back to America. My father booked me this trip to New York as my 19th birthday gift.

Twenty minutes ago, I was standing in Times Square, looking at the cowards. It's midnight in China. Perry sent me a text message, 'Have fun, young lady.'

I walked into a tourist shop, wrote postcards for him and Edmund. There was a drafted divorce agreement in Perry's office drawer. Every time he opened the drawer, he felt the powerlessness of fate. He told me this before I left the country; I appreciate his honesty.

My childhood was a 'wondering chaos.' Moving between cities to cities in China with my American journalist father and Chinese mother until the age of nine, they put me in an American school in Beijing. A few years later, I was sent back to a middle school in DC, then high school. Now I'm free. My high school graduation gift was a ticket back to my mother's hometown to visit my grandparents who can't communicate with me in English nor pronounce my name: Vera.

"We don't want you to forget the other part of your roots. And granny misses you." My dad said to me on the phone when he was in Thailand with my mom celebrating their

anniversary.

Does he have any idea of how I did grow up? Years after years, after I moved back to DC, Social Science class, American Government and Politics class—outside, of course—the intensive discussions every day after the 2016 election, everyone was expecting me to say something. The expectations come from my liberal peers, and teachers are odd, they want to hear things about China as I'm a real Chinese international student. Their faces, appalled faces, were always a pleasure to see after I told them: "I have no idea what the real China is like." My peers were 90% liberal and white, the lunch lady remembered everyone's name, and she always gave me a beautiful smile when she saw me.

My earlier political enlightenment seemed like standard procedure—like other private school students on the east coast. Or maybe there was something different, since I was meant to be raised as bilingual. I read three books written by Hillary Clinton, I never missed a single episode of Bill Maher, John Oliver, and John Stewart. My parents voted Obama and Hillary; my friends dragged me to the anti-Trump protest after the election, even though I always felt a strong disconnection when I'm in a political rally or a protest. The emotions of rapture, rage, ravishing from the crowd never gave me a sense of belonging. I couldn't reject my friends for being insecure. The very action of going to a protest seemed very American among my peers. An association or given impression that "She doesn't go because she's half Chinese, she's a China girl," to people I encountered haunted most of my teenage life until I met Edmund.

I learned how to dress like a lady, how to smile in a fancy gallery to those paintings. I learned all the rules of fine dining and those flamboyant balls and parties. The acceptance letter from Georgetown University seemed like a planned death sentence of life. Through all those years, across countries, skylines, borders, cultures, languages, my

dear lifelong democrat father still wanted me to embrace his diversity and my mother side of Chinese roots?

I haven't seen my parents for a long time. They've been flying between countries from one to another, writing their reports and non-fiction, op-eds, attending events and conferences, hugging international students from war zones and taking pictures with rare cute animals.

Wait until you spot all those books I read, dad.

I thought about this before I boarded my flight back to China.

2.

We shouldn't be seeing each other anymore, Vera.

Why, Edmund?

You have a bright future waiting for you. I'm just a high school economics teacher. Vera, I'm too old for you.

Come on. That's one of the best high schools in DC. You can always choose another career. You graduated from Columbia, genius. You are not old, Edmund. I never said you are old. 30 is not old. Uh, the airplane Wi-Fi is so bad.

Vera, I'm leaving DC.

What? For how long?

I'm not sure. I'm going back to New York.

So, your idealism died.

I think so, Vera. I love you. I still love you. My American girl.

Do you remember how we met? Edmund.

You were only 18. That was the last semester of junior year. Your counselor told me there would be a girl in my math class who just got out of the hospital; pneumonia, they say. The first time I saw you, I thought, God, she's ungodly beautiful. You stayed in the classroom until everyone left. I asked you, "Do you know there is a Vera Rostov in the novel War and Peace?"

Sir. Buy me a coffee then I'll look at your charming blue eyes and listen to you preach to me about that boring thick Russian novel. Life is monotonous. I stayed for six months in a dreary hospital, and I'm only a junior in high school, please enlighten my life.

Yes. I remember what you told me with that insouciant and devilish smile, but I found that smile was fulfilled with innocence. Then you said, I passed the age of consent two years ago. That was an intensive month at school. Your friends were busy with protesting on campus. You begged me to give you detention to have an excuse not to come with them.

They were protesting for less classic literature for English class because 'Those were written by dead old white men.' I have to hide, come on.

Vera, I miss you. The image of you sitting at my office, reading L'Amant, just emerged in my head. But I'm leaving.

What happened? I'll talk to you later. My flight is landing in 30 minutes.

I have to leave, Vera. To protect you.

When Perry first heard my name, I was sitting in the front seat of the shared ride. After the exhausting 15-hour flight, my dad texted me a Chinese number, 'Call this driver. Be nice, and don't speak English. Say hi to him for me.' Twenty minutes later a black private car showed up at the parking zone of the airport. It was not a taxi, not a car like Uber or Lyft. The driver was a middle-aged Chinese man, and Perry was sitting in the back seat.

"I used to drive your papa to those cities next to Beijing. And whenever he needs to go back to visit your grandparents, he calls me," the driver explained to me in Chinese while he was putting my luggage cases in the truck. It was a driving service offered in small towns close to Beijing, like my mother's hometown. When people needed a ride to the airport or the major train station, or anywhere in Beijing, they call those drivers. Five scores on AP economics clearly couldn't help me to understand my situation at this moment.

"How's your papa?" The driver asked me.

"He's taking a vacation in Thailand with my mom." I turned around my head to the back seat, "Hi." I said.

"Are you . . . Are you bi-racial?" Perry took off his sunglasses, he looked shocked. He's Chinese.

"Yes. My mom is Chinese."

"What's your name?"

"Vera," I laughed. "Vera Wilson," I said my name in English. I forgot my Chinese name a long time ago, even all my white friends at school were so interested to know my Chinese name like it's a trophy I could use for showing off under this generation's trending multiculturalism culture.

"What's the point of keeping a name I will never use?" I once asked Edmund this question.

"No." He said, "baby, it's pointless, you are my American girl."

I remember that kiss he left on my forehead.

"I'm not sure I love you more for the recognition you gave me, or this is just parts of the reason why I adore you so much, Edmund. My friends at school always call me China girl. I got used to it. But my dad is American. I am an American."

"Yes, baby. You are an American girl. Never doubt this."

"I think Henry Miller was wrong about one thing, Edmund."

"Which book?"

"In *Black Spring*, he wrote: The boys you worshiped when you first came down into the street remain with you all in your life. That's not true."

"Why would you say that, sweetheart? Do you remember those boys? If there were any."

"Yes."

"Really. Are they Chinese?"

"When I was eight, my dad was working on a report. We lived in a small city for three months, most of their residents never saw an American in their whole life, not to mention a bi-racial kid. Some of their parents spoke really nastily about my mom; I can't remember those boys' names anymore. Their looks, their voices, what they said to me, old stuff faded fast with plane fuels, winds, and my Chinese. You know, sometimes I have trouble talking to my mom, I don't know how to translate my thoughts into Chinese to talk to her, it's hard. I don't know what to do. And I'm sure those boys were

never my heroes.”

I never liked my mother’s hometown or the city we lived in for one year before they sent me to the International School. Those days, when I was a little girl in my father’s arm, it’s hard for those people to hide their shock, jealousy, or admiration when they heard my dad using fluent Chinese to tell them: “My wife is Chinese.”

Those boys, they were never my heroes. Those adults who praised my appearance but envied my mother’s fate, I would never become one of them.

“We are living in an era full of confusion. You are an American girl, never doubt this.”

It was close to dawn in America. I was checking my phone every 10 minutes, but I was afraid to send more messages to Edmund. I had an intense attack of car sickness on the way back to my mother’s hometown, caused by the amount of anxiety I accumulated since I received his message. My grandparents called me twice when we were on the highway, the signal was terrible because of the mountains. They told me the location of the restaurant we were going later. I heard ‘uncle, cousin, aunt, presenting, dinner,’ and all sorts of special terms you use to call your relatives in the Chinese language on the phone.

“Girl, you better be prepared.” Perry joked.

“I lived there when I was a child. You think I’ve never been to the battlefield?”

“Your Chinese is excellent.”

“Thank you. I also have a sense of humor.”

“Can I ask you to be my translator next month? I’m going to an international education conference in Shanghai.” Perry handed me his business card. “You can write anything you

want on your resume. I'll sign your recommendation letter. Send the bill to my email if you say yes."

An email reminder popped on my phone. I took Perry's card and put it in my bag.

"Sure."

4.

The conference was boring. There was not much work to do. Perry told me he just wanted to travel with me and take me to shop.

"I never dated a Chinese before. Are they all like you? Just, like, put money on the table to impress girls?" I asked him.

"No. I think I sound more intellectual than them. They are too shallow."

"So how old are you?"

"You can guess."

"How am I gonna guess a Chinese man's age correctly? This is hard."

"Forty."

"Okay. Are you married?"

"You are a smart girl. I think you already know the answer."

"How am I supposed to know?"

Perry smiled. He put his credit card on the table. Then he asked where they shipped the fish we ordered today when the waiter came back. "Can I take a picture of you?" Perry asked

me.

“Sure, but why?”

“Can I send it to my close friends? They’d be so jealous of me if I let them know I’m dating an American girl like you. Big eyes, bright skin, like a Barbie doll.”

I didn’t quite get the notion of what being empowered by a bi-racial, half-white American girl meant to this man, or men like Perry in general after he finished his compliment to me.

“I didn’t mean to scare you or sound creepy. But you see, this is, like, a cultural norm. Men like me in our forties, dating with a young girl, not to mention an American girl is such a rare thing.” Perry held my hand, “It’s an honor to meet you.”

“So, it’s all because you think I’m ‘white?’”

Here we go with a linguistic narrative I haven’t use since I met Edmund. We used to cuddle together on his couch, watching history documentaries or reading books; the WWII documentary filmed by BBC, Pat Buchanan’s *Where the Right Went Wrong*, *Roots of American Order* by Russell Kirk, Edmund’s *Claremont* magazines and *American Affairs* Journals, etcetera. I wondered why a pundit like him would condescend to be a high school math teacher.

“I’m not trying to brainwash any student. But I want to make some change, even a little. I want my students to have the urge to learn more about this world, to be more educated before they choose sides. Like you, Vera.”

He writes commentary essays for major publications. During the boycotting classic literature protest at my high school, he wrote an essay about how multiculturalism has diminished our traditional literary education; a piece from

which I could recite any paragraph,

. . . Overall, you will find many young readers have unreasonable grunge towards classic literature for 'most writers were dead white males' which clearly is a collective thought produced by outrageous identity politics. Ignoring the brilliance of their writings and the beauty of language itself, ditching the pure analytical methods of literary analysis by politicizing the dead writer's race and gender, simplifying the history and plot contexts of their books, those are just small portions of what we are facing in our current world.

There was an idealistic fire in his mind, he preserved it for years like all those books well placed on his shelf. I laughed when Perry said he considers himself 'more intellectual.'

What did I get myself into?

"No, no, no. Because you are American. And you are smart and pretty. America means freedom. You represent the freedom I would never have. That's why I want to keep a photo of you." Perry explained.

"Where do you want to go this afternoon? I don't want to disappoint my beautiful American guest." Perry said in Chinese, he checked his phone, "Let me take you to look around. My assistant just sent me those new malls you girls fancy."

It was a pleasant journey to the shopping mall full of foreigners and Chinese. Perry paid for everything. I looked at those lavish counters. The smell of a French bakery shop oddly contradicted with my body. I dashed into the bathroom then started puking.

The regret of ordering that 'Szechuan style spicy fish and forges hot pot' appetizer suddenly was waving in my head.

The photograph of Edmund and me slipped out of my purse when I was looking for my lipstick in front of the mirror in the bathroom under the warm golden light. I looked at myself in the mirror, pretended it was just stomach flu.

“Are you all right?” Perry smiled at me.

“Yea don’t worry. I think it’s because of the temperature, it’s too hot in the city.”

“I bet you are tired. I’ll call a taxi to send you back to the hotel. If you want to go anywhere later, you can call my assistant. She likes you a lot. I have something to deal with. I need to go to the airport tonight. Sorry, beautiful.”

The two red lines on the pregnancy test kit were not a surprise. I opened a pack of pudding from the convenience store down the street. “I like convenience stores here. The lights are bright, and they sell cute snacks. I think those stores are originally from Taiwan, right? I read it from an article.” I texted Perry.

“I’m glad you like something about China.”

“Really? I don’t think this is the real China. It’s too flamboyant. Nothing like my mother’s hometown. That’s the real common cities, right?”

“I won’t answer this question, smart girl. Enjoy your evening.”

I put on an oversized T-shirt I took from Edmund’s wardrobe before my summer break, turned on the TV, switched to cartoon network channel, unlocked my phone then logged on to the food delivery app that Perry taught me to use earlier in the morning.

“Just a friendly reminder that you don’t have to give those delivery guys tips. Are you throwing a party? You ordered like, five people’s amount spicy hot pot and all those

Thai foods. I'm worried about your stomach." Perry's message came later than the food I ordered.

"Aww, I'm not good at reading those Chinese menus."

Time to play that culture barrier card.

"The pharmacy next to the hotel is open 24 hours. Take care."

"Goodnight."

5.

Shanghai is fantastic, Edmund. My mother's hometown is boring, most old places still have the same Soviet-style buildings. The main street is literally a street you can finish a walk in 15 minutes. All those bus stations are sticks with so many colorful abortion flyers.

Baby, sounds like you are taking a field trip.

My dad wants me to 'embrace roots and feel more about multiculturalism.' I'm not sure if this is part of the plan. But everywhere I went, everybody treated me like an American. They asked me, do you have this in America? Do you have that in America? My cousin from my mom's hometown asked me, are there Chinese restaurants in DC? I told that little man that America has everything. That proud and relaxing tone made me realize that I sounded like you.

I'm glad you are having fun. I miss you; I miss my girl.

I miss you too. It's strange, everyone I met was trying to lecture me about Chinese history, not those stories, only the length. My Chinese uncles on the dinner table said, "China has thousands of years of history, but America was only built

a few hundred years."

How did you respond?

I talked to him in Chinese. I think that English translation is supposed to be something like: Well, middle-aged people always walk faster than the elders.

My girl is the smartest. What did they say?

They all laughed.

Funny.

Edmund, do you remember once I asked you what will our children look like?

Yes, sweetheart. I told you if we have daughters in the future, they will be the most beautiful girls in the world.

I remember everything we had.

So do I, baby.

I cherish our relationship from the beginning. Edmund, why do you have to leave?

To protect you, Vera.

Tell me what's going on, Edmund.

I can't say, at least for now.

What if I'm pregnant?

We will raise the baby together. Is there anything you want to tell me?

No. Just curious.

Did you meet anyone in China?

Yes, a Chinese man.

Oh, interesting.

You said we shouldn't see each other anymore.

I'm not accusing you, baby, relax. I'm happy for you. Does he treat you nice?

I'm not sure. He pays for everything. But he's 40 years old. And I don't know if he's married.

Be careful, Vera.

I know, Edmund.

I'll text you tomorrow, Vera. Kiss.

6.

I called room service at midnight, ordered pizza, started watching *Hell Boy*, ate the pizza then puked everything I ate the whole day in the bathroom. I stumbled to walk the table to get my phone.

Perry's assistant? No way. I might not know Chinese culture well, but even I can get by with my half-white identity in this country and it could also bring me bigger trouble. Who can say if my dear old dad takes my mother to every country he needs to go to for work instead of leaving her in DC with me, is not a sort of compensation for all those years of trash talks behind my mother's back uttered from those Chinese they encountered in this country?

Call Edmund? No.

I closed my eyes. It was the last night of my trip to Shanghai. Perry's assistant booked me a flight back to Beijing. I called the driver who knew my dad for years, watched the mountains passing by through the car window on the highway again to see my grandparents. My Chinese didn't

improve at all. All my relatives took my cousins to visit us. In my grandparents' living room, we sit on the new couch my mom bought for them. My poor cousins who go to public schools in this impoverished city, were forced by their parents to speak English with me.

"How much more practice do you think he needs?"

"Do I need to hire an American tutor to teach her?"

"Can you tutor them English while you're here?"

A few days before I left, I took my cousins downtown to the only Pizza Hut.

The place was crowded, nausea suddenly was waving in my stomach then disappeared in a second when the waiter put my spaghetti on the table. My grandparents' old neighbors, those who couldn't pronounce my name, who praised my face and sighed in front of my father because I didn't inherit his blue eyes, remains the same in my memory. I suddenly thought about them when sickness was pervading my body. As long as they are alive, they would hear news about me from my cousins parents, my mother's sisters, their husbands who are proud of Chinese history, my mother's cousins, maybe, the news of that girl who looks like a doll when she was a little girl in her American father's arm back in the early 2000s, had a baby in the summer before college.

"When you have a foreign cousin living in America, your parents will talk about that person a lot. You and auntie are that urban legend from all our parents' stories. They say, oh you need to study hard so you can be someone like your auntie; marry an American and live an affluent life, traveling around the world. Look at how pretty your big sister is. She is bi-racial. Her English is great, so when she's here, you can practice with her.'" One of them told me this in Chinese.

"So, I am still a decoration and a figure of the new

free world." I joked.

They didn't understand what that means. I laughed then gave them my email address.

"What is she like? We only met her a few times when we were kids. Does she cook Chinese food for you?"

Even when we were living in China together, my dad did all the cooking; my grandparents told me the story of how my father learned to cook Chinese cuisine from them when he and my mother were dating. Four years of high school, I barely saw them in that beautifully painted apartment. They spent decades together, with or without me; riding trains together all over China and publish my father's reports, then flying around Asia doing journalism; I spent most of my life at that international school at Shunyi in Beijing, in an American bubble until middle school. I spent half of my high school time with Edmund in DC. My parents and I have one photograph taken in Saipan a few years ago when I was 15 placed on the shelf. My father, he's been a handsome man since his early 20s. The first time Edmund came to our apartment to pick a dress for me for a school event, I showed him the picture; they have similar beautiful eyes. Now, what's left in my life?

"She's a ride-or-die. And she's horrible at cooking."

"What is 'ride-or-die?'" Both of my cousins asked.

"Have you seen that old movie, Bonnie and Clyde? It's like that. She goes anywhere with my dad. She loves me because she loves my dad. She stands by my dad no matter what, that's why I am here spending times trying to find something my dad asked me to do instead of talking to my boyfriend about why is he leaving DC, or me, or both."

"But that's an American thing, right? Auntie is Chinese. How could she be a ride-or-die if she's Chinese?"

“No, she’s American. Just like my dad and me.”

“The words you use make English sound extra hard. To be honest, we don’t want to learn English. We already have enough schoolwork. But my dad always complains if I say that. He said he worked so hard to earn money to spend on my education to send me abroad one day. Why do we have to go to America like Auntie?”

“Didn’t your parents tell you why?” The pizza still tastes horrible, I thought.

“Yes, they say things like America has the best education, great air, and no persecution. But they also curse to the TV news when your politicians attack our country. I also don’t like that. But you are my cousin. I like you.”

“Okay, this conversation is getting fun. Do you remember what your dad asked me at dinner? The first day I arrived?”

“What did he say?”

“Something about Chinese history.” I put my Pepsi cup aside.

“Oh right. He said China has a long history—what’s wrong with that? We have thousands of years older history than yours. We beat you on that.” Both of my cousins laughed.

“My darlings. You do know that even middle-aged guys in crisis are more energetic than some old folks trying to recover from stage three communism cancer, right? Not to mention someone just stepped into their early 30s.”

“Hey, why are you calling auntie’s home country like that? You lived here for a while, right?”

“That doesn’t make it home, brother. I just read a lot. I got a cool boyfriend. Well, now he’s like a half boyfriend.”

I really don't get your parents. They seem very, well, proud of Chinese history. They get angry when our presidents and politicians speak the truth, but on the other side, they also want you guys to speak fluent English then move to somewhere in America. It seems like the only stupid parent is my dad. I mean, your American uncle. He is a liberal, he embraces multiculturalism, so he sent me here looking for multiculturalism. Your parents never buy any of our 'ideological product.' Your parents believe those are crap. But they still force you to learn English because they know that's how you can get a better future. Fantastic."

Dad, how could you stay so innocent after decades of your journalism career in Asia and encountering this family? And sending me back looking for 'roots?'

"What do you mean? My English is not that good but that sounds cool." Another cousin of mine, the youngest sister in the family said to me.

"English is hard. Our English tutor asked us to watch your TV shows, we don't get your jokes." Her brother said, "Where is Auntie? Are they still in America?"

"Actually, your auntie is not in America right now. I am the one who spends most of my life so far in America. If you don't want to learn English, well, maybe try Japanese."

"You sound really cool. Like from that movie, *Clueless*. When is your flight?"

"Yes. I am a walking American stereotype. My flight is this Friday."

7.

My Dear Vera,

My baby. How's granny and grandpa? Did you get some sleep on your way back to their apartment? I miss you, Vera. Did you watch that movie again? Vera, I was cleaning my apartment earlier tonight. Your T-shirt is still in my wardrobe. I kept the dress you left here the last Halloween with your heart-shaped sunglasses.

All those nights we spent together, memories, the smell of your perfume, your toothbrush, all those nights we didn't have sex but just cuddling together are still here, in this apartment, I'm not sure how could I let this go. But, Vera, I have to go. Vera, when will you come back?

Kisses.

Edmund

8.

Vera, can I call you? I miss your voice.

Sure, Edmund. I miss you.

"Vera."

"Edmund."

"How's the dinner with your cousins."

"I don't know. They sound fun. Trust me; their parents are really something. Isn't it ironic? They admire the freedom we have, but they also couldn't get rid of their paradoxical worship of this country united by communism. Their parents want them to speak fluent English like me, but they also keep filling them with hostility towards us, America. However, they still want them to live abroad. What does that make them? First-generation immigrants but hate the western country they choose to move? Sounds so twisted to me."

“Do you want to live in China, I mean, in the future?”

“No, Edmund. America is my home.”

“Oh, baby. That’s such a relief.”

“What, you thought I would embrace my ‘roots’ after a one-month visit?”

“I was worried you might change your mind, what if Shanghai invoked your childhood memories.”

“No way. I’m not my dad. I never lived in a real China like him. My elementary school is a little America. Those people I met this summer, they don’t judge me because I’m American and I never talk about politics.” I giggled.

“That’s my good girl. Vera, are you still seeing that Chinese man?”

“No. It’s over. I won’t see him again. Edmund, I’m flying back this week. What are you doing?”

“That’s great. I’m just browsing on twitter. It’s crazy these days. If you are right-wing, there will be so many mobs wanting to ruin your life. One of my neighbors, that guy who works for a conservative think tank, do you remember him? Somebody poured a cup of iced tea on him a few days ago.”

“That’s crazy . . . ”

“Vera, you don’t sound well.”

“I just puked. Don’t worry, stomach flu.”

“Vera, are you lying to me?”

“No, baby. I’m not. If my dad didn’t send me back to this damn town, my stomach would be just fine. You know. Uh, the spaghetti tastes awful. I miss the food you cooked for me.”

“Sweetheart, will you wait for me? It won’t be too long. I will be back to DC. I will be back to Capitol Hill. But I have to leave now to protect you. Vera.”

“I will. But I don’t understand.”

“I can’t explain, at least for now.”

“Edmund, you could have told me you were leaving before my trip to China. I lived with you since the second month we start dating. You were at my apartment helping me pack my luggage. You drove me to the airport. Why did you choose to break up with me when I was in the fucking air?”

“Vera, baby, please, I’m afraid to see you cry.”

He said he would be back to Capitol Hill, but we never lived in Capitol Hill, he lives in Roslyn—across the river through the long bridge at the end of Georgetown. His apartment; brand new. His neighbors have decent jobs at think tanks and law firms all over DC or holding a fancy title on some politician’s team. If he wants to do politics, why does he need to go back to New York?

“That’s not an explanation, Edmund.”

“Vera, please, wait for me. These days are tough for us. I know. But I have to protect you.”

9.

When I was waiting for my luggage, I watched those people on the same flight with me lining up at the foreigner’s counters waiting to pass the custom through the big glass wall. International students from China, holding their passports and chatting in Chinese, some were with their parents. Chinese men wore glasses and seem never to smile. My mother never waited in that exhausting line, the second time

she came back to the states, at the same airport, here, my dad held her hand and took the exit for Americans at the other side. She was holding my hand.

How many of them spent hours of paper work and flights just for travel, work or school, and how many of them will become Americans?

Edmund asked me through a message when I was on the plane, passing the sky of somewhere close to Siberia.

I don't know, Edmund.

10.

I purchased two off-Broadway show tickets even though no one would come to see the play with me.

"But all strong men love life. Heine wrote this in his prose collection, Edmund. I wish you well."

Edmund, Heine also asked, have you seen the old play?

Now I am on a red chair next to the red food trucks on Times Square, trying to kill some time until I can walk to the theater to see the play. A man with his family next to my table is reading a newspaper. The photograph printed under the headline is a familiar face I spent those incalculable nights with. Edmund, Edmund, Edmund, why is your photo on the local newspaper's front page?

He was wearing a suit in that photo, smiling.

The man's daughter is smiling at me. You look like a fairy, she says.

Thank you, sweetheart.

"Edmund, why?"

“I have to leave, Vera, to protect you. I will be back to Capitol Hill. But I have to leave now to protect you. Vera.”

“I’m sitting in Times Square. Why is your photo in the newspaper?”

“Don’t read it, please, Vera. Do you want me to come to see you tonight?”

“Then explain to me, in person, right now before I faint in my hotel room later.”

We meet at a 50s-style diner in midtown. The man who came with him smiled, waved to me then picked a different seat close to the door. Edmund is wearing the white shirt I bought him last summer; he looks tired, the red around his eyes somehow breaks my heart; I saw the similar eyes when I was a child after my father spent nights and nights on a report.

“Who is he?” I ask Edmund.

“My campaign manager.”

I stand up to hug him, I wanted to hug him so badly during my days in China. He doesn’t have to see my confused face at this moment. He puts his hands on my lower abdomen, “Vera, you never lied to me, you little liar.”

Are those tears in his eyes?

“Baby, I . . . ”

“Shhhh, don’t say anything, Vera. Let me look at you.”

We are standing here, at the corner seat in this diner, he presses a key in my hand, “I renewed my apartment lease. It’s closer to Georgetown. You don’t need to squeeze in a dorm with a roommate. Vera, I have to stay in New York, for now, at least one year. But I will be back to DC like I promised you

on the phone. I will come to see you when I'm in DC. I will be back on Capitol Hill, Vera, you little liar. Don't ever try to lie to me, please."

I nodded.

I try to wipe the tears on his face, even though I am the one who is silently sobbing and let the pouring tears ruin my makeup, "Take care." I said to him, then put the key into my purse.

"Take care, promise me, take care, and be strong, okay? Vera, my American girl."

He left a kiss on my forehead, he walks out but keeps looking back at me as I am sitting on the couch, glancing at him; he puts his right hand on his mouth, gives me a flying kiss.

"Be strong, Vera, my American girl."

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