

Quiddity

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Silk

Joe is already on her mind when her father calls to say that he, her uncle Joe, is worse. She has been remembering trivial things, like when she visited at Christmas and tried to get Joe to tell her a story—Joe told better stories than anyone—and at first, he didn't seem to want to.

She asked, "Didn't someone in the family disappear in the gold rush? On a train?" Then Joe smiled. "All that came back was his shoes," he said. And she got her story.

Her father means well, but he sometimes has a way of making bad news worse. He pauses before he delivers it, news of the truly gut-wrenching variety. He says: "There's something I have to tell you." Then he waits, his unwillingness to deliver what is painful impregnating the air, and she sits thinking, for god's sake, just tell me.

Today she at least knows that Joe is still alive, which means that the news is mild. It's that Joe is doing worse. Her father has been asked to sign a will, and in the will, Joe is leaving her a large Oriental rug which had been her grandmother's. Her father says, "It's worth some money. So. You should call him soon."

And she wants to call, she has been thinking for weeks that she will, soon, but between one thing and another she hasn't, and now she can't imagine what she might say.

Joe had officiated her wedding, and they had kept in touch sporadically since. The last time she called him had been a few months ago. He had been sick then, but not nearly so sick. Even so, she had heard the high, crazy pitch of her own voice as she blathered about work, and hearing herself sound so—desperate—had scared and humiliated her.

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Her best friend had recently asked how she lost her virginity. "You know how I lost mine," her best friend said. "And I was thinking, I never knew how you lost yours. Who you lost it to."

She joked back, "you were thinking about my virginity?"

"I mean," her best friend said, "I know you have your secret life. I know you have this whole side of things you don't talk about. So you don't have to tell me."

"I don't have a secret life," she had replied, mystified.

But she had thought about this for days after, about how the people she loved sometimes made her question what she thought she knew about herself.

At her wedding, back in 2009, her father had said in a toast that she was someone who loved deeply, that she chose who she cared about carefully, and then cared with the whole of her heart. And this had surprised her, because she had never thought of herself in this way before.

She had expected that he would say something about her rebellious streak, or maybe about her bravery. Her father did believe she was brave, she was sure.

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On her seventeenth birthday, her best friend had remembered that she once mentioned loving strawberry cake as a child, and baked a strawberry birthday cake from a boxed mix. The cake had been bright pink and much too sweet—boxed cake mixes are almost always too sweet—and they both ate only thin slivers, and gave most of the cake away.

Her best friend had apologized that the cake wasn't very good, but of course, the cake itself wasn't what really mattered. She was stunned by the simple fact that someone she loved had bothered to do something that so clearly communicated she was loved in return.

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Here is what she told her best friend about losing her virginity:

It wasn't a very good story.

He had kept his socks on. He said he loved her. He didn't know that he was her first, and when she broke off the relationship with him, less than a month later, she had felt palpably relieved.

But to this day she still keeps in touch with him, the boy with the socks. When she is in a sentimental mood, she sometimes feels the urge to tell him that he was her first. And lately, when the thought comes to mind it makes her sad, as if the omission is cheating him of something.

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When she got fitted for her wedding dress years ago, she told the tailor that the dress was a family heirloom, and that she would be the fourth woman in her family to get married in it.

When the alterations were finished, the tailor handed her a plastic bag full of scraps along with the dress. Because it was an heirloom, the tailor had saved everything she cut away, even the smallest fabric clippings and water stained buttons, everything.

She hadn't known what to do with this bag, but she thanked the tailor. Most of the fabric pieces were small, too small to do anything with.

Still, she kept them, because they had been part of the dress.

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She cannot possibly call Joe and thank him for the rug.

She also can't call Joe and pretend that she doesn't know about the rug. Because, she thinks, he might suspect she is only calling because of the gift, that she is calling out of some sense of gross obligation, rather than simply because she loves him. And she somehow vaguely resents her father for this, although she knows none of it is even remotely his fault.

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She had despised the boy with the socks for a while after they broke up, because of how he tried to get her back. He called and left messages. He pleaded with her in public. Friends said he drove by her house at night.

But somehow, in time, it had turned out all right. He had moved on, dated other girls. And now, in a way that is a bit odd and a bit intense, he has become very endearing. Over the years, he has somehow become one of her old friends.

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She thinks, I will call Joe and read him poetry, and, I will call Joe and just tell him stupid things about my day, and, I will send him a letter. But she does not call and read him poetry, or tell him about her day, or write any letter.

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Shortly before her wedding, she had purchased gifts for friends and family, and she had not known what to buy for Joe. She could not think of anything she knew for sure he'd like. Days passed, and weeks, and this began to feel like an uncomfortable burden, until she thought of the dress, her dress, which had been his mother's first.

She fetched the bag of scraps and dumped it on the floor, and picked out one piece of fabric larger than the rest. It was ivory winter-weight satin silk, a lush fabric.

She smoothed out the scrap and trimmed it square with pinking shears, a square nearly but not quite the size of a handkerchief.

She rubbed her cheek against the square and closed her eyes and thought, this was Grandma's. Then she folded it into an envelope and mailed it to Joe with a note that said something like, "This is from the dress—I thought you might like to have it."

As soon as she'd mailed the envelope, she regretted it. She suddenly felt silly: little girls cherished wedding dresses. Men, grown bachelor men, did not cherish their mother's wedding dresses. Did they?

She had anxiously wondered for awhile afterward if Joe would mention this, her foolish, inappropriate gesture, and she hoped he wouldn't. But time passed, and he never brought it up.

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She picks up the phone and puts it back down: no. She will not know what to say. She cannot do this one very simple thing.

She resents this something of a feeling which isn't quite cowardice or dread or shame, but somehow feels not unlike any of them, and she tells herself, I'll just call. It isn't so hard.

She picks up the phone and puts it back down.

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She picks up the phone, holds it in her hand a moment. Listens to its tone. Then she dials Joe's number.

She listens as it rings.

Then, his voicemail: and here is his warm, familiar voice.

It directs her to leave a message, and promises to call her back, and she breathes in, and then, in a rush, leaves a message—a short, foolish message—and feels relieved.

But so very sad.

~

She thinks, I should call my father back.

She thinks, heaven should be exactly like an autumn day when the air swipes cool at the skin, exquisite icy sunshine. She thinks, I want to lie on wet grass on my back, and smell it and feel its dampness and sky right now. I want to be seventeen again with no thoughts except for the possibility of sex, and cake. And God, I am still a child, such a foolish child. I don't understand why everything that happens and ever will happen is always so incomprehensible and devastatingly surprising.

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Cindy Lam

The Red Jar with a Golden Cap

The street was quiet at night. She wanted to jaywalk just like the teenage couple who had just dashed across the street. But Pastor Dan said that God took note of even the little things, so she walked to the corner crosswalk even though her building was in the middle of the block.

For years, she had been rushing to the church every Monday, Thursday, and Friday evening when she wasn't held up at work. This night was the first Friday she'd skipped church and stayed out late.

"Gin—look at me. You should go out more often. It's raining men outside. Your church is a Sahara: no men, except the UMBs," Coco said. Then turning away, her large sparkly earrings tinkling, she blew a halo of cigarette smoke toward the window. They were inside a bar in SoHo. There were three men smoking outside on the patio. "I won't be as busy next year," Gin said absent-mindedly, watching the halo dissipate in the air and chewing on Coco's latest acronym. The Underage, the Married, and— *Oh, nevermind*. She noticed the "No Smoking" sign on the red wall.

When Gin had one foot in the entry, she instinctively hugged Hello Kitty's stuffed head tightly against her chest. There was the man in the wig. She watched his back as he climbed the stairs. Same outfit as before: black windbreaker, grey shorts, leather sandals.

Her family's flat wasn't small by Hong Kong standards, but it housed Gin and eight others in her family: Ma, Big Brother and his girlfriend, Second Brother and his wife and daughter, Baby Sister and her husband. They lived on the fourth floor in a tong lau (a Chinese tenement) in Jordan. Like many others built in the 1960s or before in Hong Kong, it had no elevators. Each floor in her tong lau had four flats, but hardly any hallway. The only shared space was the staircase landing, about the size of a toilet stall. Guarding each door was a foldable iron gate. The rusty surfaces of the crisscrossing iron bars were covered by uneven layers of flaking paint. Some revealed green under black, others red under grey. Most sported rusty brown patches. Though the colours of the iron gates varied wildly from flat to flat, all the floors shared a uniform smell of incense that lingered in the still moist air. At the base of many of the gates sat little red shrines. Each had a primitive urn the size of a coffee mug that held burning yellow joss sticks.

The first time she met the Wig Man, she was walking up the steep concrete steps from the second floor. He was standing in the third floor landing. His back was to Spring City's yellow and pink sign. She hadn't invited friends to her place since the embarrassing business moved in one floor below her family's flat.

For her personal safety, she had memorized the faces of Spring City's regular patrons, and the Wig Man was new. He was smiling with closed lips. His tanned, rough skin emitted a heavy mixture of cheap rice wine and stale cigarette smoke. He peered down at her silver cross pendant which had swung inside her blouse as she climbed the stairs.

When she tried to pass him in the narrow landing, he seemed to revel in her nearness. The tiny eyeballs under his wrinkled eyelids swept over her, up and down, from her hand — which was pressed against the warmed cross lying beneath her blouse — to her bulging pants pockets. She had stuffed a handful of markers into each pocket while she'd been packing up cartons of free gifts at work and forgotten to take them out before leaving her office.

When Gin told Coco about the Wig Man the next day, she spat out the most powerful and profane Cantonese four-character phrase and swore if it had been her, she would have threatened to scoop out his tiny wrinkly eyeballs.

As always, Coco's verbal display of machismo made Gin laugh out loud and feel better. Gin had been living in this tong lau since she was a teenager thirty years ago. Nowadays, just as she couldn't imagine living there forever, neither could she imagine living anywhere else. All these years she'd had so many unspoken wishes for her living space. She had wished for bright florescent lamps in the staircase and landings. She had wished for a security guard, though she didn't know where they could find space for his desk. And she had wished for a window in her tiny partitioned room, but she knew that was the least plausible of all her wishes.

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Determined not to be seen by those wrinkly eyeballs again, she waited in the entry next to the cluster of galvanized steel mailboxes that hung on the wall. She'd had two glasses of wine that night. Rarely did she drink, just like most in her church, but tonight was Coco's farewell. Coco said that Gin had an advantage because she was tall and wouldn't even feel tipsy after just two glasses. As she waited for the Wig Man to

disappear into Spring City, Gin realized she could check the mail.

Before Rina joined her family, Gin used to be the one responsible for bringing up the mail and putting it on top of the wooden cabinet next to the shrines in the living room.

Letter Box. Letter Box. Letter Box! On days when things didn't go well at work or in church, Gin felt secretly annoyed by the nagging identical Chinese characters painted in a rigid red font on every single mailbox.

But Rina had taken over the job after she moved in, and even delivered each person's mail to their respective bedrooms. Although Second Brother already treated Rina like a queen, Rina was eager for mail from her family in Jakarta's Chinatown. Gin knew it was ungodly to judge others, but her hunch was that whenever everyone was out, Rina familiarized herself with the kind of mail they each received, and with any new items in their rooms. There were times Rina borrowed—without asking—the silk scarf Coco had given her and once even her Guerlain body lotion. Of course, she knew better than to complain to Second Brother. She didn't want to be the reason her favourite brother fought with his wife.

She dug her hand into the mailbox of 4C. Though she loathed superstition, she still felt a bit jittery about the flat number 4C.

Once when she saw Ling-ling doing homework with her tummy down on the bed she shared with Second Brother and Rina, Gin told her mother, "Ma, we could've got a proper desk for Ling-ling over here if these shrines weren't so huge. Don't we have a Land God shrine outside already?"

"Don't you give money to that bearded man on the cross *all the time*? Why don't you spend all that money on Ling-ling's books?" Gin was the only Christian in the family, so Ma's shortcut was to resolve any disagreements with her with blasphemy.

Big Brother then whispered the same banal joke in her ear, "Gin, don't challenge Ma's shrines. We need a place to burn joss sticks. We live in 4C after all, a flat of say-see" (dead bodies).

From the galvanized mailbox of 4C, Gin's hand fished out a few promotional leaflets, the electric bill and a long white envelope. It didn't bear any address or name, but simply "To a Lovely Woman." The envelope was sealed.

Who's this for?

Rina should have checked mail already in the afternoon that day as she always did when Ma was napping. Without thinking, Gin quickly slid the envelope into her purse and skittered up the concrete steps. Her face finally felt flushed from the glasses of sparkling wine that night.

"You're home late tonight," Rina said, her eyes smiling like cashews. Her nose and mouth were hidden from view behind a stainless steel coffee mug—the one Gin had bought for Second Brother during her mission trip to Jerusalem last year. Everyone else seemed to be in bed already.

"Yes, farewell dinner and drinks with colleagues. My boss is moving to Singapore with her husband," she said, feeling a warm blush on her face. In fact, a few of the colleagues from the all-ladies public relations team had brought along their boyfriends, but Gin knew better than to provide that information to her sister-in-law. She put the mail on top of the cabinet next to the shrines.

"Your boss — oh that Coco," Rina said, gazing at the mail.

"I got this cushion for Ling-ling," Gin said, extending her arms to give the Hello Kitty cushion to Rina, her niece's mother. Rina drew up a corner of her lip and acknowledged receipt with a subtle snort, then stuffed it into a drawer in the cabinet with one hand, holding onto the Jerusalem mug all the while.

Since Gin became the public relations assistant for Hello Kitty, she had been blamed for her eight-year-old niece's obsession with the mouthless cat. Rina had once said, "That cunning cat hides her mouth so no one can tell whether she's smiling or swearing."

Rina moved to the prominent red duplex of shrines that Ma got workers to install before the family moved into the flat. She lit three new joss sticks, and waved them in the air flamboyantly to put out their small flames. Holding the joss sticks above her narrow forehead, Rina slowly bowed at the ancestors' black-and-white photos three times, and then poked the sticks into the urn in the shrine. Then she knelt down to do the same at the Lord of Land's shrine.

Without another word, Rina took all the mail from the cabinet and sauntered to the room where she and Second Brother shared a queen-sized bed with Ling-ling.

Once Gin closed the door of her own partitioned room, she let out a sigh of relief; her face still felt warm. She switched on the small orange desk lamp that was clamped to her bunk bed. It shone on her pillow where she'd earlier placed the devotional book written by Pastor Dan. She didn't turn on her ceiling light because the wooden partition that separated her room from the one where Baby Sister and her husband slept was one foot short of touching the ceiling.

Cluck. Cluck. Cluck. She heard feet in rubber slippers go from Second Brother and Rina's room to the bathroom, and then water running in the shower. It was Rina, of course: she was the only one in the flat who took showers and blow dried her hair at this hour.

Gin's partitioned room was so small that no furniture except her bunk bed and a tall narrow wardrobe fit in there. When Fourth Sister married and moved out, Gina turned the upper bunk into an extension of her wardrobe and a place to keep her Christian books and DVD library.

She draped her silk scarf across the bed. It smelled of cigarettes. The first thought that hit her was Rina's cashew eyes; no doubt Rina smelled it without even a sniff. Coco smoked three cigarettes while chatting with her. Gin never smoked. She didn't appreciate that Coco sometimes didn't even turn away to exhale the smoke. Nevertheless, Coco was the boss who treated her like a sister.

She removed the long white envelope from her purse, timidly—as though the friction between the paper and the soft lining of her purse might wake up Baby Sister and her husband on the other side of the partition.

It was a Chinese poem she had never seen before. Of course, she had not read poetry since the days of her public examinations thirty years ago; though those uniformed school years didn't feel all that long ago to her. It was written on thin plain printer paper with a blue ball point pen. The handwriting seemed so disciplined, as though the person had placed a piece of grid paper under the paper to write.

The poem was about a little stream's love affair:

*Crossing the mountains, her perennial flow.
Cut the iron, and slice the rocks.
Rushing and flushing—
Her heart won't rest 'til she meets the sea.*

*Splish-Splash! Crash! Finally, they meet!
Her joyful swims. Enveloped by the curve of his arms.
Every drop of her—now a part of him.*

*What if they're divided, someday?
She'd be called by his undercurrent.
Overcoming—any distance,
Her strides will break the mountains.
"How can I—not—run to you?"*

The most beautiful writing I've ever read, she thought, the flimsy piece of paper quivering between her thumb and index finger.

The next day, when she shared the poem with Coco, Coco would complain: *Doesn't the Lovely Woman have a name? What a cheesy poem written by a coward! And blue ball point pen? Oh come on!* A couple of weeks later she would get Coco's email from Singapore with her sudden recall: *That thing on the printer paper is actually lyrics to a Cantopop song! No wonder it's so hopelessly cheesy!*

But that night Gin read and re-read the poem. Then the tips of her fingers tickled the words: "Every drop of her — now a part of him." She startled as the bathroom doorknob loudly clicked. Her listening ears had missed it when the shower stopped running and when the hair dryer blasted. Rina's rubber slippers squeaked back to their room. Their doorknob gave out a definite click.

A pleasant soapy steam escaped from the bathroom and took refuge in Gin's dimly-lit partitioned room. Now the silence rang in her ears.

Her face still felt warm and flushed. At this moment, something strange inside her, down there, suddenly felt as if it were tossing on a hot dry sand dune under a large blinding sun. As if it were a hamster and not a part of her, that weird thing itched and twitched. It gave her a strong urge to do something about herself.

Something. *Anything.*

Now it occurred to her she must get rid of the cigarette smell on her skin. But she was not going to take a shower at this time of night. She wouldn't risk waking up Ma or Ling-ling with the loud and self-centred hair dryer. She put the envelope and the poem on top of her devotional book on her pillow. In a split second, she had taken off all her clothes and thrown them into the canvas laundry bag standing at the end of her partitioned room. She pulled her silk scarf from the bed, opened her wardrobe, and threw it in without thinking.

She didn't want to think. *Not now.*

She sat on her bed. Her cotton bed sheet felt icy cold beneath her warm bare crotch. She gazed at the small mirror nailed to the side of her bed. She could see herself from her chin down to the semi-circles of her breasts. She recalled the name of the website from which Coco said she would download free videos that she and her husband watched before they did it. She reached her long arm up and deftly fetched her laptop from the upper bunk.

When she was bending over, driving the laptop plug into the extension socket hiding behind her laundry bag, two images flicked across her mind. The devotional book on her pillow. And Pastor Dan's face.

She froze.

Just as swiftly, she placed her laptop back on the upper bunk. She recalled what Pastor Dan said during last Sunday's sermon: "Brothers, I especially want to remind our brothers. Make a covenant with your eyes and guard your hearts."

It hadn't before, but now his reminder irritated her.

The hot dry sand and the hamster. The monthly torture. She fetched an elegant red bottle with a round golden cap from a drawer below her bed. There wasn't much left in the bottle. *I'm just trying to get rid of the cigarette smell.* She sat on her cold bed again. Now feeling she was allowed, she squeezed the pinkish body lotion onto her palms. Then her legs felt two cold hands gently rubbing them, slowing when they neared her inner thighs, luring the hamster. *A regular self-exam,* she explained, before the two cold hands kneaded the two dough balls on her chest. The pair bulky, yet sensitive and needy.

When the bottle was empty, she was finally relaxed; she thought of Coco and smiled. It's quite a wonder that she and her boss could become such close friends. But she had learned to avoid mentioning church commitments. Coco could be rather extreme, insisting the church was taking up all of the personal time Gin had to meet men.

Coco had actually joined Gin's cell group meetings in the past. But Coco was frustrated, complaining, "What the f— nine women to one man? I don't get how they can even allow such an obscene ratio to exist!

Your church leaders' oblivion is a crime. They're married themselves, and they say, 'Yeah, we don't like the ratio. It's so hard to draw the guys in...' But the truth is — they just don't try hard enough! Have they ever put 'Brother Recruitment' in their yearly objectives? Or set up an online matchmaking thing for their single ladies? Hell, NO! The church is your priority—but uh-oh, you're not theirs..."

Coco eventually stopped when she noticed the tears well up in Gin's eyes. Gin wasn't upset that she was single; she was only upset that the people Coco cursed included Pastor Dan and his wife whom she deeply respected. But she forgave Coco at her first word of apology. She believed it was God who put Coco in her life: they were born in the same month in the same year in the same hospital.

On the other hand, Ma had a new saying. "Women don't need men to be happy." It both surprised and comforted Gin to hear that from her old mother. That's precisely what Gin herself believed. Her faith had filled her need to be romantically pursued. Yet Gin couldn't reconcile Ma's new saying with the fact that when Ma was younger, she piously burned joss sticks to pray for better luck with men.

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Ten years ago, before her public relations job for Hello Kitty, she worked for a skin care and fragrance brand. She was in her mid-thirties. Still young, though she didn't feel that way then, probably because both her younger sisters married that year.

There was an informal group in that company that met at lunch every other week to study the Bible. There she met a Singaporean man who looked her age. He wasn't a believer. He only went to the meetings because he was searching for his spiritual orientation. Sometimes he would be quiet, but sometimes he would ask a lot of questions. The group leader, June, a woman in her sixties, always wrapped his hand with both of hers when they shook hands. She was too happy to welcome a non-believer interested in hearing more about the Gospel. It was when he and June shook hands that Gin noticed his black Buddhist beaded wristband.

One Sunday he came up to say hi after the service in her church. She was surprised to see him there. "I live on the next block," he said. It was quite natural that he'd like to befriend her. All his connections outside work were in Singapore. Her city of concrete forest could make expatriates feel isolated.

After service, they grabbed lunch nearby. He invited her to his place. The lime-green coloured Pandan chiffon he baked was too big for one.

His modern serviced apartment was equipped with lots of built-in steel appliances. It was a different world from her tong lau. When she told him how Big Brother tried to scare her, saying her family's flat at 4C had dead bodies, "say-see," he laughed heartily. He said he used to live in a tong lau in Singapore where they were called "shophouses." He added that he'd love to visit her dead bodies' flat someday.

"I'm the only child. I don't have funny siblings to tell me horror stories," he said, smiling innocently. "My parents are devout Buddhists. They burn incense sticks made with high-quality sandalwood. I don't burn incense sticks, but I'm very fond of their scent."

That Sunday they discussed the devotional book that June had given everyone in the group. They read a new chapter and prayed together over Pandan Chiffon and hot herbal tea.

He was always a gentleman. He set fine china tea cups on coasters. He gave her white cotton slippers to wear. He never even touched her, so she felt safe alone with him, and close to Jesus. She liked listening to him play

hymns on his black rental piano on which she never saw any music scores. She sat on a wooden chair next to his piano, singing along when she knew the lyrics. She wondered aloud how he knew so many hymns by heart.

“Why not?” he asked, as though puzzled. “They sing different ones at Bible study and church service.” He told her his parents were teachers of Yangqin, Guzheng and other Chinese musical instruments. They used to run a studio on the ground level of their shophouse.

“They’re ashamed I picked up piano instead.”

“No. They must be proud. Their son plays by his ears,” she said, taking his words as a joke.

“No. Mammy told me she and Daddy were disappointed. Ashamed.”

She didn’t know how to console him, so she said, “My youngest sister got married recently. I do like her husband, but our rooms are only separated by a wooden board. Sometimes I’m awakened from my dreams when he snores like a boar. I feel like — why do I have to live with someone else’s husband’s snores...”

He became quiet, his eyes looking at the herbal tea in his cup. She wanted to punch her chest for having blurted out a complaint previously intended to be a secret. She watched him as he slowly drew his tea.

“And you can’t complain—or they’d say you’re being bitter. It is unfair,” he finally said kindly, looking up to meet her eyes.

Sunday service, light lunch, sharing a chapter from the devotional book, praying and singing. These activities became their Sunday routine for three months. By the time they were singing at the piano, it would usually be mid-afternoon. Sunlight streamed from his small balcony that faced a hill covered with green trees. Sitting on the chair next to the piano, her bare feet in the white slippers would blissfully tap on the sun-light on his hardwood floor.

The first time he asked her to sit there without any clothes on, she said, “What do you mean?” Nowadays, she liked to believe that the younger version of her was scared to her bones by his request—though the truth was, the hamster in her had been anticipating for three months to be a little scared by him. Nothing traumatic or untasteful, but just a little scared.

“My fingers like to sing to the piano with an angel nearby,” he said, smiling his now signature innocent smile.

He led her down the hallway to his bathroom. The marble surfaces and chrome fixtures shone under the lamps. It must have had been cleaner than the bathrooms at Four Seasons. She briefly felt ashamed of her bathroom at 4C.

“I bought this for you. From Lane Crawford at IFC. I’ll put it here so you can use it every Sunday,” he said, pointing to an elegant red jar with a spherical golden cap that rested on the counter. He was standing in the bathroom doorway, tall like a Pilates instructor. Then he gently closed the bathroom door for her.

Samsara by Guerlain. The gentle body lotion was too strong on her nose when it was first applied, but she knew it would send out a soft and sensual undertone of Sandal- wood after a while.

When her clothes and underwear had been folded neatly in a pile, she heard the piano again. She did not know what to expect before she went back out to the living room. She certainly did not want to do it—*no, no. Really, no!*—nevertheless, she was surprised to find he still had all his clothes on.

Every Sunday, after the less exciting routines, he would lead her to his bathroom as though he feared she would get lost in the hallway. As she rubbed the pinkish body lotion on herself, her eyes tried to take in as much of his tidy bathroom as they could. Before opening the bathroom door, she would quickly sniff her arms, and take one last look at her full breasts in the large mirror.

Sitting down was always the moment she felt most embarrassed. He didn't have any music sheets, so her reflection was in full view on the black upright piano. She didn't even dare look at her own face. The cold wooden chair would sting her bare skin at first, but the chair would soon feel damp and slippery—sweat would drip from her thighs, which she had glued together. It was a relief that his eyes would only be drawn to meet hers, or the keyboard, or the green hill outside. Never once did she catch him looking at her as though he didn't see a lady.

He always seemed relaxed and comfortable around her as though nudity were the social norm for how music should be enjoyed. After a while, she would get used to her state. And it gave her great satisfaction to watch his stately profile, his lean and powerful fingers flying over the black and white keys. After all, this musically gifted young man was inspired by her *full* presence. So it never occurred to her that she could be unhappy that he always chose to say goodbye at his apartment door. And that she always had to walk to the bus stop and wait there alone.

After half a year or so, he suddenly stopped coming to the Bible study and the Sunday service. There weren't any messages from him. During those two weeks, she didn't try to contact him. Nor did she pray when nobody was around.

"Jimmy has been relocated to our Tokyo office," June updated everybody at a Bible study meeting.

With her first pay check from Coco at her new job, she found herself lingering in Lane Crawford, bashfully asking a salesgirl for the elegant red bottle with the golden cap. "Of course! It's our classic," the salesgirl said brightly.

Soon after that, she received an email from him. A brisk greeting and an apology that he hadn't had time to say goodbye. And that he'd love to visit 4C someday.

She never returned his email, though it didn't mean she hadn't been wishing for a follow-up email, or a phone call.

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Ten years — and now the poem. If it were written on nice stationery, she might believe he sent it. *The sea can mean many different things to a little stream.*

In the morning, Gin lingered in Lane Crawford again where she bought herself a new bottle.

Cindy Lam lives with her incredibly supportive husband and their three-year-old son in Hong Kong. She is a member of Hong Kong Writers Circle, and the organizer of Hong Kong Women Writers Afternoon Meetup. She is currently working on a short-story collection set in her hometown.