IMPERFECT SPEAKERS

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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*Imperfect Speakers* is a novel set in Taiwan, about an English young professional, Robyn Anglesea, who hopes to abandon her stressful existence back in London for a more relaxed ex-pat life in the city of Taipei, but, in the process of making that new life successful, encounters many new conflicts with morality, identity and globalization, meeting examples of Taiwanese society at its most superficial and its most profound. Her failures to deal with these situations lead her into greater troubles, never understanding, until the novel’s climax, that her own attitude to the world is at the root of many of her difficulties. The novel comments on several canonical travel texts, such as *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Passage to India*, and uses the contemporary experience of teaching English in Asia as a lens for re-examining their themes. The novel is not yet finished: here is included the first thirty five pages (the opening chapter) of the latest draft, re-written with the feedback from my thesis advisor and classmates taken into consideration, and a little over a hundred pages of the previous draft.
IMPERFECT SPEAKERS

CHAPTER ONE

Despite everything my bosses back in London believed, I didn’t know much more about Taiwan than its place on the map. An island off the corner of Asia, as if the giant China—sitting cross-legged, facing the sea, his head the Himalayas, his thighs those famous rivers everyone wanted to dam, his feet the mega-cities of the coast—had been skimming pebbles across the Pacific, and, aiming one a little north of Hong Kong, expecting it to hop past the Philippines, had seen it land and stick on its first bounce, magically refusing to leave the waves, settling just far enough out that it could not be reclaimed. When I had paraphrased the basics of this image to Andrew, my recently ex-boyfriend, he had retorted, “Robyn, Taiwan is just a place for making fake things.” It seemed I was allowed to get creative only when no one noticed—within the memo, for instance, that had got me included on this trip to the East, where I had asked to be our firm’s third delegate to this year’s Asian Mortgage Finance convention, a memo in which I not only exaggerated my knowledge of the region, but also my fluency at Mandarin Chinese, a language I had studied for a term in university, recalling, four years on, only the first strokes of the calligrapher’s brush, the numbers, one to twenty, and perhaps thirty short words. My poetry had done its work: I had been chosen, others had not, and now, on Friday, the tenth of June, 2005, my first night in Asia, I was imprisoned in our hotel’s basement, dry eyes blinking at a computer screen, forced to research something pointless, forbidden to sleep.

I sat at the last of the four brown monitors that made up the hotel’s computer lounge, a room lined by panels of dark wood, its printer by the wall giggling out fast pages for a tall blonde man in a slate-green suit, the elegant co-ordination of his
shoes, shirt and tie suggesting that he was probably not English. The Taiwanese girl behind the desk, dressed in black, and with rather amazing hair, all curly cascades that reflected the dim wall lamps, brought me a coffee when I asked, placing two milk tubs by my keyboard side by side. But although the coffee’s steam warmed my face, its caffeine, as I sipped, only stiffened my eyelids, each blinks creaking like jammed wooden shutters. We had flown economy for sixteen hours, changing planes in Bangkok, and upstairs, my superiors, Brian and Alice, were already asleep, whereas I had only dropped my bags in my own lovely room on the fourteenth floor, and, with my shoes kicked off, watched for a few moments Taipei’s city lights shimmer below, an alien map of night. My childhood, spent in a small, too-loud house in south London, had taught me to savour such secluded privacy, with its own refrigerator, wardrobe, and walk-in shower: I had always envied the heroines in fairy tales, because no matter their other problems, they never seemed to lack personal space. If I ever tried to do my homework at the kitchen table, and my dad had managed to dodge the pub on his way home, he felt duty-bound to bother me:

“What’s nine times nine?”

“Forty nine.”

“What’s a million times a million?”

“Dad. This essay’s supposed to be about Mary Queen of Scots.”

“Mary? ‘By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes!’”

“Mum! Tell Dad to stop being stupid again!”

In the computer lounge, gulping more of my coffee, my other hand steadying myself on the printer’s warm shell, I noticed that the blonde guy was printing out the
same Standard and Poor’s reports on *Pfanderbriefe* that I was. I nodded to him—a shared sufferer.

I asked, “Do you have any idea what these things are?”

“*Pfanderbriefe*?” His American accent was especially clear in the German word. “We’ve been buying them for years. This is just a refresher for me.” What a dick.

He smiled, awkward, parting his teeth: “That sounded better in my head. Sorry. I’m Jason.”

I said, “No, I’m sorry. I just gave you the death-stare, didn’t I? I’m so tired I’m not thinking—I’ve just flown in—does it make sense to you that we’ve come to Asia to talk about German banking stuff?”

“Not really. Mr. Sugiyama added it to the agenda, and he seems kind of important round here. Guess everybody’s scrambling to get their shit together.”

“We found out in the taxi from the airport.”

“Look, if you’re just getting into these things, try reading the Moody’s reports first. Their methodology is simpler.”

He paused, expecting this advice to prompt a conversation. I was freshly single, if three months could still be called “fresh”—singleness was probably like yoghurt, after a certain point becoming toxic—and the only man I had slept with in that time was, stupidly, Andrew, the previous weekend, because I’d been stressed, and my instincts had told me I would feel better even in his arms, instincts that had turned out to be very mistaken. And so, while the schedule in Taiwan barely allowed time for it, I had hoped I’d be able to have sex with someone good looking, pleasant, and well
informed, also on his own here, also far from home. Jason could teach me about German mortgages in his room, I could wake up comically nervous, then, at the conference table with Mr. Sugiyama, he would reveal to everyone how little I knew about Pfandbriefe bonds, betraying me so thoroughly I could not even respond, sitting there open-mouthed, shaking with disgust.

I said, “I’d better get started on these. See you around.”

Too afraid I would fall asleep if I went to my bedroom, I read in the lounge’s armchair, and when I looked up both Jason and the Taiwanese girl in black had left, leaving the room all mine. I tried to feel proud of myself for coming so far. I had seen only a little of Taipei from my seat in the front of the taxi—liking its foreign bustle, the high-rises and alleys, the crowd of Asian faces walking close by when the lights held us back, the tide of scooters racing ahead when green let us go—before Alice Weir had checked her phone and learned about this new German interest of Mr. Sugiyama, our host at the convention. Because I had been a little fraudulent in getting myself to Taiwan, and my lack of expertise at Mandarin could potentially be discovered as soon as we checked in, I did not feel secure enough to tell her I would wake early and do the reading then.

From the taxi’s back seat, Brian, the third in our team, without disrupting the wrinkles meeting across his eyes, had told me, “Don’t worry. When you reach our age, you’ll get revenge on the next generation,” and although he had been joking, I liked his sketch of the circle of time, as it had the ring of insider-talk, the suggestion that I was valued by our firm’s important people—I had only been there two years—and so it hinted that my life, going forward, would be all right. I could not remember the first time I had sensed that, one day in the future, I would need to take care of my
parents, who had woken up in middle age with few savings, the house they owned as unreliable and rickety as a British sports car, and my sister, as she had tipped into her twenties, becoming an alarming additional burden, yet, ever since understanding that reality, I had lived with the seriousness and velocity necessary to meet it, seeking only the kind of jobs that could save a whole family. Being in Taiwan was proof I had done well, had prospered despite the limits of my dull, rough state primary school and my snobbish, cold secondary one, that although the race had been hard, and I had recently come to suspect it had been for little purpose, it was now achieved, and I could enjoy the results for themselves, the sheen and flattery of international business, this coming together of the world’s elite in a strangely named city, our status proved by the ironed sheets and complimentary ointments of an expensive hotel.

The girl with the curls returned, carrying in both hands a bowl piled high with noodles, their steam scented the air with peanuts and soy, which for a moment, delighted, I thought she had brought for me. She returned to her desk, and, ripping open chopsticks from a paper wrapper, began to eat, blowing on the clump of brown, sauce-thickened noodles she raised to her mouth. I continued to read and jot notes, getting some small grasp of these peculiar German financial instruments, but was more and more distracted by the sounds and smells of my neighbour’s chewing.

I walked over. “Hi, I’m Robyn.”

She said, “Do you have a problem with your working?”

“With the printer? No, it’s fine.”

“Good. Because I am a very bad computer person.” She was tiny, and pretty, her shoulders narrow like a teenager’s, but her tone was severe, and she threw out terse statements as though she disliked indulging in speech. Her skin was far paler
than I thought normal in an Asian person, a luminous pallor coloured by the red of her small mouth, and the blue she had shaded her eyes.

I smiled: “Did you tell them that at the interview?”

“Huh?”

“It doesn’t matter—a joke. I just wanted to ask: what kind of food is that?”

“Ma jian main.” I knew that mian was the word for noodles. She added, “Are they too stinky?”

Below the nutty sesame and fried spring onion, my nose could make out faintly the coils of white dough, the freshness of just cooked, hearty food, layering itself in the stomach like an embrace.

“Could I get one for myself?”

Her name was Mei, pronounced like the month, and once we both stood at the high desk, slurping our midnight dinner, two bowls side by side, the ma-something-mian sank in me, grounding me in Asia, making me feel, perhaps absurdly, that although I had been nowhere in the continent and seen nothing of it, I could now say I had arrived.

“How much for this?”

“It’s okay. No money. The cook is happy you are trying Taiwan food.”

I asked, “How about my chopsticks? Am I doing this right?”

“No. Your way is ugly. Put this one—okay, throw them away. I have extra.”

Opening a new pair, snapping them separate, then rubbing both together as if to start a fire, she gave me orders about the first stick: “Hold it there. Close your thumb. Tight.”
I was supposed to hold the second stick much like I would a pen, although angled downwards, so that it could swoop towards the base stick, pecking.

“How am I doing now?”

“How more up. Your style is a little poor, like a farmer. Yes, hold nearer the back. Good. Now you eat like a princess.”

I tried. “It’s sore. It actually hurts to lift food like this.”

“Because you are Western.”

I suffered my unaccustomed right hand, scooping up little tangles, and, seeing that Mei had no worries letting the ends dangle from her mouth before she collected the stragglers with a slurp, I forgave myself similar motions. I wiped my delicious lips with the back of my hand, the Pfanderbriefe papers stacked on the counter next to my bowl, but I just didn’t care enough to go back to them yet.

“Mei, if you don’t like computers, how did you get this job?”

“I’m just for the big conference. I do different jobs all weekend.”

“I’m also here for the weekend. You like it? Is it a good place to work?”

“Just okay. I only had to do washing up job once. Don’t like washing, you know? Too like my home—my mom always yelling.”

We talked. I discovered, through questioning, that Mei was new to the city, arriving from a village, Bao An, far in the island’s south, and that she lived in a budget hotel of sorts, Tibet Hostel, where various girls shared rooms for months at a time. One American woman there apparently fascinated the locals, because she had come to Taiwan to meditate, and was an expert on Buddhism, although Mei seemed
skeptical of her for reasons I could not make out. It sounded like a pretty cool life—I could not imagine owning the luxury of enough time to travel to a foreign country to practice meditation, a choice that seemed more decadent and more worthwhile than most of the things I had ever done—and I felt amazed by little Mei, who had come to a city where she knew nobody, starting afresh.

Mei asked, “Where do you live in America?”

“I’m actually not American. I’m English. From London. You can’t hear the difference in my voice?”

“No. My English is so suck.”

“It’s okay. My Mandarin is also—I live in London, but I don’t really feel at home there.”

I had felt for some time rootless in London, because where I lived was so temporary. I was renting the spare room of some friends of a friend, a nice couple who had bought a place in Hackney, taking the room in part because it was conveniently placed for my work, but mainly because they required no contract, as, when I moved in, I had hoped to be living with Andrew nearish in the future. Once he and I broke up, I still thought about moving out, but back to my parents’ house, to let myself recharge a while, to recover. I knew I wasn’t quite getting on with the couple I rented from: they found me strange, always late home from work, or catching up on reading upstairs, rarely coming down to socialise with their friends, rarely joining in their continuous post-work chill out. Their ease made me uneasy, as if either they or I had misunderstood something vital about life, but, although I felt bad for being judgemental, I believed the mistake was theirs. I didn’t have proof—it was just a sense that time had to be paid for.
However, thanks to disasters begun on the weekend before I came to Taiwan, moving back to my parents’ house had become impossible, and that made all of London feel homeless to me. Andrew had laughed at my stress and my seriousness, when we’d met up in a pub not far from his flat.

“The point isn’t Taiwan, Andrew. I don’t see why I shouldn’t push to get things. I’ve always had to struggle—I come from a really unstable home situation—”

“Who fucking doesn’t?”

Three months after he had, apologetically, dumped me, we were still having the same arguments. I did not say that when my parents’ boiler broke, I had paid to replace it, that I had spent eight hundred pounds this year helping them out, and these costs seemed like the heralds of their long, needy autumn that I had always known would come, as he well knew that story, nor that Shelia, who was twenty-two years old and who acted—when it came to booze, boys, and employment—no older than sixteen, owed more on her credit cards than her temp jobs could ever pay back, and would need help from me, too, and more than mere advice—as this was a secret from even our parents.

The pub was musty and damp, as if it stood in the ghost of a sunken river, the shields and medals pinned to the wall opposite gone shadowy with the years’ grime. Lights from a pinball machine, running up and down in sequence, kept distracting Andrew’s eyes.

He added, “It’s not Taiwan you should be nervous about. It’s when you get back. You’ve lied to get this place, and the other associates—who have been there longer—lost out. They must guess you pulled a fast one. You’ll have to look at their faces every day.”
“Andrew, please. Please.” I was silent a long time.

He reached to rub my back. “Look, forget it. You’ll be fine.”

“I’m going to be hated.”

“Nah. It’ll be okay. They probably lied too—just not as well.”

“Jesus.”

And it was a Saturday night, and we kept drinking, and the sex was actually good, mischievous ex-sex, and I woke up feeling okay. Dry headed from the beer, but not guilty; I did miss Andrew, but I didn’t need-need him, and I liked waking up in his flat, unbuttoning one of his shirts from its hanger, and walking about while he dozed. I got a grunt when I proposed coffee, so I filled the kettle in the nook that was his kitchen. Sex in a relationship started off gymnastic, brave and all kinds, and as things got more troubled, more bitter, it narrowed towards just the missionary position, then, of course, to none at all, and so it made sense that the first time after a break would be missionary as well, safe and sturdy, before opening up again—I stopped myself, as we weren’t getting back together. Still.

His place was nice, the bottom floor in a West London house, with only two shoebox-sized windows high up, so I had bought him a lamp that mimicked sunlight. A century before, the four floors had been one home: the Victorians must have been colossal people to need all that space, or, if they had been our size, must have possessed such grand desires that they needed room after room to satisfy them, whereas we moderns had to squeeze everything into one or two. Andrew’s cramped gesture at a kitchen had been awkward when we had entertained people, but the living room itself was a soft, pleasant space, with a giant-sized leather sofa well suited for curling up. Andrew’s video games were still out, as was his Playstation, saddening
when I considered how many arguments it had provoked, although I saw he had
removed the framed Chelsea FC poster, the one I had always made clear I despised,
maintaining that it was immature decoration for a twenty-seven year old accountant.
He had taken it down once he had got free of my complaints.

The kettle had not yet boiled when his phone buzzed, his posh one, given to him
by his work, chunky and equipped with a keyboard. Obviously it felt wrong, but as
the bedroom door was pushed to, I crossed the room to look at it, leaning over the
shelf where he had left it.

Sheila: “Good morning, handsome lad.”

Oddly, I felt proud that Andrew had gained some random woman’s flirting. He
was actually kind of handsome, in a large-at-the-waist way, and he seemed serious
and hard-working, which could be attractive until you realised he liked to spend his
free evenings, game controller gripped tight, directing Scholes to take shots at
Germany’s goal. I would have gone back to the kettle, only it was funny that this
woman had my sister’s name, so I unlocked the phone, and checked her number. Then
I sat down at his table, discovering that it was actually her, and that they had been in
contact a long time: Andrew, thank God, did not seem to be flirting back, but they
were speaking. Hers often ended with kisses, his were perpetually well punctuated
and earnest, and this went back more than the three months he and I had been apart.

Andrew, staring at me from the bed, had been apologetic, but not, to my disgust,
particularly shame-faced.

“At first, I was just trying to reach you.”

“At first? Then you started fucking?”
“No. So you looked through all my messages?”

“You left the phone out. It wasn’t hidden.”

“My work phone, Robyn. I didn’t think that was high-risk.”

“So she’s been contacting you more on your regular phone?”

Andrew was silent a moment, caught, so I knew there was worse evidence elsewhere. He might have been polite and proper simply because he was using company equipment.

I said, “I want to see those messages, on your fun-phone.”

“You and I are not dating anymore, Robyn, okay? I do not have to justify—”

“Oh, I know, but we were a little intimate last night—you don’t feel responsible—”

“I apologise I for doing something I knew would be a big fucking mistake.”

My sister, I already knew, would run away. She was not one to take criticism, still more or less a child, groggy in a haze of whatever she had imbibed the night before, cloudy by resentments given form by whatever she could half-remember from Kierkegaard or Freddy-fucking Nietzsche, read in her younger days when she still gave a shit about things. By staying out or sleeping in, she would try to evade an honest explanation, but I had assumed, the way I assumed gravity would keep stuff stuck down, that my parents would assist my pursuit, that together we could triangulate the hunt. But when I told them about the texts, they were vague, they were ambiguous. I couldn’t understand it. I barely heard some of their responses, my dad simply saying, like this was a repetition of one strand of an old conversation, “Darling, Andrew was under a lot of stress a while ago,” and I could only grasp that I
had lived my whole life to get to a place where I could rescue them, and now they
weren’t on my side. I said some things I shouldn’t have, about money, and I saw them
flinch, and, God knows, my mum is not one to tread lightly when she’s upset, and
while I probably should have apologised better, I didn’t, and she didn’t even begin,
and then I really was alone.

Placing my used noodle bowl on top of hers, Mei asked me, “You’re actually
homeless?”

“No, it’s just a figure of speech. I don’t like where I’m living. I took it as a place
to stay before I moved in with my boyfriend. But he and I broke up.”

Mei covered her mouth with her fingers: “Oh my god.”

“It’s okay. So then I figured I’d move back home, with my parents, only—”

“You don’t want to.”

“No, I don’t.”

“I understand. It’s hard for me, in Taipei city, without my parents, and
grandparents, but I needed the new life. To try it out.”

“Look, thanks for listening. It’s really late.”

“Are you going to explore Taiwan on your trip?”

“No, just this hotel.”

“You will have a good time here. It’s a new place, so probably no trouble with
ghosts.”

“If it were older, ghosts would be a problem?”

“Many Taiwanese are afraid of older building. Many bad memories.”
“How should I protect myself from ghosts?”

She raised a finger, instructing me in the ridiculous. “Easy thing is—don’t put your shoes together in your room. A ghost can step into your shoes.”

“Then what?”

“It can take your good health. Pow! Take it away.”

“But if I leave my shoes apart, it can’t?”

“Just don’t put them by your bed.”

I thought: it is past midnight, and I am chatting about the supernatural with a real Asian person. I felt proud of myself. If people in London seemed to have a problem with me, that was unfortunate, but maybe people in Taiwan would see me clearer.

The next morning I ate breakfast with Alice and Brian. All the time I had known her, Alice had let her blonde hair grow long, and its brambly length and brittle white streaks gave her the air of a seer, especially when meetings on the top floor couldn’t end, when the senior men could neither quite continue nor conclude, and Alice would lean forward and choose. Going for our weekly sandwich at Pret-a-Manger felt like being high up, in clear air, like hawks must feel, my problems with my latest project, or my confusion about why the company was such a mess, all seen from a fresh, conquering altitude. “Money doesn’t matter until you work for yourself. Stick with me, Robyn. I’m gathering good people.” On those days, the solidifying of the tuna mayonnaise in my stomach, the paling of my one o’clock caffeine buzz, seem less the cause of my afternoon slumbers than the disappearance of Alice to the third floor. And with just a short night’s sleep, over the small plates of Chinese dim sum, warm
chocolate croissants, and honey on crisp, cool toast, she seemed as precise as always, whereas I felt half-dead, and Brian, our rotund sales rep, seemed a relic of old England, rumpled and unfit, crumbs from breakfast falling on his tie.

He said, “Good toast, isn’t it? A little plastic, the way the Yanks make it. That’s the best thing about getting over there—diners. Love ‘em. You ever been State-side with us, Robyn?”

“This is my first business trip abroad.”

“We can’t have that. I’ll make sure you see New York soon. Now they’ve sent you one place, lining up more is easy. They practically ask for your top ten. And Alice will help put in a good word, won’t she?”

Alice smiled. “Of course. We’ll show her the whole world.” I was beginning a second life.

Over the head of an Indian man reading the folded-over pages of the Financial Times, a tall waitress was wandering, a steel coffee jug in hand, and Brian stuttered at me: “Oh, ask her, please, Robyn—I’d like a little more toast, if that’s all right.”

I didn’t even know the Chinese word for bread. I waved to the girl, and said, in English, “More toast, please?”

Brian nodded: “Should have thought of that myself.”

Ours was a company of management consultants that had, in recent years, unhappily grown too many faces. We were not as old as our partners’ surnames implied, but we could remember the eighties, and during those vigorous years, I was told, had deftly advised deals almost too large to be believed. Yet since I had joined the company’s Research and Opportunities team, my first real job after university,
even the bad newspapers knew we were confused, unsure whether to re-brand ourselves as an IT firm, an industry the partners considered beneath us, or even how to maintain an edge against our much more enormous rivals. One partner knew a person high up in the public sphere, and it was semi-forbidden to whisper quite how much of our new business came from that single civil service source, how ruined we would be without the Blair’s government’s wild needs. One way out of this morass had come by chance, a different partner’s rather wealthy friend wanting to move operations from inside China proper to a factory on the Hong Kong mainland, and who had become concerned about getting screwed during the switch. “Robyn’s company sells shoes,” my mother began telling people. A Cantonese speaker had been hired for the duration of the contract, a contract long since completed, but the same partner now pushed for us to “become at least half Chinese,” and his best contact in Asia, Toru Sugiyama, a Vice President of Mori bank in Japan, invited him to send a team to a little conference in Taipei, where, by night, he said he would happily play matchmaker between us and the locals.

We met just before lunch, in a meeting room in the bowels of the building, ten people without windows. The air conditioning on the floor was bothering me, gusting freezing air against my suit jacket, adding to my queasy disorientation of daylight and hours. I felt sad that I had worked to deliver facts on Pfänderbriefe to a table of ten, two of which, Jason and myself, already knew the details, and another two of which, Alice and Brian, didn’t give a shit. Mr. Sugiyama, already seated when we arrived, seemed a kind old man, in good shape, his brown tie fastened with a bronze clip, whose eyes blinked as if he were often amused. Alice kept her hands in her lap during introductions, they being her one insecurity: while her age had only brought her more visibly into her face, her personality a lamp bright in those eyes and mouth, and she
worked hard in a fitness club near the office, her hands had grown ancient ahead of
time, dry and yellowing with long, pointed fingers, pieces of spotted wood that I
knew, from how she shepherded and concealed them, she felt were no longer hers.
Everyone there but Mr. Sugiyama and a colleague was Western, a lot of loud
American hellos, but he, from how we waited on him, was clearly the senior force.
Once the discussion began, I felt ashamed of my anxious fantasies from the night
before, because Jason, two men to my left, was perfectly gracious towards me, and
when the inexplicable Pfanderbriefe bonds came up, he even deferred the early, easy
questions my way. Toru Sugiyama nodded, even taking notes as Jason and I rambled,
and the conversation had moved some way on, into discussions of the Taiwanese
housing market, where Brian, to my surprise, began asking good questions, the person
I thought least equipped to speak among us, when Mr. Sugiyama coughed, killing that
debate, and looked straight at me.

“No, I’m afraid I still don’t understand. Maybe I’m too hasty a reader. What I
don’t get is how, exactly, these bonds are government guaranteed. Is it like Fannie
Mae, or something else? Do the agencies’ reports explain that?”

I didn’t know what to tell him, and the question was, without doubt, mine to
answer. The table curved around me, waiting. I was poised to speak, when, for some
reason, I glanced at Alice, expecting support. Her face was dead, staring at mine, her
eyes powder blue pebbles, her mouth tight, her speaking self zipped up, withdrawn
until I passed this sudden test, and if I couldn’t pass, I understood I would be
abandoned by her, left in silence. She was a sword, ready, and the realisation struck
hard. It was like she was observing the struggle of a person she barely knew, and
perhaps somewhat disliked.
I gave a good answer, more or less, and asked Jason if he agreed with my conception. Alice’s eyes, when I next turned to her, were her own again, and the meeting moved on, but I couldn’t look up from the table.

Panels continued all day, even through lunch, with little time to talk or think. After one, Brian stopped me.

“You doing all right, Robyn?”

“Sure, sure.”

“You haven’t looked your best—you seem pretty low. Tell me if you need a breather.”

“I think I’ll be fine.”

“I’m sure you will be. No worries.” He paused, “I heard this week hasn’t been much fun you. Some family stuff—just, if you want to talk about it—”

“Christ. It’s common knowledge?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. Alice hasn’t heard a peep. It’s just me, you know—ear to the ground and all that. Watching the smoke signals.” He winked, seeming much sharper than I had ever credited him, making me wonder what else I had not understood about the company’s food chain, and the people around me.

I said, “It’s been hard, yes. And the rain this week, you know—it’s depressing to have it rain so much in June.”

“Good old British summer. I don’t blame the weather, though—I blame the partners, for picking an office so far off the Tube map.”

Although I’d mentioned it purely to defuse Brian’s worries, the week’s rain had
bothered me. As I trod through it, in the shadowy seven a.m. mornings, in the grim London streets, the old buildings on either side of me built by the long ago dead, I kept wondering: would I be doing this had I not designed a life around fixing my family’s problems? Would I be doing this kind of work, or walking to this office, had I been free from the start—would I be wearing these same clothes? No answer appeared, and that too was a worry.

I told Brian thank you, and the day continued, crammed to the minute, and I was never free until a brief half hour before the scheduled early dinner. Yet, even as I freshened up in the arms of my gorgeous room, the motorways and spires of the city bright below, I kept re-picturing that shift in Alice’s face. Sure, the working world was tough; I was tough. But it was not what I expected from my mentor. She would show me Washington and Cape Town and Shanghai, and if I ever relaxed my hold, if I ever was not quite on point, she would let me fall into the sea.

Downstairs, before we were called to dinner, I took her aside.

She seemed bemused: “You felt I betrayed you?”

“I could have got the answer wrong. I only started reading up on those things after sixteen hours on a plane. I expected you to back me.”

“And of course I would have. I’m not a monster, Robyn.”

I touched her sleeve: “I don’t think you are. Just—is the test is over, or am I going to be judged every time?”

“It’s over how I behave towards myself—how I know I’m okay. Take it as a compliment. I make sure I know more, think more, see more, than everyone else. If there’s any doubt, I crush anyone who tries to look better than me. And then I tell
myself, well done, Alice. Well done.”

“Is there a difference between crushing every rival and just being okay?”

“Maybe in a better world. Look: every Western business is willing to fuck every single one of its employees to get things built cheaper in China. Everyone’s competing for the same small pie. And there are fewer and fewer spots the higher you get on the pyramid. You’re lucky: you’ve got the tools to climb up, and most people never even get that. Travel more of the world and you’ll see—how wretched so many millions know they are. The only happy people are the ones moving up—when you can only hang on to your spot, life is very long. Half the managers back home are like that—clingers. They start off so happy with themselves, so pleased with their niche, so critical of anyone who wants to excel, and ten years later they’re sorry, sad windbags, moaning at their staff about the wrongs of the company, the world, the entire bloody universe. I think you’ve got potential, and you did fine today. No need to worry. We’ll have fun tonight.”

Alice had spoken in similar tones in London, but either the change in hemisphere had allowed her to be frank, or I had not quite heard her before. I thought it possible to excel like her, yet not quite be so brutal, but I knew better than to suggest it. During dinner, seated opposite her on the circular, eight-person banquet table, I let our eyes meet, to show I understood. The huge room felt very Chinese, with a plain floor and walls like a dining hall, its monotony broken by river scenes painted in the brush stroke style. One standing pole-man was pushing his boat through choppy water, surrounded by rising herons. The dinner was served in waves, not courses, the hotel tired of humouring our Western expectations, bringing out a single superhuman-sized dish of black sauced beef and noodles for our table, several of us
commenting on the decorum of Chinese eating, how one dish served all, how you
could take as much or as little as you liked, a comment shown increasingly foolish as
more and more food appeared, enough for ten stomachs, enough for twenty: chicken
chunks on a bed of fried peanuts and red chilies, a long silver fish in a clear broth,
steamed forest-dark greens drizzled with soy, beige pointy vegetable stalks in an
orange sauce, stir-fried aubergine that was painfully delicious, a scarlet mound of tofu
studded with minced pork that was so hot even my shoes sweated. Each of us
stumbled through the deluge like invalids, faces blanched, too drained even to make
jokes. And still more: a slab of red pork, its burning juices running down the plain
plate it ruled, a cuboid artifact without doors. Stuffed with rice and chicken and the
oily smile of soup, even our men stared at this challenge, each of us wondering if we
could send it back. I broke the tension, sliding the provided knife into the trembling
near-jelly, livid red peeling from livid red, and, as they waited, I lifted to my mouth
the column I had placed on my rice bowl, like a conquistador’s first step on solid
land. Tangy softness rushed in, a month’s worth of cholesterol in a mouthful.

“Owf. It’s great.” Everyone groaned.

As we eight reclined, victorious over the wreckage of the table, defeated by the
violence in our stomachs, waitresses moved around the banquet hall, clearing plates.
One of these women was Mei—I saw her across the room, at Mr. Sugiyama’s table,
placing tea cups into a soup bowl, the old boy politely leaning back, sensing that Mei
was no professional, that chance dictated the making of her wobbly crockery tower.
Beside him, a youngish Taiwanese man, slim and lacking a jacket or tie, the hair on
the top of his head rising straight up in a tuft, saw me watching, and smiled, making a
slight bow. I looked away, startled. Jason, who had been placed on a table near them,
was talking to his phone.
The sturdy, hairy American guy on my right said: “I’m never eating Chinese food back home again.” He had his rice bowl close to him, in case he decided to attack again.

“It’s not like this?”

He began a long analysis, and, half listening, I didn’t see Mei’s arrival at our table until she was lifting up plates, her intense face not noticing my slightly raised hand, my not quite vocalised hello. Mei, having stacked five plates and a few bowls in her left hand, spotted our teapot, which was resting in the middle of table. Brian shook his head, saying he was still working on it, but Mei seemed too nervous to hear, and leaning around my American neighbour, reached across. Brian, unwilling to surrender his luke-warm tea, murmured: “Robyn,” and, understanding that I was the one to overcome this threat, I felt the table’s eyes on me. I did not know what Chinese words to use—what the words were for “keep” or “teapot” or “still drinking”—but I had to demonstrate some fluency to my judges—and as the pot rose from the sodden cloth, a vocabulary door somewhere in my head opened, and I hissed, “Hai mei!” Not yet! My tone must have been harsher than I had meant, for Mei flinched, seeing me, and released the pot some inches up, straightening quickly, and the plates that her other hand was carrying tipped towards me, unbalancing, their scum and detritus rising from crescent to oval. My American neighbour flicked up an arm, catching the stack from underneath, he and Mei guiding the pile back to level safety. One half-full rice bowl slipped free in their readjustment, hitting the table’s edge and flinging itself and its soy-muddied contents across the floor tiles.

Mei, saying “Du bu qi, du bu qi,” knelt down with her plates to grab at the lost bowl; I half-rose to assist her; Alice frowned, puzzled, and shook her head; I sat back
down. Mei went from us without looking back. I saw her go to the hall’s double doors, where a large, jowly manager berated her.

Brian commented, “Dramatic. But there’s life in this thing yet. Listen.” He sloshed the pot’s unused half-inch, and aimed the spout at his cup. Alice shrugged, shaking her head, and gave me a little nod to say well done. A minute crisis, perhaps, but I had proved myself again. I had successfully maintained my place on the pyramid—one more moment in an empty, pointless struggle to look good, which would never, ever let up. This was the new life I had begun.

In the grand hall, the speakers for the final speeches waiting while functionaries fiddled with the microphones, I sat very close to myself, and tried to understand how so much had gone so wrong. I had worked as hard as I could to achieve something quite empty and cruel, and I had been successful, alienating boyfriends and family, earning myself a very luxurious prison sentence for the rest of my life. Other people, probably, had been living during their lives, maybe not all the time, but at some points, certainly, while I, instead, had been on some sort of mad journey, burning each day like matches in a small box. All I had to do was wait, let this sense of clarity fade, tell jokes with Alice in the bar tonight, and I would be fine, I would be rich, even if my eyes might be cold, my hands turning into wood. The first speech had still not begun, and the air-conditioning kept giving me shivers, my legs chilly even though my tights, and I rose, sick of it all, and edged through of the row of seats, and left the hall. In the lobby, once I had evaded a rolling coat-rack, loaded with the hotel’s uniforms, pushed by someone hidden by its bulk, I smiled at the young concierge behind his marble desk, and, turning the revolving door, I walked right out into the humid evening.
My hotel stood on the corner of a long, very corporate street, with almost no pedestrians, all the buildings gleaming glass, latticed white, or balconied sandstone. I was facing a vacant, fenced-off plot of grass a couple of hundred metres wide, and beyond it the sun was low above the distant towers and offices of the city, its evening amber softening the flakes of cloud scattered in the huge sky. There was the faint reek of car fumes instead of a breeze, no movement in the air at all, like being indoors—and incredible, stifling humidity. The heat struck at me and struck again, and I was not dressed for it, my Armani wool sucking in the summer. I could not quite understand how evening could be this warm, or how the Taiwanese lived in it, how they were not forced underground or into the sea, because on the far side of the grass, I saw people walking, and pristine white shops, their walls displaying the huge figures of expensive Western brands, their uppers floors accessible by raised walkways. Some place there would sell cool drinks, and I began that way, going down a long road, cars and scooters rushing close to my right, my face blanketed by the heat, my stomach queasy from dinner, my tights sticking in ways they shouldn’t. I was afraid that I was already ridiculous, that a tougher, quicker person would be able to skip from the hotel to an elegant bar, but I was not her, that I simply too small, too human-sized, too unprepared for the climate, too ignorant of this city’s dimensions.

“Miss Robyn!”

I could only laugh, already discovered, winched back into my old life a minute after leaving it, the shame of question upon question, but, when I looked, it was only one person following me, a Taiwanese man. He seemed just as underwhelming as I was compared to the space he was crossing: he would not be able to stop me. For a moment I thought he was a hotel employee, until I recognised him, because of his Asian-style collarless shirt, as the man who had given me that strange bow during
dinner. He was walk-marching towards me on thin legs which his dark trousers churned around, each third step a long one, as if berating the previous two for their slowness, and he raised an arm, waving at me, not convinced that calling out my name, or his body’s urgency, would communicate that he wished us to speak.

“Hello, Miss Robyn, my name is Richard Hu. We met during the lunch-time talk on Taiwan’s laptop business today.” He had a birthmark on his cheek, like someone had pressed a thumb dipped in wine there.

“Really?” I didn’t remember him at all, neither the birth sticker nor the prominent forehead, and I felt embarrassed, as there had been so many guys in suits through the day, and in my worries over Pfänderbriefe and Alice, I had only registered the good looking ones.

Richard said, “Yes. But we didn’t speak then. I work with Mr. Sugiyama. He was worried about you, after one of his meetings. He asked me to check you were okay, see if you were enjoying Taiwan. I decided to talk with you after dinner, but then I saw you walking away from the hotel—”

“Thanks, but I’m fine. I just wanted to get out for a moment.”

“You don’t like the hotel? It’s very modern.”

“I wanted some fresh air. Some very hot fresh air, it turns out.”

“Are you hungry?”

“No, no—God, I’m full. I’m just looking for a cold drink. The shops over there.”

“We can get a cold drink in the hotel.”
“No, I don’t want to go back there. You’re welcome to go back—we can chat later—but this is the way I’m going.”

We both regarded the tiny, bright people going up and down in the distance. Richard’s face was flushed, and sweat grew on his brow.

He asked, “Can we take a taxi?”

The cab’s seats were a rush of cold, and I guessed that Taiwanese people had constructed an amphibian sort of society, half in their island’s immense heat, half in the blasting chill of their air-conditioned interiors. We had barely moved before we had arrived, and the heat attacked again as I put my feet on the curb. We had come to the meeting of two piazzas, separated by this road, a Warner Village cinema complex ahead of us and those white shops behind. Good looking, calm shoppers filled the space: a man in his plump thirties led a summer-dressed pig-tailed girl, his wife beside him, fanning at her face with her hand, her green top stretched over the making of their second child. Yet the walls of this place were waves that swamped me: Batman’s wings outstretched, Cheezy Fries, a Latin-dark girl crouching on the steps of a gothic church, the clam buckets of Red Lobster bubbling with Lush Soap. It seemed I had come to no place at all, neither foreign nor home—the people of the East transposed onto some corporate recreation of Earth.

I asked Richard, “Is it all like this, so Western? All of Taiwan?” From my friend Cindy’s trip to Thailand, I had seen photographs of lunches eaten from mats laid over the floor.

“You don’t like it?”

“Is it possible to go somewhere more traditional? Some sort of restaurant, or pub, that’s old-fashioned Taiwan?”
“Sure. But we will need another taxi.”

“It’s safe? Safe to visit there?”

“Of course—this is Taipei. It’s very close. If more time, you could see many traditional places in Taiwan.”

“Aren’t I keeping you from the conference?”

“The talks are very boring. I don’t work for Mr. Sugiyama’s bank—I’m his freelancer. He asked me to help you—this is the only thing I need to do today.”

Asking Richard to wait for five minutes, I went to the nearest shop, Quicksilver, and there I bought a t-shirt and sandals, peeled myself out of my tights, and folded my old clothes and shoes into one of their plastic bags, paying with Visa. Richard called another taxi, and it took us away from the sun. We were soon gone from these tall buildings, from brand names I knew, passing low apartment blocks, three or four storeys, plain concrete grey, with small windows covered by bars, their lights coming on with the coming night, the rows of buildings looming over the pavement, their overhanging first floors supported by pillars rising from the curb-edge, giving their pedestrians a continuous concrete covering from the elements. An amphibian society. Ahead I saw steep, abrupt hills, mini-mountains that proclaimed an end to the dominion of the city, lushly green and tree-covered, their only human traces the peaked roof of an occasional temple. At the end of one block of flats, where a road rose uphill, heading towards a row of houses rising diagonally, a small girl was tugging the hand of a smaller one, shepherding her sister to come home. The sense of having reached the edge of somewhere, of having come far, even though we were with walking distance of settling down, with popcorn, to a film about lost American teenagers being melted into wax.
As the taxi bumped over potholes, and we got farther from Westernness, I tried to understand why I did not feel frightened by Richard. I was travelling alone in a foreign country with a man I had seen in a banquet hall, whose only qualification was sitting at the right hand of another man I did not know, but Richard seemed perfectly calm, his hands resting on his thighs, neither watching the view nor checking the meter—which wasn’t on—and neither seeming eager to talk to me nor avoiding it. He had got us into this cab, it would soon bring us somewhere, and so his mind was serene. Were an Englishman to act this way, it would be absurd, like he were a serial killer or an imported saint, but I wondered if this cloudless demeanour was simply normal in Asia. Plus Richard had chosen our destination, and I was desperate, fleeing the hands of my old life, with no idea where to go, hardly able to scorn help. Caution would have to be some other girl’s affair.

We stopped beside a simple restaurant, its raised veranda covered by a green awning. From its sliding doors, a beaming matron emerged, her grey hair tied back, her off-white apron bordered by a frayed red trim. She seemed delighted by our presence, and at Richard’s brief instruction, two tough-looking men carried out an industrial-size fan and set it going behind the veranda’s one table. Not sure if I was breaking a social rule, I ordered a beer, and Richard ordered ice-tea, and when the fan’s gusts turned to the back of my neck, the sweat on my skin shivered, and sitting down, holding the chill glass, having kicked off my sandals, the heat of the day seemed bearable, almost soothing. Richard asked if I was happy, and I said I was, and we were quiet a while. Half the sky was now dark, its clouds fading into a misty grey, and the high rises of the city were reflecting the redness of the sun; birds, black against the sky, crossed in a slanted line over the nearest green hill. From inside the restaurant, I heard voices laughing, loud men and women, who, I saw when I went
inside to use the toilet, were sharing beers and carrying on like silly grown ups, a
party of working class couples probably much those I had known growing up, seated
around a circular dinner table identical to the one my business colleagues and I had
just eaten at, but, unlike us, were actually enjoying themselves. In the cramped toilet,
I thought about Alice Weir’s pyramid theory, and wondered if it were in fact
nonsense—here in this restaurant people were enjoying food and drinks in each
other’s warm company, not noticeably worse off for sharing it far from skyscrapers.
Perhaps human beings started enjoying life only once they got off the pyramid.

Richard asked me, when I returned, “Miss Robyn, why did you want to come
here?”

“I was feeling really unhappy in the hotel.”

He didn’t reply to this, and I realised that he was nervous, just barely showing
it.

I added, “Not because of anything you or Mr. Sugiyama did. You were great.
It’s just I realised what precisely my job required. A lot of stuff has been happening
that’s made me rethink things.”

“Okay. We will have to return to the hotel, soon, though.”

“No problem. Let me know when you need to go back.”

I learned that Richard was not a banker at all, but an IT freelancer, who had
done some work for Mr. Sugiyama at some point in the past, who had since then kept
Richard around, inviting him to events such as these, maintaining some kind of quasi-
business, quasi-friend relationship.

I asked, “Is Taipei the only Western city in Taiwan? Is the rest of Taiwan more
like this neighbourhood? Quieter?"

“Taipei is definitely the most modern, the most free. And it’s where most English is spoken, so it is easier for foreigners to explore.”

“I speak a little Chinese, actually.”

“Really?”

I admitted, “No, not really. I studied some in university, but I can barely remember it now.”

“Outside Taipei city, most people speak Taiwan national language. *Taiwan-hua.* It’s more difficult for you than Chinese.”

“I read about that. But are they really different languages, or is it like the difference between British and American English?”

Richard, grinning like a pleased Buddha, recited a series of words which fled from my ears, leaving an inviting, curious echo of familiar and unfamiliar syllables, the East I had learned about and the East I had not. Around us, houses were settling into the Saturday night, the pitter-patter flicker of televisions illuminating many windows, the faint shrill of voices, the hill’s leafy bulk behind the houses remaining untouched, increasingly mysterious in the growing darkness. I did not know if it was the sense of danger—having to be alert, on some conscious or unconscious level, to the foreign everydayness now around me—or the sense of rebellion, of the fury my departure would provoke, my long struggle through school, work and adulthood suddenly ditched, or some other phenomenon else entirely, but I had the very peculiar feeling of being unconcerned by time, the situation around me rich in some way my life in London had so rarely felt; the world, centred on this little piece of an island,
now seeming very large and inviting of discovery, it and not some plan for the future calling on my attention. I tried to imagine going home, and could only smile at my picture of myself, attempting a changed life in my small room in Hackney, the trip-hop from the downstairs stereo disrupting my yoga mantras, or doing my best to read philosophy in the pub on the corner. I could leave that house, of course, and rent a quieter place with better sunlight, a park of oak trees nearby, but that would require money, much money, and so I would have to continue working just as hard as before, and would not have time for the yoga, nor the philosophy. Plus my family would be there, unchanged.

Richard said he was not aware that British English was so different to American English, and I passed a fun few minutes describing my words for the things he knew, attempting not to think of the messages from Alice surely accumulating on my silenced phone. Richard’s way of imitating a British accent was to say everything very seriously.

He said, “My accent is different, as well, from Beijing people’s. The Taiwan accent is different to how you learned in University, I think. My friends in China say that Beijing people laugh at them.”

“Americans think our accent is stupid, too. Or, they think it’s kind of sexy, but they make fun of it, as well. But it’s their English that everyone learns.”

“All countries in the world want to come to China now. Many, many Taiwanese go there to make business.”

China was a puzzle to me, even before I had considered a trip to Taiwan: a brutal imperial government which commandeered gas reserves, and stole secrets, that was imprisoning the leaders of Tibet, as well as the leaders of other ethnic groups that
only through their violence were we in the West dimly aware, and yet, confusingly, was simultaneously held to be a good thing—possibly the best thing in the world right now. I had learned in school that dictators never actually made trains run on time, that Mussolini’s invigorated Italy had been a sham, and that, therefore, the choice between a muddled democracy and a high-achieving dictatorship was therefore also a sham, democracies winning war after war while feasting their peoples on cake, yet, in China, that natural law seemed to flounder. In China, the world finally seemed to have found an effective monster. More people had escaped poverty through the Chinese Communist Party’s works than those of ten Oxfams, than through the songs of a hundred LiveAid concerts, and it had all happened without us really understanding how. China seemed to be a bad good thing, something one didn’t want to like but, balding friends of Andrew had assured me, one had to, if one was mature, tough-minded, if one accepted how the world was. Whereas Taiwan, the few times that business people mentioned it, seemed to be rather a mess, a democracy but not a pretty one, an Asian tiger but not very scary. I had even read, and could not exactly believe, that Taiwan considered itself to be the actual ruler of China, which obviously had to test people’s sympathies, as if Charles the First had fled to the Isle of Skye, and stayed there, his court forever afterwards claiming itself to be the real British government, denouncing Westminster as a fraud, demanding equal attention from the world’s diplomatic corps. Taiwan seemed the opposite of China, a bad good thing, something one wanted to like but couldn’t quite, an anachronism in the days when dictators were finally allowed to win.

I said, “Maybe if Taiwan said, ‘Look everybody, forget about us being the real Chinese government and all that. We’re a democracy, and we really are separate to China,’ then the world would pay more attention. More business would come here.”
“China has seven hundred missiles pointed at Taiwan, in case we say we are an independent country.”

“I see your problem.”

“I think we are a different society, though. I want to see Taiwan become a proper modern country, and all over, not just Taipei, so people can buy anything and not be afraid, so that everyone is honest and trusts each other, just like in Western countries.”

I suggested this was not an accurate description of the West, but Richard was unbowed. I checked my phone, once my beer was done, and found a series of text messages from Alice, increasingly angry. I also had a voice message from Brian.

“Robyn, where have you gone? Have you sneaked out for a cheeky pint? Or should we call the police? Alice is going a little spare over here—please call.” I was touched by Brian’s kind tone, and wondered if, had I not approached it wrong, the business world would have been perfectly liveable. Perhaps—I just knew for myself I had made things wrong, and I wanted to try something new.

Richard guessed that my bosses were worried about me, and paid for the drinks. Once we arrived at the hotel’s lobby, he looked at me, nervous.

“You are going to be okay?”

“I’m going to be fine. Thank you so much for the tour.” All my life, I had been good at making decisions: I went to my room, packed my things, wrote a note apologising to Alice, and a second note to my immediate manager, Doug, saying that I was resigning from the company, and would repay the plane fare if they felt cheated—even though I would be drained of money if they called on that promise. As
I wrote, I didn’t have a detailed sense of what I was doing, other than finding Mei and saying sorry for shouting at her, having a chat with the American woman who had come here to meditate, and changing my whole approach to life. I slid my suit into its bag, my laptop into its, and packed my toiletries and spare clothes into my suitcase. Wearing my new t-shirt and a more casual skirt with flats, I wheeled my possessions to the lift, travelled down to the business lounge, hoping to see Mei behind the desk. Instead I found an unfamiliar girl, and with a quick google search I found Tibet Hostel, but instead of asking her to write down its address, which would mean, as soon as Alice or someone else asked about me, they would know my destination—which would lead to enormous hassle and arguments—I found a metro stop nearby from which I could walk to the Hostel, sketched the roads on a napkin, cleared my browser’s memory, and asked the girl to write the station’s address for me in Chinese characters.

With her note in his hand, a taxi driver drove me across the city. I saw in the night many things: tall buildings glowing blue, the red and black front of a California Fitness gym, the steam rising from a line of cooking stalls down a side alley, two Western guys, one with jagged, artsy hair and a shoulder bag, waiting for whatever food they had ordered, both of them gone in the taxi’s next instant. A monster-sized raised road, video screens advertising mobile phones through feminine exclamations of wonder, and, more old-fashioned, so many signs for restaurants, humble and grand. A girl in denim shorts climbing on to her boyfriend’s scooter. And much of what I saw, I knew I would not completely remember. It was too strange, too large, too sudden. Streets aglow with red break lights, underneath a mono-rail of massive concrete pieces, heading north, which, while we waited in a traffic jam, a train passing overhead made shudder. It was a doubled sensation, its two parts at war:
inside the cab, great warmth and pride, the delight of breaking rules, of being free and scandalous, for perhaps the first time in my life, and simultaneously, outside of me, the mystery of the city, the frightening poverty of its towering dirty office blocks, my small English bank account, my lack of friends or language, and feeling both emotions at once, neither swamping the other.

I paid the driver only a few pounds worth of Taipei money, and in the damp heat, pulled my suitcase along a pedestrian-only, tree-lined avenue, and then down a narrow alley, festooned with signs I could not read. By one door on the right, a sheet of paper, sealed in plastic, whimpered in English, “Tibet Hostel. 2nd Floor. Go up.” My suitcase thump-thumped over the door step, and when I sweated it up one flight of the dusty stairs, I was confronted by a bare corridor, lacking windows, dimly lit, dust thickening at its edges, with only a single office at the far end. This thin building made no sense, lacking doors—as if its neighbours were consuming it, dividing its rooms between their jaws, and from this level only the single bright light at the end remained. Tibet Hostel, a tightness in my shoulders worried, might be a real dump, and not the kind of dignified simplicity I had imagined. Perhaps I would be shown, in another few minutes, how far the fall from the pyramid would be.

In the office, on a damp-looking, wrinkle-cracked leather sofa, a Taiwanese young woman in a blue summer dress, her legs crossed, a sandal dangling from the toes of one foot, sat reading a magazine that even in Chinese, I could recognise as Cosmo. The little remaining space was used up by a squat black filing cabinet, its two drawers dented in all eight corners, and a desk that was half set inside an alcove, bearing a bound book, pens, and a bronze lamp with a bent neck and a green shade. It seemed a very lonely workplace.
The girl said, “I love your hair.”

I laughed, as much of it was plastered to my brow. “It’s a style called sweat-monster.” Reminded of Richard, I wondered if all Taiwanese people were simply this friendly.

She asked, “You want a room?”

“Sure. A girl I know is staying here—Mei. I wanted to say hello to her before I decide anything.”

“Xiao Mei? Ah, she’s so cute.” The girl went to a box of keys in the alcove by the desk, continuing to ask me questions, socialising on autopilot: “Mr. Gao will be back soon—I’m not the boss, I’m Lily. I just stay here. It’s great—Mei’s room has a spare bed—she has so little friends in Taipei. She will be happy.”

“Hang on—are there any private rooms?”

“Just one, on the top floor—it’s taken! Okay, okay, don’t worry. Mei is a good girl.”

A shared room would cost me three hundred per night, or less, Lily promised, if I decided to stay by the month, and tried to haggle with the liao-ban—a word I remembered, meaning “boss” or “manager.” Three hundred Taiwanese was only five pounds, and I had a little under a thousand pounds in my bank account. I would be okay, at least for a while.

“Is Mei at home? I don’t want to weird her out.”

“Don’t think so!”

We went up a flight with my bags, my skin turning cold in the extreme AC, to
an equally misshapen floor. To the left of the landing, abruptly, stood a metal door with three locks, with a line of worn, small shoes, male and female, just underneath it, while to the right, beyond stairs heading to another floor, ran a corridor with four doors on each side, its floor made of shiny wooden panelling, the foot-long pieces rising in occasional ridges that questioned the skill of the hand that had laid them. Mei’s door was the third on the left, and Lily left me there, wishing me an absurdly over-feminine “bye bye!” before her sandals slapped their way down to the office. If staying in Mei’s room was a little creepier than I had planned, I would still be able to apologise, say why I had been so stressed over dinner, and, by explaining, take charge of time. Mei had been kind to me, I had been rude to her, ruining the good feeling of that first meeting, and the way I had lived so far, running around life like a gerbil on a wheel, that would have been it, I would have had to charge on, regretful but helpless. Now, however, I could say sorry, get to know her, see if we could be friends—and, if we became close, that would, in a sense, reverse time, and annul my mistake, bringing the bowl back to the table. Knocking, hearing nothing, I unlocked the door to my new room, rolled my things through the door, and placed my laptop bag on an IKEA-ish chest of drawers. It was only furniture in the windowless room aside from the bunkbed, which took up half the space, leaving only a few square feet for anything other than sleep. I flicked on the light, and saw I had put my bag next to some sort of buddha statue, an icon or something like that, and frantically shoved the bag away from it.

“Hello?”

In the lowest bunk, Mei’s head was blinking awake, the rest of her covered by a Hello Kitty duvet. I had woken her, or, at least, the person I thought was her, as this person looked very little like the girl I had met. A face flattened by the removal of
make up and creams, the high pallor replaced by a more sepia, skin-like tone, her hair unbinding its cascades, and shoulders that seemed fit for a body far younger than Mei’s. It was possible Lily had given me the wrong room.

I said, “Hello, Mei. I’m Robyn. The English girl, from the hotel, who said she was homeless. I’m so sorry to barge in like this. They said you were out.”

She raised herself, and stared. “Robyn?” I realised that in my loose t-shirt, my face flushed from the outdoors, I had to look completely different, too.

“Yes, I’m Robyn. The English girl. We ate noodles together—I really appreciated that. And I was rude to you at dinner, which I want to apologise for. I was doing all sorts of things wrong—not just with you, but with everything—I’ve made quite a big decision.”

Mei was silent a while, properly awake now, nodding that she did remember me, but was still unsure of something, probably why and how I had got to her room, asking me, again: “Robyn?”
CHAPTER TWO—from the previous draft

While the rest of the world added and subtracted, asked to borrow money, and ran to catch trains, smiling women dressed me in fine clothes. I had no option but shop, after all: my suitcase had only expected to provide for three days wear. I took the metro map as my model of the city, still finding the gleaming, silent underground Taipei more comprehensible than the real, chaotic and overheated one. According to the metro, the important bits of Taipei ran east-west, along the blue line, intersected by the clearly important red line to the east, and what seemed the less crucial brown line in the middle. Much further west of my area, the city became, from my limited view of it, poor, industrial, and shapeless; much further east of the station called, “City Hall,” one stop beyond the Sun Yat Sen Memorial hall, steep green hills rose to choke off the streets. Walking in new sandals south of the City Hall stop, among tall buildings often as futuristic as the metro—and never finding an actual city hall—I discovered a Warner Village and a Zara and a dozen other designer places, some accessible by walkways hanging from steel cords. Chewing a paper bag’s worth of cheese fries, I discovered, up icy escalators, in the lowest floors of the city’s largest sky scraper, Taipei branches of Versace, Emporio Armani, Aquascutum, and the rest. Yet these labels, I hurt to learn, turned out to cost the same, or more, as they did in London. I had savings, a little more than a thousand pounds in my bank account, but I had no idea how long that money would have to last. Two ladies in bright make-up aided my choice of one delicious longish black skirt—I could afford one nice thing, I reasoned—and I never went back.

Exploring alone or with one of the girls, the more I saw, Taipei seemed to be
like two cities. Sometimes the two versions of Taipei complemented each other like a well suited couple, and sometimes one seemed intent on drowning the other, like two swimmers writhing to get free. The first city was large-scale and Western, a city of counted hours and minutes, an eager participant in the international order that spanned the globe, its prices often no different to New York’s or London’s. Its colours were a creamy ceramic-seeming white, the cloudy-steel of high windows, the dark cloth of men’s suits and patterned paper shopping bags that comfortable women carried home. Its angles were soft, polygonal, its modern designs eliminating the rectangle, the square, in favour of something more playful, eliding whatever difference was supposed to exist between work and leisure, corporate and personal. The inhabitants of this city, if young, were noisy on their mobile phones, the men styling their hair spiky, their bellies plumply indulgent under black t-shirts, the women all slender beyond easy understanding, tall and loud as they stepped on their heels.

The second city loved to be small. It was often dirty, friendly, painfully local, and occasionally frightening. Sometimes it existed underneath or just to the side of the first city, like the simple neighbourhood I walked through that sat in the shadow of the enormous Taipei 101 tower, where I met a tiny girl, her hands dirty from picking grass, calling to her even smaller brother to tell me hello. Once, when I wandered far from any subway stops, somewhere north of the blue line, I found a shop selling only birds, brown and white chicks in pallets one on top the other, which faced, across the busy road, an equally small temple, its outside scarlet, its interior darkly invisible. In this second city, they told me I was beautiful. The old people sieving out noodles from broth, or pushing a circular blade through a crisp pancake of chopped spring onions, lied to me and said I spoke excellent Chinese, and they rarely charged more than fifty pence. Young people, men and women, stared at me, and,
often when I met their eye they grinned and looked away. Sometimes crowded,
sometimes very male, the streets disorderly in their layout, the buildings all grim
blocks of concrete whether small or giant-sized. This city’s time was summer, its heat
and slowness, the hot sun crimson with dusk, the teenage girls in aprons mixing ice
tea, and mixing ice tea, and mixing it again as I watched more customers arrive from
my seat underneath a straining wall fan, their hands pouring cold tea from a jug, and
sweet powder in scoops, their chatter to each other like the conversations of birds.
The evening market stalls appearing on quiet streets, where couples strolled, rarely
touching. This city that rarely spoke English, that was not mentioned in maps, and
that was probably completely dull to most visiting Westerners, just homes stacked on
top each other, and prayers to the dead smouldering in metal buckets, and two
brothers with mullets racing on push-scooters, this was the city, the continent, that I
wanted to know. Its energies, unobserved by the rest of the world, living only for
itself, filled with me with great happiness, merely by walking or buying something
small for little money.

Mei and I usually ate breakfast on a small street I christened “Temple Lane.” I
hadn’t even noticed it on my first day, but Tibet Hostel’s alley ended in one of the
city’s most pleasant spots, a long, tree-lined pedestrian-only avenue passing secretly
between blocks, where wooden benches sat vacant in the intolerable humidity. One
lane, running off the main avenue, devoted itself entirely to food, all low buildings,
each using its ground floor as a compact diner, with the single exception of the tiny
temple at the alley’s entrance. Big enough for one person at best, this grotto stood in a
small yard, overshadowed by the old tree that grew there. When Mei finally heard me
call the street Temple Lane, she was amused once she understood, dropped the real
name in Chinese—which I immediately forgot—and commented that I “was like a
child, making new words.” And I was a child, made so by travel, wide eyed, seeing a
monster in a sweep of an oak’s branches.

Chinese characters made the city nameless. Grand landmarks, of course, existed
in English, but that street with the caged birds ceased to exist as soon as I had stopped
looking at it. Fortunately, Mei enjoyed playing guide, and on Temple Lane, where
men cooked noodles outdoors under awnings, where office workers swung food in
bagged takeaway boxes from their wrists, she showed me four different kinds of
dumpling, all sold within thirty feet of each other. Guo-tie, thin like canoes, crisping
at the base of a covered pan, the pork merging with the fried dough shell, sweet in the
sauce we lowered them into; wontons filled with shrimp, served in soups, their tailing
fins like the arms of a courtier’s robe; jiao-zi, extracted in trays from a freezer at one
ancient woman’s diner and sunk into a furious broth, served moist and airy; bao-zi,
my favourite, steamed in circular bamboo boxes in a forever crowded diner near the
far end of Temple Lane, a place with two communal benches and stools round the
walls, beige and brown toned, where televisions played silent dramas set in China’s
nineteenth century, the customers all in dark office wear, more friendly and good
natured than the staff, who were often curt once the lunch hours began, bringing with
grim faces the trays of incredible, melting dumplings.

The day before, a tropical storm had whirled through Taipei, leaving the city’s
air cool, like someone opening a window in a stuffy room, and so on Monday, a week
after I had arrived in Taiwan, I offered to treat Mei to an iced coffee in Temple Lane’s
one cafe. This pleasant little spot, although appealing for its red cushioned stools and
quirky signs, in English, describing the old fashioned way this unknown chain made
coffee, was open to the street, and so I had never been able to linger there before,
although admiring the idea of relaxing with caffeine, reflections quickened in the
open air. Today, however, Mei and I ate ice cream sandwiches, and I continued my quizzes.

With the help of the girls, I had prepared index cards, which, as the morning people came for their snacks before work, I shuffled and drew.

“Who is the DJ Kool Herc?”

Mei replied, “He was the first guy to do the hip hop thing. From Jamaica. You really love him.”

“No, I don’t love him. I just think knowing about him would help.”

Embarrassing that I myself did not really understand the chapters of books I had read, and so my education of Mei would be effective only if her interviewers did not know very much themselves. I had hoped to find someone or someones who had simply invented rapping, but it seemed that things were more complicated than that, with dancing and Djing coming first, but I didn’t feel confident enough about the details to try to explain much to Mei.

I drew another card: “What clothing do you think looks sexy for dancing?” This was one of Lily’s.

“I am so tired by this.”

“The interview is tomorrow.”

“I think girls should not change their clothes just to have sex with a man. Wear the same clothes, the man will still try to have sex.”

“Okay. Say this: I think that women should buy clothes that work with their personal style, and that’s something I can help them with in this job.”
“Thank you, Robyn. I am listening.” She smiled: “You are lucky to be rich, so you can just go exploring all day, and read books in the library for me.”

“I’m not rich. If I don’t get help from my family with sorting things at home, I’m going to be in financial trouble. And they’re angry with me.” The ice cream was cold on my lips, and the day warm on the back of my neck. A street like Temple Lane seemed very much my dad’s kind of spot—as long he could also find a pub somewhere nearby. The plain, busy diners seemed like how I had imagined his life as a young man, scribbling at the Evening Standard, a world of toil followed by brainless relaxation, always in a pub or in front of the telly at home, but I tried to picture him in a cafe like this, a young man on a year abroad, because that was in him, too, even if it had not had much space to grow—drinking iced coffee, noting down questions, watching, being changed. Perhaps even, by spending time in this alien culture, being prepared for the equally alien experience of raising two daughters.

Mei said, “You like Taipei. You keep looking around and not getting bored. I want to tell you be careful. Taipei is a bad city. Every street contains some evil thing.”

“I feel so safe here. It’s amazing. No one seems like they’re going to attack me.”

“No, I don’t think so. Not like that. But people here have bad hearts, because of the noise and money. Not good like Western city.”

“London is more scary than Taipei.”

She seemed not to hear. “Not good. Old places in Taipei have seen many ghosts. And the people who seem Western here, they are just pretending. They are clever, like Chinese.”
“Give me an example.”

“That’s why I’m staying at the Tibet Hostel. Of course I have relative in Taipei. I am Taiwanese—of course my family knows a person for me to visit. My uncle—not really my uncle—a family member. He is well known in Bao-an, because he came to Taipei and did well. Not so well as the most famous Bao-on people—he did not get to Shanghai or America—but good. Successful. But people say that he was successful in export business because he used bad ways. That he got help from owning a ghost baby.”

Mei was capable of bringing strangeness into any conversation.

She explained: “It’s normal. But very bad. The Daoist magician can do magic on a baby’s dead body, and put it in a bottle. Then it does different things to help the owner, if the owner keeps it happy. Many movies about this situation. Just before I leave Bao-an, one aunt—not really my aunt, a family member—she tells me to be careful around this uncle, because she says the ghost baby is real. She says the story that when he came to Taipei, with almost no money, he just had one connect, a good friend businessman, and he worked very hard to make friends with this man. They go drinking, and my uncle borrows so much money to pay for all the drinking and food, and soon the man likes my uncle very much. He helps my uncle start his own business, and they both make money. In early times in Taiwan, making money much more easy. Soon, my auntie says, my uncle is making more money than his friend. He has many new friends now. Then the friend’s wife gets pregnant, and the baby girl dies. Not like abortion. Just natural.”

“A still birth? Or miscarriage?”

“Sure. My auntie says that my uncle persuaded his friend to him the pieces of
the dead body. I don’t know exactly. He argues that a dead baby’s ghost can be very
dangerous, will maybe try to kill any new babies his wife has, so he will take danger
and save his friend from trouble. He puts some of the friend’s baby girl in a jar, and a
magician uses spells so that she can work for him. Then his business keeps doing
well.”

“Mei, can I interrupt with a rude question? Do you actually believe in ghost
babies? Do you really think this would work?”

She waved a hand: “That’s not what my story is about. Listen. When I come to
see him and his wife, they are kind to me. She is cold, but good. He makes many
jokes, saying I am so beautiful, and soon I see this makes his wife unhappy. The
apartment is very nice, small, I think, because then I don’t know that everywhere in
Taipei is small. They have no children. Three bedrooms, two computers, big
windows, and a glass machine for making coffee that they never use. A shrine on the
wall to Lord Guan, so they are a holy couple. Many books of Chinese poetry in the
room they give me, and on their balcony a table for their ancestors. No ghost baby.

“So I stay in the house, and soon the uncle finds me a job in a friend’s company.
The job is no fun, and also the uncle is scaring me now. He calls me ‘sexy’ and
‘beauty’ all the time, and he wants to buy me new clothing, new underwear. His wife
becomes cold—she hates me. But even with the computer, I can’t find good job in
Taipei. I have no experience and my degree is from bad university. I pray hard to my
gods, but I know they are very busy, and I am just a small woman. I think that if I can
find my uncle’s ghost baby, it can help. Ghosts are close to us, so they are more
helpful.”

“So you do believe in them.”
“No, not in every ghost baby. Most are just a trick. But maybe this one works. Then I discover, from talking, that my uncle also owns the basement in the building. One night, when his wife is out playing Mah-jong, he comes home so drunk, and he chases me in the apartment, trying to kiss me. He makes me hide in his bedroom, banging on the door. Later I hear he falls down on the couch, laughing like a boy, and then snores. His keys are on the table. So I take the keys, and go down to the basement. I try all the keys until a little one opens the door. I know that he will have the ghost baby jar on a table, with sticks to go bai bai, and other stuff, but inside, I find something different. There is a leather couch, and a flat TV, and a small bed. And the cupboards are full of porno DVDs. He owns hundred of porno movies. Every kind of woman. Young and old, Taiwanese and black and white. Girls tied up, girls wearing stupid clothes. So disgusting I feel sick. And this is just one or two cupboards, but the others are locked, and then I hear him calling my name from upstairs. I get scared looking at all the pornos—there is no time to find the ghost baby—so I lock the door and go out to a QK cafe over in the next street and order very hot green tea. I hold it in my hands, taking little sips, and then my uncle walks in and sits down opposite me. I am so scared. He is very open, with a soft voice. He says he knows I have seen his room, and so now he and I are a tea m. We must become sex partners. He says he needs it. And he can help me with the rest of my life.

“I don’t leave the cafe until his wife comes home from Mah-jong, and the next day I leave his house and come to the hostel. Then his wife calls friends in Bao-an to say that I tried to sleep with her husband, that I am a thief of men. And that I disappeared from the good job they found me. My parents are ashamed.”

“Tell everyone about his secret room.”
“I did. But maybe he cleaned it too quickly. I look like liar, so now I don’t know I can go home. I think of all this sick, in Taipei, since my uncle came here. So I see a happy girl like Lily and I think: you don’t know anything. You are just stupid.”

Of course I defended Lily a little, but I was really thinking about the big modern world that everyone wanted me to rejoin, how clean and sensible it seemed, and how much suffering it required. How many bodies, in factories out of sight of its cute cafes and smart restaurants, it ground down to paste. Poor Mei, and all those women in Mr. Uncle’s porn collection, studios across the surface of the globe recording a million fake moans. It could be defended—it was just a job, after all, and perhaps no worse than other jobs that humanity performed. Anything could be defended if you didn’t think very hard. The only sensible thing, despite what everyone said, might be to step away from the wheel a while.

These thoughts made me bolder, that afternoon, when I called my parents. My goal was to stop them worrying enough that they would be willing to help me out. If I could get my stuff out of my rented room by the end of the month, I would not have to pay five hundred and twenty five pounds in rent. But they were not able to stop worrying.

My mum fretted about my employers, who apparently had called many times, in more or less the same sentence as she fretted about the typhoon which the BBC’s website had reported.

“Mum, Taiwan gets typhoons every summer. Me and the girls just bought a lot of snacks and iced coffee, and stayed up watching Korean films.”

“It looked terrifying. We saw waves—”

I pointed out that those waves were on the island’s coast. Taipei, locked in by
mountains, was wave-free all year round. She then complained about Rose, who I had mentioned once and foolishly called, “crazy,” and about I could believe I was safe in a foreign country.

Taipei feels safer than London. Women are out all hours of the night, in short skirts and everything.”

“They know the culture, though—you don’t.”

I asked to speak to my dad.

My dad was no better, refusing to help me out.

“You need to come home, daughter. You don’t know how often I’ve thought of declaring you legally insane, and cutting off your credit cards, or even coming over there on a plane and frog-marching you to the airport.”

“You need two people to frog-march someone.”

“I’d put out an ad, in Taipei, calling on any fathers with troublesome daughters. I’d have it written in English and any languages dads might speak over there—Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, and Swahili. Any dad who have ever worried where his child is sleeping at night—”

“I sent you photos—”

“—if you, dads of Taiwan, know what it’s like to have struggled all your life to put food on your family’s table—”

“And beer in your own stomach.”

“—And send your daughter money in university so she could get drunk and call home the next day because she was sick, or, when she was in school, hassling her
headteacher if she ever got less than an A—

“I really liked it when you did that.”

“—Then come join me bringing Robyn to the airport. And I bet there’d be a crowd of dads, an army of dads, a nation of them, all as Chinese as chow mien and all understanding me perfectly, what with how the world has got today.”

I asked him if he envied me, just a little, and he did eventually admit that, if he had planned things properly in advance, and had money, and had sorted things out with his boss first, and wasn’t “out of touch with reality like his eldest daughter,” he might have, as a young man, enjoyed a trip to Asia.

“What would you have done?”

“Learned how to use the nunchuks. They do that in Taiwan, right? I have taken classes on a mountain top with some old geezer, like in Enter the Dragon.”

“He might have had to send you jogging, first.”

“We’re talking about the seventies, love. I was not then the man of substance you and your sister have become accustomed to. But I’d agree to a little jogging, if asked. This does not imply I am endorsing your madness.“

“I do plan to come home, eventually.”

“If I had any more courage, I’d fake your signature and spend every penny you have, so you’d have no choice but come home. I’d fake the evidence so MI6 has you arrested and extradited. Only your mum has informed me that this would be counterproductive.”

“I love you, dad.”
“Come home, then. I will not assist your project to fuck up everything you have always considered important. And Andrew, that poor boy—he’s been calling here every couple of days. He doesn’t know why—”

“I’m calling him later—”

“Come home, Robyn. Before it’s too late.”

Things did not seem late at all. Another woman might have used this new freedom to loaf, but not me. I felt more than once a trembling good fortune that I knew exactly what I had won for myself: total liberation from the power of time. I woke with no other demands than hunger, and not only did this mean I could do anything I felt like all day, it also meant that I had no one nearby who expected anything of me. No one expected me to be a certain kind of person, and so I could ask myself, each late morning, sipping iced coffee in Temple Lane’s open-air cafe, what kind of person I wanted to be.

Firstly, I wanted to be more of a reader: years of corporate work now made my mind feel quick but limited, like a rat expert on its own laboratory cage. The saddest thing about my sister was not her drinking and generally fuck-up-ness, but that right up until her first term in university, she had read like she sought the answer to some tremendous puzzle. Her dramatic contacts with older men in chat rooms had horrified my parents, but to me they had seemed another reaching of hers for an understanding of the world, and so explicable, even admirable. In her twenties, though, she just seemed tired, appearing for a Saturday breakfast while the parents and I were starting our lunch. I remembered her reading Kirkegaard at seventeen, and so I travelled to the twenty-four hour bookshop in the very centre of the city, Eslite, and bought a slim Penguin edition of Fear and Trembling, which I read in cafes and dumpling diners,
concluding that religious people were quite strange.

I wanted to look better, and while I did not have the budget for fine clothes, I did have the time to exercise. I visited, close to Eslite, a gym, but there I met a very loathsome Taiwanese-born salesman, handsome and muscular, whose Sheffield accent, gained from studying sports psychology there, made him think he could impress me by disparaging all the Taiwanese-owned gyms in the city, and who pressured me to sign up for a whole year until I walked out. Advised by Lily, I bought brandless running shoes, track-suit bottoms, and a purple t-shirt that promised to do the ‘wicking’ thing, and I tried to jog up and down the pedestrian avenue outside Tibet Hostel. Only, no matter how early I woke to do it, old women stared at me so strangely I didn’t summon the will to run there that often. Once I took the 360 bus north and up the curving road that rose to the highlands of Yuan Ming mountain. There the air was indeed blissfully cool, clouds thick above like the sky above a moor in one of those gothic novels, the streets and shops quiet and friendly, lanes heading off towards low houses and convenience stores. I ran slowly, the way jogging websites recommended, through a college campus, passing groups of girls who waved and hedgerows decked with roses. When I ended, tired out and exhilarated, I recalled that the guy Tanner had offered to show me around Yang Ming mountain, and I was possessed by admiration that I had done it alone.

I bought Chinese CDs and a book, and I practised with Mei. My dad’s words continued to sting, that I had thrown away everything, and I took notes on the city, thinking about possible ways to start some kind of business. There had to be some way to use what I knew, and who I was, to make some money, and Taiwan contrasts, simultaneously thriving and modern, and limited and ramshackle, seemed to beg the intervention of an intelligent woman equipped with local friends and a knowledge of
Economics. And yet, I didn’t want to make impressing everyone back home my sole purpose. I had got into trouble by taking life too seriously, and I wouldn’t repair that mistake by transferring that same behaviour to Taiwan. It was time to live post-seriously, and I told myself that a night spent laughing with friends was as valuable as studying a book on Plato, and savouring an exquisite meal was as much my priority as comparing local computer hardware prices with those listed on Amazon.co.uk.

There were, after all, more dishes than just dumplings to try. I ate by pointing—yes, one of what that couple were sharing, or that just killed fish breathless on freshly poured ice—answering, if questioned about cooking style or side dishes, with my new magic words: “Sui bian.” As you like. The food would inevitably taste good, and the world was so big I could simply let it come to me. Sui bian. As I supped and shopped in the smoking, crowded lanes of Shi-lin night-market, passing the cheap clothes sold on tables or laid out on plastic sheeting, tasting the rice-wine tang of teppanyaki chicken on its bed of fried garlic and bean-sprouts, or the bitter tones of the oyster omelette that Mei insisted I love, or the curry-thickened noodles with devil-black beef, which caused me to wipe my mouth once more in the hope that a little more sauce remained on my lips to be tasted, I came to see that this way of eating would have been impossible in England. Even if the dishes were identical, no one in London could know the specific pleasure of walking out any time of the day and being sure that whatever was ordered, the result would cost next to nothing. London had grown too expensive for humans: you could not open a Shi-lin night-market there, because paying five or ten pounds for majian noodles made majian noodles a different dish. Here, food existed in the air. Here, one could live sui bian. If you ate a paper bowl of stewed pork on rice, and a paper plate of bok choy drizzled with soy sauce, and later were hungry again, someone nearby would be cooking something else. Taipei was
still two cities—London only had one. And while I understood that these low prices had to be the result of low wages, of a still developing economy, where cooks and ingredients and machinery were still cheap, and I hoped Taiwan would one day be as rich and unsatisfying as England, I felt grateful to have seen it now, before that day had come.

Yet, the city still had claws. Once I offered to treat Lily, Dan Dan and Mei to a restaurant meal, and they brought me to a rough place, with bare walls and ingredients laid out in cases by the door. We ordered a foot-long red-coated fish, a vegetable soup, dark greens, and a plate of sautéed kidneys for Mei, and when the bill came to nearly four hundred NT, and I winced, even though I had spent no more than the cost of a single gourmet burger back in London, I then realised how nervous about money I was becoming.

I lay on my bed and called Andrew with my laptop. I used phone cards for my family, but Skype for him, because its newness and freeness made me feel less far from home. During the week, because I was an inconvenient eight hours ahead, I could only call him during his breakfast, as by the time he finished work I was long asleep.

“I’ve been out to more places, the last couple of days. I’m seeing a lot more of what the city is like.”

He said, “I’m still trying to picture it. I imagine the market stalls in Camden Town, but just more of them.”

“They’re a bit more moveable, here. What’s funny is that in the diners and restaurants, unless a place in really posh, they all do their cooking out front. Customers in the back. On Temple Lane, you can see two rows of guys in string vests
cooking noodles. My theory is that it’s a trust issue: because none of these restaurants are regulated, or are regulated poorly, they have to find a way to signal to customers that their kitchens are clean. So they do the cooking in the open.” I lay on my bunk, my hands warm on the laptop, pleased at reciting a little economic theory.

Andrew said, “It’s possible. Shows you how expensive signalling costs can be. Everyone has to set their restaurant up the same way, even the ones with clean kitchens.”

“So, if the Taiwanese had a more reliable regulation system, then everyone could save money. They could use the space better.”

“But you told me the island’s really crowded. And rent’s high, and the weather’s shit. You can’t stick customers out in the rain—so maybe they have to put the cooks there.”

“That’s what my friend Mei says. But I don’t think it’s just that, because I’ve been in larger places, where the cooks are indoors, but they still cook out front.”

On Yahoo, I saw an email had arrived from my sister during the night: “Speaking to you on the phone sent dad really mental.” I didn’t want to reply, nor let Andrew hear my keys clicking and know I was dealing with more than just him.

He was saying, “It might just be tradition, though. Remember Krugman’s needle factories—remember QWERTY: once you set something up some way, everyone has to keep going that way, because that’s how everyone knows to set up a restaurant. So any new regulation could ruin a lot of businesses. You force changes no one can afford, especially if the profit margins are tight. If they sell—what—two hundred bowls of noodles every lunchtime, at fifty pence each—”
“Actually most people get a side dish as well.”

“Anyway. I don’t really think it matters. Just—you are still planning to come home, yeah? This talk of regulating a whole industry—”

“I’m just thinking out loud.”

“But you’re still not doing anything much, right? Mainly just hanging out and getting your energy back.”

“I’m teaching myself Chinese. I bought some audio courses.”

The connection died.

Andrew’s typing appeared in the chat screen: “Fuck.”

Me: “Yes, sorry. Call you back?”

Andrew: “Give me a minute. Putting on my tie.”

Me: “Windsor knot?”

A pause of a minute.

Andrew: “With this collar, it bloody well better be.” I smiled, and checked my phone. Mei had texted me, asking if she could come in. I texted back it was fine.

Andrew: “Hang on. I keep screwing this up. Back in a second.”

Mei’s hair had been set perfectly in waves.

She asked, “Not on the phone?”

“A bad connection. Are you ready for the interview?”

“Yeah. I am now the total expert of this hip hop.”
Andrew was flashing on the screen: “Tie is tied. Third time lucky.” Then:
“Robyn. Are you really coming home? Everyone wants to know. I basically tell them you’ve taken a very long yoga class.”

Me: “Soon. But not just yet.”

I waved Mei off, and called him back: “This is like a huge favour, but I need to get my stuff out of my place. So I don’t pay another month’s rent. And my dad won’t do it.”

“I wonder why.”

“I’m not planning to spend my whole life here.”

The connection died again, but when Andrew simply began typing, as if nothing was amiss, I wondered if he had chosen to hang up: “It’s just that helping you move out is like enabling you to stay. I don’t want to be your enabler.”

“I don’t need enabling. I just need five hundred and twenty five pounds. Plus bills.”

“I’m going to look really stupid collecting your stuff.”

“Maybe stop worrying for a minute what other people think. I just need your help.”

“I’ve got to work. Talk about it later.”

“What?”

“It’s time for me to get out of here.”

“Can we just resolve this?”

“Have a lovely day in Asia. Kiss me.”
“Help me move.”

“Bye bye.”

People back in England weren’t willing to help me, and at times it seemed the city felt the same way. The heat made an orderly discovery of even the central areas impossible, for when I did not have a goal, or a nearby subway station to orient me, I could walk for maybe twenty minutes before the summer swamped my lungs, caught at my underwear, and turned my feet to sweaty stumps. I had made the mistake once of telling my mum I might rent a scooter, and she had begun screaming. The roads did look dangerous.

And just as I believed a bedroom could tell something about its occupant, walking Taipei suggested something alien about the people who had made it. I kept looking for a West End, a city centre for entertainment, and I never found it. Zhongxiao Dunhua were the Tube stops that seemed the most central, the busiest, but they still felt too empty once the sun set, and the little streets where everyone went to eat and shop were always hidden out of the way. Nothing in Taipei seemed more than fifty years old, too, not a single tower of wood or stone, which gave the feeling of a great cataclysm, some total break with the past, that to a Londoner like me seemed hard to fathom.

They were not drinkers, either. I found bars, but none of my girls treated alcohol as something casual at the end of the day. Lily and Bianca saw being drunk as a fortnightly disaster, something they did to themselves in a basement club called Waxy’s, where apparently cheap spirits were free once you paid the entrance fee, and which left both girls sick for days following. Dan Dan and Mei treated drinking as a public activity, one involving many friends in a circle, one’s best clothes, and much
discomfort. I just wanted, sometimes, to share wine with close friends the way I had
during the dinner parties Andrew and I had hosted, and I thought about adding a
bottle of Pinot Grigio to Lily’s fridge, only I worried it would firstly not fit, and,
secondly, would lead to me finding the whole bottle drained and Dan Dan face down
in her own vomit, begging with bloody eyes for more booze.

I wondered, as I walked, how the women of the city stayed so slim. I had passed
maybe two gyms during my entire explorations, and these did not seem large enough
to exercise ten percent of the skinny legs I saw. Taiwanese food, rich and oily, could
not be the cause. Did these girls purge? I had known two girls in University whose
pact had been ruined by doctors—I tried to picture this city’s million women heaving
down the toilet, the whole island lapped by vomit—they had to suffer in some way to
maintain their pretty front, but whatever their system, and each of my friends gave me
different explanations of their dieting logics, they made me feel large. In the bathroom
mirror, despite my irregular jogging and the unchanging needle of the scales, I saw
myself thickening into something alien and unfamiliar, someone with curves and
folds not meant for this island. When I passed local women who covered the width of
their real hips with long skirts, I made sure to nod a hello at them, two people of the
same race meeting.

Sometimes I spotted, on the other hand, old English friends in Taiwanese faces.
I was startled to notice my friend Linda, who still wanted to be a dancer, in a
Taiwanese woman holding the hand of one boy and calling to another, and it made me
feel sweetly sad to think that this was Linda’s destination as well, that children would
be a way she could let go of her regrets. I saw in the shuffle of an elderly maker of
curry the self-effacing shrug of Frank Temple, the old boy at work responsible for
checking and collecting everyone’s time sheets and booked hours—I missed Frank
more than anyone at my work, other than Doug, because his time sheets had nicely structured my days. These parallels confused me, and led me towards two contradictory beliefs: that people had doubles all over the world, that certain types existed in every city, every farming village, every gypsy camp, or alternatively, that we were all unique, all of us specific and particular, only that the world’s struggle and suffering pressed down on us in common ways, molding us until certain shapes became common.

I took the train up to see Alice, in her area of the city that was more quiet and a little more spacious, and we drank coffee and talked.

“Everyone wants me to come home.”

“Maybe you should ignore them. Like you ignored my advice.”

“I do worry that the people back home are right. I’m not really doing anything. I love it, I’m busy all day—”

“Then maybe continue doing this thing that everyone tells you is nothing?” I thought of Rose, surrounded by letters of rejection.

The first time I felt like I had some connection to Taiwan came when Mei announced she had got the job at the hip-hop store. Dan Dan led us to a district of universities, and on a crowded pedestrian street of international restaurants and ruffled dresses in shop windows, as we waited for the matron of a red-themed Korean place to make a table for six, in the sticky heat of the evening, I felt a great happiness, like waves of a warm ocean coming in to rock the shore. Up and down the street, these people were healthy and content, in light, simple clothes, with no face swaggering for a fight, no one disdainful or angry, their minds tuned to absorb the full pleasure of these restaurants, these book shops and cafes. Signs further down
advertised Indian, Thai, and Italian food, the happiest elements of foreign cultures brought here to serve local stomachs. Out in groups of friends, Taiwanese young people seemed not much in love with work, not much in love with my own culture’s weighty systems of remaining dissatisfied. It struck me that I might have come to the right place. While I obviously could not claim to know how every culture lived, I had been lucky enough to end up, haphazardly as it might have been, in Taipei, a city safe from the rest of the world.

After our oblong plates of blackened spicy squid, fried eggs, chicken leg and ginseng root soup, I proposed we go for beer, and Dan Dan walked us to a quieter street. The place she knew, its air heady with a Middle Eastern perfume, was hard to name: dark like a bar, with tables lit by bronze lamps and lime green booths, yet making and mixing complex coffees and teas behind the counter like a cafe. Young people chatted over coffee at the bar, or sent their waitress to collect Belgian beers from a tall fridge with glass doors. Nothing in Taipei was half as foreign as this place, a place dependent on a nation of men who could finish an eight percent beer and continue to ignore their short-skirted neighbours on the next table along, where no one demanded that the trip-hopy music be turned up or the tables cleared for dancing and touching. A place of peace.

I asked Mei if the store managers had been impressed by her interview technique.

She had chosen a strawberry-flavoured beer. “Yes.” Her cheeks were already flushed: “They said they can’t believe I was so Western.”

Back at the hostel, there was no going to bed, with Lily clapping for everyone to join the “Afterparty! Afterparty!” Mei and I paused downstairs—I had agreed to call
Andrew, as he was taking an rare afternoon to work at home. The door to our room stuck, and once I put my shoulder to it, making Mei giggle, I discovered it had been caught on a folder someone had shoved through. A little dizzy, I found the folder full of documents, as well as, placed between print outs of addresses in America, an envelope stuffed full of money—many 1,000 NT notes. A strange gift that I might be wise to reject. My fingers then noticed the hardness of a passport, and I flicked through it to find a photograph of Rose, from a time when her face looked a little thinner and her hair fell neatly to her shoulders.

Mei asked, a hand on the wall to steady herself: “What is this stuff?”

It was a message, clearly, but what it was trying to communicate was not clear. Upstairs, Rose’s room was locked, silent when shouted at, and when Lily brought a spare key, we found Rose on her bed, lying on her back, lost in something that at first seemed like sleep, her room just as much of a mess as before. Unlike sleep, she did not react to either the light coming on, or to being shaken, her mouth slack like a pudding, her wrist warm with a deceptive pulse, the information offered by the folder of papers she had given me completed only once Mei found a half empty box of pills on the floor, the inscription in Chinese meaningful to everyone but me. All of us tipsy, through the shouting and rapid Chinese I kept trying to find out if an ambulance was ordered and when it would come. Mr. Gao appeared, old and regretful, with the paramedics, who took me with them to the hospital. Only hours later, when they told Lily that Rose had been brought back, did I remember the night had been meant to involve another chance to speak with Andrew, and I suspected I had lost something without quite knowing how.
CHAPTER THREE

The manager at the Shane Language School, perched by a window ten floors above an eight-lane junction, was as English as the St. George Cross. A honey-brown buzz cut that was the modern Englishman’s response to disappointments of the hair line, grey sea-water eyes, smooth laughing cheeks that bulged out from his face when he smiled, and he smiled often, as if stepping out of my way every time I spoke. His desk bore photographs of his two loves, Lawrence Dallagio, imposing and watchful in London Wasps green, and himself, in aviators and a straw hat, grinning beside a rather plain Asian girl with one brown tooth. He listened to my situation, and although he was spectacularly polite, I soon understood that I was in real trouble.

Teaching English was not a great goal, but I had felt sure, if I wanted it, it would be mine, especially at Shane, the one British-owned chain on the island. Now I learned that no only did they have nothing for me, but unless I found work within two weeks, both my visa and my bank account would run out.

“It’s the rent,” he said, ducking his head in apology. “Gets everyone. Taiwan’s just a little too expensive to live like a king.” Shane paid eleven days after the month, so if I got a job the following day, I would need four weeks of money, and there were no jobs starting the following day.

“Unless you take that one we got starting in Puli township. But you said you want to stay in Taipei—in love with the bright lights, eh?”

“What about other jobs—banking, or working for a law firm?”

“You’d struggle to get a visa. And how’s your Chinese?”

Frustrated, I left him in his comfortable crow’s nest, and stepped halfway home
on the red line. The best hospital in Taipei, one stop south of the Main Train Station, stood beside a park of pagodas and fountains where, the girls I lived with loved to remind me, gay men met at night. The best by reputation, but still not pretty, and I waited on a bolted down chair next to a pair of shabby grandmothers in pastel colours until a doctor I did not recognise came to bring me to Rose. Taiwan, like England, had some sort of National Health Service, and, like England, took care not to allocate too much money to it, and so while I was grateful they had kept Rose for a week during her slow emergence, blotchy and naseated, from her chemical underworld, Mei and I had brought her food and took her clothes for washing, and once I had arrived to find her unroomed, the doctors needing her space for worse conditions. It was time to get her home.

Leading me down to the basement, the doctor said, “Too many sick children come to Taiwan. Sick orphans of the world bring their troubles to us.”

He was a short man with cropped hair like a convict’s. I said, “And pay taxes. Rose was a teacher here—she helped fund this hospital.”

“He tax may have paid for her bed. A bed a Taiwanese couldn’t use. All over Taiwan now, Westerners recovering from depression sickness, pill sickness, life sickness.” He stopped beside the unmarked door to Rose’s room, and shot an arm towards the door handle, commanding me to enter.

I said, “Maybe Taiwan’s partly to blame.”

“Taiwan is not to blame. Taiwan is the victim.”

“I should ask someone to move you to a different area, if you don’t like helping Westerners so much.”
He placed both hands together: “I pray to God.”

Inside, Rose lay wan under a pink, scratchy blanket in the first of two beds, the second occupied by a middle aged Taiwanese man who had propped himself up on pillows in order to highlight passages in an English-language newspaper. The charge of Rose’s smile disorientated me—a week of hospitalisation seemed to have opened access to her deeper levels. Still wreathed in illness, her body clearly still weak from her bottled poisons, she yet seemed on the edge of a new season, a stage of life perhaps slower, kinder, and more conscious. I needed her to be better, as, no longer in my Eden of timelessness, I needed all my energies for the job hunt.

“Mei came by yesterday. You’ve got to tell her she’s adorable.”

“She is. She seems to have forgotten she was ever afraid of you.”

“I’m not frightening. I mean—I’m only scary on the inside. To myself. And the floaters I keep seeing aren’t going away. Wild oranges and greens.” I wondered what the hell she had managed to stuff into herself.

“But you’re well enough to come back to the hostel.”

“No, I want a fresh start. I want to get out of Taipei, to somewhere there’s real nature. Where I’m not so closed in. I want to make the move in a way that isn’t such big a effort for you or Mei—you’ve both done so much for me already. You got my money, right—so could you please ask Gao to keep the room for me—he’ll cut the rate if you push. Tell him I won’t be there myself—I want to keep most of my stuff there for the next couple of months. Tell him you need a baggage rate.”

“Months?”

“I keep thinking, ‘Wow, I fucked up.’” I really fucked myself up. And the
whole point of coming here was to learn about myself, get away from stupid America, and become a better Buddhist. Oops.”

I smiled, impatient.

She said, “There’s a retreat run by the Tzu Chi organisation, down south in the mountains. I got one of the doctors to refer me.”

“You need money to stay here?”

“Just a donation when I arrive. It’s run by volunteers—the buddhist organisations here are phenomenal. I don’t know how built up it’s going to be, though, or even if I’ll have a locker or anything, so I’m not bringing much, just clothes and a toothbrush. And, I so hate to do this, but I’ve got to ask your help, Robyn, if I’m going to ever get myself fixed. Can you kind of manage my paperwork—meet my students—ask my old boss to extend my visa? I made a list, actually. Yeah, I know. It’s shitty. But the doctors say my eyes won’t be right for another week or two.”

“I’m kind of busy. I need to find a job, pronto.”

“I charge my students seven hundred an hour. That’s what—4,000 NT from all of them—more than one hundred US a week. They’re good kids—I cut the most boring ones. Take them on and you won’t need to worry about money.”

She did look too weak to run her own life.

She smiled: “You’re so together. I look at you, and I know—Robyn’s going somewhere. She’ll figure everything out. Thank you. I’m excited, you know? First time in a long time. I’m going on the journey I was always meant to be on. I’m okay, Taiwan’s okay. I’ve just got to make that a little clearer to myself.”
While Lily headed towards tranquility, I sank into Taipei’s jungle. Tealit, the job directory that every foreign blogger recommended, the “indispensable” resource for every ex-pat, had been built from the cheap HTML banners and captions of an amateur porn site. Its teaching jobs were in no way distinct from its more queasy business, which was the sexual introduction of Taiwanese women to Western men, either out right on its dating pages, or via the subterfuge of a “language exchange.”

Western women and Asian men were few, and a sense of desperation underscored the profiles of the white women, their sentences ungainly, projecting that they were not welcome at this dance.

Every Western guy wrote: “I am a great guy on the most exciting adventure of my life. I want to meet new people and learn about Taiwanese culture.”

Every Taiwanese girl wrote: “I love laughing and cats and shopping and life. If I had to describe myself in three words it would be happy, happy, happy.”

As I searched for jobs, the blonde widow’s peak of “Surferstudent” smirked at me from the box on the left hand column advertising ‘new members,’ but he would not have bothered me if I had been sought by the site’s employers. Many asked for a teaching qualification, and most required American English, and while I could respect the first, the second grew a fury in me at Taiwan domination by the empire of Britney Spears. I saw little reason why I should be excluded on the basis of an extra ‘u’ in colour. Yet, in part it was my fault, because I had paused too long, and now needed a job that would save me within two weeks, and most of these schools’ bosses were clearly better organised than that. I did have a credit card, and I could in theory fly to Hong Kong, and stay in a hotel while I applied for a second Taiwanese tourist visa, but this would destroy the last of my savings. I could not tell my parents I was
throwing all my money away just to come back to Taiwan to job-hunt so more.

In an ice-cold, black faux-marble cafe, I waited with Dan Dan for the fourth and last of Rose’s abandoned students.

Dan Dan explained about Tealit, “We have all tried it, but we don’t anymore. It is the biggest site, the one everyone knows about, and the worst. There are too many men who expect to have sex right after you eat lunch. Even the nice one: he is talking all the time the first meeting, and the second meeting he wants to drink beer until he grabs my leg. Some Western men told me that on Tealit there really are some Taiwanese women ready to have sex. The Westerner said that the same woman had slept with all his roommates. Many of the unwell women in Taiwan come to Taipei and live here, and these women give everyone else a bad experience. So now I use the other sites. I can show you my profile, if you like.”

“What’s the appeal for dating Westerners?”

“I can date anyone, but I like the feeling of a challenge, in here.” She tapped two fingers to the base of her neck. “Lily and I agree that we like our new life—that’s why we both came to Taipei. Most Taiwanese men want us to put away the new life.”

“How has dating them worked so far?”

“I still have the new life, don’t I?”

The student was obvious when she arrived by her nervousness. I had warned her by phone that I was not Rose, but unreassured, she faced me across the table like a stick insect frightened by other twigs. Dan Dan spoke to her a little in Chinese, slow and soothing, but after Dan Dan excused herself, the girl asked, “Can this be trial class?”
“Sure—you can decide afterwards if you want to study with me.”

“I mean, because you are not my regular, can this first class be free, for trial?”

“You’re worried I won’t be a good a teacher as Rose?”

“It’s you have the British accent. I don’t know if it will be too hard for me.

When I was a young girl my British teacher gave me many mistakes. My parents had to pay for extra lessons to stop my English being so wrong. And also he had drinking problem, everybody said.”

“How about we make the first half free?”

Over in her new job, Mei looked competent and gorgeous, her face lit in the narrow dark shop by the computer screen she managed. The very price of the clothes she oversaw was erasing the village in her past, and her disdain of the goods she rang up was now an asset, hinting that she guarded chic mysteries beyond even this shop’s reach. Her store was a dimly lit, beautiful thing offering artifacts I couldn’t help finding both remarkable and absurd. In the window display rested, blacked by ruffles of velvet, four hand-decorated baseball caps, each of them padded, almost helmet-large, bulky to deflect the disappointment in parents’ stares. Just inside, behind glass, eight skateboards were racked, each of them sturdy and broad, dribbles of white and red and purple ink proclaiming, “Mets” or “Shoot” or “Jeez,” all of them too fine to imagine at the feet of the clattering teenagers I remembered from London. The main area of the store stocked raggedly denim skirts sent over from Japan, tracksuit bottoms that said demurely of their wearer’s rear, “Juicy,” men’s basketball shirts apparently genuine, and dark jackets with tassels appropriate perhaps for Michael Jackson or Prince. Even Mei was now being dressed by this worldwide collaboration, sporting a grey t-shirt that displayed an sketch in red of Erika Badu’s face and tower
of wrapped hair. The severity of Badu’s far off stare, added to the padded bra Mei used to fill the top, cloaked my friend in several extra years of tough maturity.

She said, “I asked for a shirt with the Kool Herc’s face, because he helped me get this job, but none around. If he is dead, I can offer him some thanks for making the interview go so easy. If he’s not dead, I don’t want to send it to the wrong hiphop man.”

“I don’t actually know if he’s still alive. You look good, Mei.”

“I am happy in this work. It is simple like I said it was, though. No need for extra knowing.”

Two guys, skinny in string vests and baggy jeans whose dark stitching spoke of money, came into the shop followed by a girl with red streaks in her long hair, and they paused by the framed poster to the left of the entrance, snickering. I had smiled at it myself—a supposedly “ghetto” family in a supposed alley, posing pugnaciously. To me, the picture was obviously meant as a send-up of stereotypes, but I suspected the Taiwanese were a little too prejudiced to see it as a joke, which annoyed me, but when I mentioned this to Mei, she told me instead that everyone was laughing at the grandmother’s dog.

Looking again, I saw, beside the white-haired stooped grandmother, who was gripping the bar of her walker with the same hand she clutched an Uzi, her left hand holding the lead to yapping terrier’s neck in her other hand. The terrier was was dressed up in a cap, basketball-style vest and stubby fake-trainers. Funny. The silhouette, on the wall behind the family of seven plus dog, of the man holding up the circular light shade aloft, the evidence of an amateurish mistake in a picture so slick in all other ways, gave the scene an arch, self-amused air, admitting that it was itself a
product. No non-ghetto person could be too uncomfortable at the stereotypes presented here, as the photograph disowned itself from reality by its so deliberate error.

I suspected, however, that this humour was not why the Taiwanese owner of this store had chosen this picture. As this shop was meant to sell hip hop related clothing, then the photo was probably meant as a showcase of styles, and it did have wonderful symmetry, the family falling away in height from the tall, suited father in the centre, growing more ferocious and anarchic as they grew shorter, until, on either edge, we met a mid-teens boy wielding a scimitar and the grandmother with her terrier.

Mei said, “I think you need better job than tutor. Taiwanese young people very lazy. If they feel too tired or boring, they won’t show up. Then you stuck with no money that week.”

“Why does everyone like the dog in the poster so much?”

“They think it’s cute. Dress up the dog.”

“Do you sell dog clothing here?”

“No way. It’s not our thing.”

“People would really put clothes on their dogs in this weather?”

“It will be colder later. But I think this style is not available here.”

“In all of Taiwan, you mean? Why not?”

Mei shrugged, as if the list of things sold on her island was a mystery she did not expect to understand. “Some customers ask for it, but the laobang just say it’s not available here.”
“That’s interesting. A demand without a supplier.” Economic theory, of course, suggested that business opportunities rarely offered much easy profit. If a market existed, entrepreneurs would have long before discovered and exploited it, bringing down profits as low as they could go. Yet this blanket claim only applied to perfect markets, and there was no guarantee that Taiwan’s pet industry was one. Mei’s guess, when I asked, that the poster was new made me more confident—it was possible that only now Taiwanese consumers were discovering their desire to dress their dogs like rappers. And Economic theory suggested that where imperfections existed, where money and capital did not flow as they should, a person who could gain a monopoly over a market could become rich.

Mei said, “If you want a real job in this part of town, there is a school nearby wanting a teacher. They have put a sign outdoors—I see their students coming every evening towards the school. They always look so sad.”

The heat hit me when I pushed open the door. It was so hard to feel competent in Taiwan’s outdoors, because sweat dribbled through even thin clothes and, unless you took care, made underwear obvious. The heat turned me into a wild woman. When I found the small poster that Mei had seen, stuck to two adjacent lamp posts, its thrown together air made me feel it and I were well met. Someone had printed out a square six inches wide, the double border and slightly off centre text the giveaway signs of the hasty application of Microsoft Word. The advert was almost too hurried to say what the job entailed.

“TALKING PLANET ENGLISH SCHOOL

needs an English teacher

for American Conversation and Culture evening class
see details on Tealit.com”

Using Mei’s computer, I discovered that the school had posted their ad in the morning, one I might have even scanned and rejected without looking, not being American, had I not realised how desperate they had to be. The ad’s last sentence commented: “Must be able to start next Tuesday.” If they could wait then they would not want me; if they could not wait, why should I be worse than any apple-pie American? Culture, I could teach—I had been steeped in Americana my whole childhood—Cheers, Madonna, Domino’s Pizza when my dad was feeling lazy—and American English was not too different.

I called Talking Planet’s reception and asked if the job was still open.

“Ah! That job is so big trouble!”

“Why trouble?”

“Will you be able to teach next week? That’s what we need.”

“Will you be able to get me a work visa by then?”

“Sure, if you are in Taiwan now. Are you in Taipei now?”

“I’m right around the corner.”

We agreed that I would visit in a couple of hours time, when the school’s boss, Rocky, was back, and so in the evening, when Mei had handed over the shop’s till to another girl, twitchy and gaunt, she and I went out into the solidifying, darkening afternoon, Mei holding out her palm to check for rain. I was pleased that Mei had expressed some interest in checking out the school, and had encouraged her to come along, as bringing along a prospective student would surely make me look good. Soon we passed, pacing more reluctantly than us, adult students clutching folders and slim
textbooks colourful like graphic novels, weary, office-shod, and glum, turning down
the alley we turned down, heading towards the same red door at its end. These
workers came here week after week, their daylight hours used up by the grim
combination of work and English, and their dreariness showed on their not quite
young faces. Perhaps they lacked a decent teacher.

The school’s door: a carnivorous thing. Beyond its red arch, into the gusts of
indoor cold, we found a drab hallway with an unmanned desk for a security guard,
and, on the wall to the left, a plan of offices. Talking Planet appeared on six of the
building’s fifteen floors, including the basement, and as it was one of the only
companies listed in English, along with “Hong’s Exports and “Taipei Salsa Studio,”
its red lettering seemed a spreading invader, a swallowed bacterium that would
consume the tower whole.

The ninth floor housed the school’s reception, and so we rose accompanied by a
sweaty, overweight teenage boy, his books pressed to his chest, his breath coming in
troubled pants as the lift climbed, its doors opening to a chill and spotless reception, a
large space of pine flooring with three round tables. Schoolboys stood over the
nearest trading Magic cards. At a glazed glass desk two slender women in black suit
jackets bowed, and then had us wait, smiling sometimes, handing us plastic cups of
warm water, their responses confused by our combination of foreign would-be teacher
and local student. Rocky’s youth surprised me, in this country supposed to revere old
things, his smooth face no more than a year or two older than mine, but he treated his
surroundings and the two women that he had brought with him with the hasty
nonchalance of someone at ease with his power. One woman was tall and wore the
same black jacket and skirt as the receptionists, her arms a little too long for the
jacket’s sleeves; the other was short and tiny, in tight jeans which must have been
unbearable outside.

As if Rocky’s rimless glasses were bad, he held my CV at arm’s length, squinting like an older man, and he abandoned it to ask me, “Do you have a bachelor’s degree?”

“Of course.”

“Of course! Me too. I have excellent bachelor’s degree from a terrible Taiwan university. One day I will attend college in Texas and get myself an MBA, but just so business right now. No time even to go on dates with my girlfriend. All this money calls out to be making.”

He gestured to the shorter of the two women: “My excellent assistant Miss Ying will give you the interview—and the tour.” He spoke in grandiose Chinese to Mei a while, and then returned to me: “Excellent! I wish you a great experience in my school.” He was comic, overblown, but perhaps through this he reminded everyone he was in charge, able to make odd jokes in his broken English because no one who wanted a job could complain.

The taller woman, her hair platted around her head like a victory wreath, was more cheerful than my Miss Ying, pointing and giggling at everything she and Mei passed. Ying, soft and sour, merely paused to let me look.

Each classroom was quite large, glass fronted so that the people in the hallways were as vulnerable as those inside. A Western man taught in the third we passed, his frame large and craggy, whose oversized head and clay-brown stubble were pocked and blemished like the damaged surface of the Moon. He stooped, one leg in his loose jeans bent, ashamed by his ogre height, his shoulders not large enough to be appropriate for his thick arms, and was holding his head to one side, listening,
begging with a pained smile his class of adult students, who slouched uncomfortably in their cream metal seats, to not make him wait too long. A middle aged woman with a sea green scarf raised her hand, and to his hurried nod to go on, she spoke in English I could not hear, but which appeared resigned and practical, an anecdote about a nephew or recent shopping trip. Their giant held his marker pen ready, but did not move it to the board, unsatisfied, waiting for yet another answer from the mute three rows.

He had already composed two columns in blue ink, the first reading:

*When I was living*

*When I was visiting*

*When I loved*

The second, however, was more ambitious and more cryptic:

*Freedom*

*Pleasure*

*Music*

*The Great Gatsby*

I felt sorry for this man in his tartan shirt, old jeans and boots, and concerned by his Gatsby reference, which exposed my earlier hopes to amaze my students as hubris: these foreign teachers were hopeful and serious, yet the cord between them and their students remained slack. This might not be a great job. As Ying spoke of sections and hours, I felt my mind distinguish between the me who might work here and the real me: it could be just a place I visited. However, in order for the real me to
continue whatever journey she had begun, I had to take on employment that good old
Gatsby, bootlegger and gangster, would have probably disdained. And perhaps that
was the secret—to understand that a job could be just a job, and liven up my hours
with the students, who were probably too tired to be serious. Mei, ten feet ahead,
being led on to further rooms, was being given a wonderful patter, full of
exclamations and jokes, which might be the best way to treat this evening school.

Ying opened a wooden door to a smaller room, one not viewable from outside,
and I waved goodbye to Mei, who seemed hesitant, her smile to me fading, as the
door was closing, to something more uncertain.

Once we had sat in the cream, too rounded chairs, Ying explained, in flowing
but sparse English, that their last foreign teacher had decided to disappear from Taipei
with no notice, that they needed a replacement for their advanced class, American
Culture and Conversation, which was starting again the following week. Courses in
this school lasted for twelve weeks, after which students were free to repeat the class
or move up to the next level. They would give me the Culture class, which met twice
a week for an hour and a half a time, and about seven other hours of classes.

I said, “I heard I’ll need to work fifteen hours a week before you can give me a
work visa.”

“That’s for the Alien Resident Card. The police never check.”

I had a real job close to my fingers.

“What about the other classes? What sort of thing will I be teaching?”

“It’s not important. We have many classes here. Conversation class, Grammar
class, writing class, TOEFL exam, IELTS exam, S.A.T. test, G.R.E. exam, Business
English, Academy English, Interview English, casual English. Then we have classes for middle school and high school English. We used to have a class called Technical Translation but we had to stop it. Some in morning, some in afternoon, some in evening. We can look at your hours and move another person around.”

“I could teach Business English, if you want. I probably know more about it than most of the foreigners in this city.”

“We have a teacher for that.”

“Okay.”

Ying was hard to relax around, seeming both frail and intense, her face small like a child’s, yet severe like a matron’s. Worse, she seemed like she would not understand the verbal flourishes that made an applicant look good and confident in an interview—I thought of and dismissed several claims I could make. Then Ying broke her tight mouth into something that was probably intended as a smile, and shifted in her chair, crossing her legs.

“Do you like New York?”

“Yes, but I don’t know it very well.”

“Really? I think that every foreign teacher knows New York.”

“I went a couple of times as a child. My ex-boyfriend took me there, about a year ago.”

“I suppose I like to think New York is near to everyone because I want to visit it myself. L.A. is most popular with Taiwanese, and easier for visit, but I wish I can visit N.Y.C. Your home town is nearer New York or Los Angeles?”
Confused, I held back the idiot part of my brain, which kept prompting that London was much closer to New York than the West Coast. Ying must think I was American. She obviously couldn’t tell the difference in accent, or was too expectant of an American foreign teacher to listen for it. I should correct her. And then I would lose the job.

I said, “It’s actually much closer to the East Coast.”

“Do you prefer East Coast? And why?”

“I prefer the historical buildings. In L.A. everything is so new. Cities on the East Coast have historical neighbourhoods.” Conscious of my accent: compared to Americans, my voice had a reedy, up-down quality.

“That’s true. Like the difference between Taipei city and Tainan city. But I saw you went to university in England. Was that difficult for you?” She really had no idea.

I said, in what was not at all an American-sounding voice, but one which I was allowing to drawl slightly: “From my resume, you can see that I actually spent both my college years and my secondary school in England. My parents took me there when I was quite young. So I think I’d be a good teacher for the students here. I know what it’s like to adapt to a new culture.”

“Many of our students want to study abroad. Especially in your Culture and Conversation class. Was it very difficult for you to learn the English ways?”

“Maybe, at first. They’re quite different.”

“Really? Western is very strange to me. You mean the accent? Sometimes I can’t understand them. The accent is too strong.”

“I think my accent is like a mix of the two. It’s not completely American, any
more. But most people in London don’t have a hard accent. I think you mean English people from the north, like Newcastle.”

Ying shrugged: “I don’t know. Only I hear something very difficult.”

I said, “It’s not just accent, though. Spellings of words, and culture. Different sports, different values. And that’s why I think I’d be an excellent teacher for your class. I can see America from the inside—and the outside.”

“And the food. I hear the food is terrible.”

“Well, a lot has changed in the past ten years. London’s changed a lot, actually. What kind of thing would I be teaching in your class?”

“It’s up to you. We have a textbook, but unlike the others, it’s more free for you to teach what the students want. They have lots of questions, like England versus American life. They like to ask about people, entertainment, business—the secrets of the culture that only local people know.”

“I think I would be great at that.”

“Take a look at this sheet. I will be back in few minutes with your friend, that girl. When do you need to get a work visa?”

“Two weeks.”

“We can do that. But don’t relax now. The interview is not over, okay?”

The sheet posed only a few simple questions which I knew I could answer, but I didn’t uncap my pen. You are doing something very dubious here, Robyn. Yet the school did need a teacher straight away. And I knew I was a good, reliable person, a hard worker, and that I could figure out any skill that English teaching demanded. If I
was deceiving them, they would never suffer for it. I probably couldn’t alter my accent enough to fool the other teachers, but I could study, buy CDs, practise the way the Taiwanese practised. I could simply act standoffish: “Sorry, I’m learning Chinese, so outside of class I try not to use English.” As long as the job kept afloat for a month, I would be paid, and would have a visa. I would be able to report to everyone back home that my jumping ship had worked fine: I had not gone into debt nor got into trouble.

I was working on the third question—*If you could divide your first lesson of the course into three parts, what would they be?*—when Mei opened the door.

I asked how she liked the school.

“It’s okay. But I don’t think I like all the work and hours. I think my English is already very well.”

I showed her the questions, and she pointed at the one that asked me to describe a uniquely American tradition: “Tell them about American horror movies.”

“Nice.”

The door opened again with Ying leading a Western guy, a man whom I recognised in a moment of hot panic as Tanner, the guy from the concert hall. He said hello to me, puzzled, perhaps not realising where he had first seen my face. Fuck. He seemed unchanged in the last two weeks, his cheeks that sloped into his jaw, pale brown hair parted high on his forehead. He now wore dark trousers and a short-sleeved linen shirt that revealed his discipline at the gym. That same aggrieved air of being stuck in the world, a kind of impatience, a kind of mockery. I hated that this room had no other exits.
Ying said, “I want a foreigner teacher to talk to you, okay? Just to go over the classroom stuff. You okay with doing this, Tanner?”

“As always.” He sat down in one of the metal seats with care, as though I were dangerous.

Once I was gone, he turned to Mei: “This won’t take long.”

He asked me, “Have we met before?”

“Yeah. I think so.” I spoke in little words, so my voice could hide.

“I guess I thought you were a Brit, before. But Ying said you were American.”

“I got a bit of a British accent. I went to school there.”

“It’s more than ‘a bit’.”

“Sure, but I can teach the class.” I made the “a” in class soft.

“When did you leave the States?”

“I was young.”

“Well—how young?”

“Twelve.”

“Still watch a lot of American shows in England?”

“Of course. I think 90210—that was my favourite.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“I know what TV I watched.”

“Where were you in the States—before England?”
“San Diego.”

“Sweet. You surf?”

“No. Just swimming, you know.”

“Britain’s really leeched the California out of you.”

“I’ve been gone a while. Look, I answered these questions on your sheet—”

“Here’s a new question. The students always ask about totally unimportant cultural things. They all want to know about Thanksgiving and apple pie. So, humour me: what’s a ‘base hit’?”

I was pretty sure this was baseball—first base—although it could also be crack cocaine.

I said, “I was never that into sports. Is that going to be a problem?”

“That’s good, good. We say ‘sports.’ They say ‘sport’—’I was never into sport.’”

“I’ve never really liked baseball. Can we talk about classroom stuff, now?”

The room felt horrible and I couldn’t bear Mei hearing this.

“Last question from me, then the job’s yours. I don’t care about the classroom crap. Just this, okay: you know how the British like to drink their beer in ‘pints?’ It’s famous, right? What do we call it, the glass you get your beer in? What’s the American for ‘pints’?”

I couldn’t speak.

He sat back in his chair. “The thing is, Robyn, I remember you being one hundred percent British a couple of weeks ago. You got mad about me tricking a girl
with cups—"

“This was a mistake—"

“The cups?”

“No. You were wrong about that. This—it wasn’t my plan. Just Ying misunderstood me, and I didn’t correct her. I never said—”

“Amazing. Wow. But how that have ever worked? Even if you convinced me, they’ll need your passport.”

“Hold on.” I looked at Mei: “I’m sorry about this.” She was staring at me, blinking.

She asked, “What’s happening? What’s the problem?”

“It’s okay.” I said to Tanner: “I would just tell them I had a British passport.”

“They would figure it out. No one’s going to believe you had—”

“I got a new passport when I moved.”

“Then you aren’t American—the women in the back office would notice it—probably the only thing they would notice—Ying would call you in and start checking.”

“Okay, but what if I did have any American passport?”

“Come on—a fake one?”

“It’s real.”

“You actually are American? You’re like a Brit pretending to be a—”

“No, it’s a friend’s. I could say my real name was actually Rose, but I prefer
“You killed someone?”

“She’s in therapy. She doesn’t need it.”

“The photograph?”

“It looks pretty much like me. I’m guessing the back office people won’t spend much time around me before the application gets sent off.”

“You’d commit a crime to get this job?”

“I can do this job, Tanner. It’s just a arbitrary rule stopping me.”

“It’s illegal, even in Taiwan.”

“It seems like a lot of illegal stuff that other people do doesn’t matter here.”

“You’re asking me to help you break Taiwanese law? You heard anything about Asian prisons?”

“Not at all—I’m not asking—”

“I’m going to see what Ying wants to do. If she wants to press charges, then I hope you have some friends in the Taiwanese police—”

“Wait—”

“Both of you better stay here. Hang on.” I called at him again but he left.

I said, “Mei, I’m so sorry.”

“I hate this school! Why are they crazy? He wants to arrest you for applying for a job?”

“Let’s get out of here, okay.”
“Why? What’s the problem?”

“It’s me. It’s my fault.” She followed as I stood up, but as I hesitated, meaning to go for the door, I heard Tanner’s low tone through the cheap plywood wall. They were coming back.

Mei said, “We are running?”

“It’s not possible.” I sat down again.

Ying came in, and gave me another creepy, withered smile. “Great news, Robyn. I’m so happy you can work for us here. It’s so useful you came by today. Give me your passport information so we can rush the visa process.”

Mei asked her, “You are not angry?”

“At the old teacher, yes. He just ran away—but Robyn will be a better teacher, I can tell.”

When I stared at Tanner, he merely shrugged.

—

My tools to operate the island’s people: marker pens in blue and red, an index card inscribed with the lesson’s three parts, and the assigned book, flippantly thin, “Brooklyn Bridge,” which taught, in the form of a guidebook to New York, the lesser known tenses, the slang men and women used when meeting for wine and fine cuisine, and how to subordinate a clause. Its first chapter recalled so much the details of Ying’s love-dream of the city that I now suspected she had lifted it whole from these pages. The classroom’s thirty chairs dwarfed my students, who straggled in as seven p.m. approached, each slumping into the inhuman metal curves and the low-set desk flap that sealed in their legs, polite and shyly nodding at me when I said hello, a
well-meaning optimism rising from tired bodies. Each wished me a “Hello, teacher,”
apart from a very tall, rather pale and ugly girl, her eyes intent with mute fear. Aside
from her, I thought this class would be good—they would like me. And our room,
bare in white and glass, had one great advantage: it was the last in the corridor, so no
chaotic feet from other rooms would disrupt our study.

I wished I did not feel unprepared and unsafe. I had followed Tanner’s advice
for planning the lesson, and kept my notes brief, yet now I wished I had produced a
line-by-line script, especially as Bianca, the girl I liked least in the hostel, had opted
to attend this course, and had managed to passed whatever minimal tests Talking
Planet had required. A disaster I had been too distracted to prevent, busy all weekend:
not only would this job now leak into my Tibetan idyll, with Bianca due to address
me as laoshe whenever we passed on the way to the shower, but her pretty presence
on the second row of chairs meant one person here already knew I was a fake. Were
she to leak—she had promised she would not, that she didn’t care about my trick with
Tanner nor my accent, and that she only wanted a teacher she trusted, someone
sympathetic. I wished I could trust her, but I hadn’t been able to tell her, politely, to
take a different class.

A rising tremble as the minute hand crossed the hour, all the students seeming to
have arrived, my own fear rising, the feeling of all those very young Greek men who
tried to some absurd, like fight Achilles or fly across the sea, knowing the thing they
were about to ride exceeded their strength. As individuals these Taiwanese were
probably as meek as all the people I had met, lacking any offence, but as a twenty
they could throw me to the rocks, and to lead them I had only a six-part plan: thirty
scribbled words to last an hour and a half.
I had composed my introduction on the board.

_I am Robyn Anglesea_

_This is American Conversation and Culture_

_7:00pm to 8.30pm. No cellphones, please._

——

_Five Facts about me: true or false?_

1. _I was born in London, England._

2. _I went to high school in London, England._

3. _Before I came to Taiwan, I used to work as a management consultant._

4. _I studied Mandarin in evening classes in university, but I still can’t speak it._

5. _Since I arrived in Taiwan, I can’t stop eating dumplings._

The first of these five facts confused me. I had meant, when planning this the day before, to say I came from New Jersey. I even had a town invented, and I had wanted to remind Bianca of the secret she and I would need to keep. Yet the word “London” was written in my hand-writing, the claim too bold, too risky, almost as if I wanted to mock my the students’ credulity, and I did not know where this impish version of myself had been hiding. It was the kind of daring I associated with my dad: his kind of stupid flippancy towards authority. I could not hold down my cheeks as I faced the room, grinning at my unconscious, pleased to be discovering the wildness residing in the cellars of my psyche. Play on, Robyn.

One man raised a slender wrist. His features were handsome and odd, a mix of
simian and scholar, the high, protruding forehead and prominent mouth contrasting with his slender build and relaxed, well-cut khakis and cream shirt. He seemed likeable, although not quite as fully grown as he should be, his arm fragile and his shirt loose around his fat-less chest.

He asked, “What does ‘management consultant’ mean?” Once I had explained, he copied my answer down, and I wondered if all their questions would be so slavish.

A rotund man, young and nearly bald, as if a lifetime of ingesting cheap cooking oils had poisoned his hairline, told me, “I know the number one is false. This is an American class. You are American teacher. So you are not born in London.”

I said, “Yes. Number one is false.”

Sitting close to the door, Bianca did not blink. I did look at her, but she hid what she knew with remarkable poise, or perhaps with unremarkable dullness. She had come to class wearing denim shorts that would have violated some physical law of the universe had they been any smaller, but her expression of staid boredom did not make her beautiful. She was actually not so pretty, if you looked, despite those inappropriate shorts: her face was too blocky, too square. And of all the girls in the hostel, she had seemed to dislike the English I imposed on Lily’s room the most, and the familiar grumpy set of her jaw suggested some great disapproval. I had never thought she enjoyed my company: coming to my classes might be some very weird form of vengeance, a resentment well-packaged. I wondered if all these students, so friendly and mild on the outside, held old resentments from old teachers, seeking out fresh Westerners whom they could complain about afterwards, snickering in the corridor once class was done.

Trying to ignore these paranoias, I said, “Yes, I grew up in New Jersey, which is
near New York.” I held up our textbook, as if to add evidence to this claim. “But I did
go to school in England, so the second one is actually true. I went there with my
parents for several years—so my accent is a mix.”

I had not done as much voice work as I had wanted. I had taken from the library
H.L. Mencken’s ginormous “The American Language,” whose erudition had dazzled
me, although not for many pages. I loved its facts about where so many words had
come from, but its relentless depiction of the English as prissy, staid, and frightened,
and its cheerfully jingoistic assumption that, as the U.S. was the more linguistically
fecund nation, the U.K. should acquiesce to whatever phrasing and terms Americans
could dream up, soon dried out the mini-epiphanies its earliest pages had brought. I
had giggled all Sunday at CDs bought at Eslite Books, listening in my room and cafes
to the secrets of American vowels, but I had not completed the course, and neither had
I absorbed the full extent of differences in vocabulary. “Trucks” and “diapers” were
obvious, but the greater dangers were words I had never heard on TV, like “black-
top” or “onesies.” Every noun I owned could be a traitor.

Once I had gone through all five statements, and we had all chuckled about
dumplings, I had them design a list of five such statements of their own, and then in
pairs introduce themselves, trying to guess which of their partners’ claims was false.
This was another tip from Tanner, who had pointed out how much time it would eat.

I drifted among the chairs as they spoke. The slim guy in the nice shirt had
created some funny claims about himself—he said, when I asked, that his English
name was Richard—and had grasped that the exercise was only worthwhile if you got
creative. It could only be interesting if you said you own nine dogs, or had eaten your
own sister in the womb. He looked up as I checked his sheet, and we shared a
moment’s warm, oddly maternal collaboration, aware that he was enabling his teacher to run the class.

But most of his fellows were dullards. I heard conversations like:

“‘I was born in Tainan.’”

“Is that true?”

“No. Actually I am born in Hualien.”

Or:

“My parents are always angry at me.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s true.”

Or:

“I own a beautiful white cat.”

“I believe you.”

“No, not really. I wish I have a cat.”

“Okay. Don’t worry. Soon you will own a cat.”

It could not be prejudice to wonder what had gone so wrong with these adults: the very evidence was written down in neat loops, by nineteen damning hands. Some of them were kind of sexy, like Bianca, or had a little verve, a little confidence, and so presented some social danger that could, for a short while, obscure their simplicity, their fear of imagination. Yet half my class was already finished talking, as if even their fantasies were not worth discussing. The best-looking man in the room, very
young with wet, forward-swept hair, was sitting back, his dark eyes apologetic when I approached, his partner still wearing her raincoat, both of them silent. He had written merely a tick or cross five times, and his own claims were as unsuited to play and elaboration as his classmates’. Good looking but dull, or plain and dull—these seemed to be the choices. I wondered at the cataclysm that had taught Taiwanese people to hide themselves.

I leaned over him: “Try to discuss the one about your cat with your partner. Say why you want one.”

“Sorry, teacher, can you say again. Your voice is—”

I tried not to flush, and, stressing the American in the vowel, said “Talk about this.” “Talk” in English was like a road through a tunnel, sharp and direct. “Talk” in American was more vertical, the mouth a high cave, the sound’s movement ungainly, like a wingless, strutting bird.

And yet, everyone was working and well behaved. That I could admire: Taiwan did not seem a place where teachers worried about discipline. Although I was a fake, I was getting the job done: only one student seemed unable to take part. This was the girl who had been petrified right from arrival, and who now sat stammering amongst the watching completions of her neighbours. She really was tall for a Taiwanese woman, her shoulders seeming almost double as wide as those of her petite, librarianish partner, and her face a pallid near-green, as if an over-application of the whitening cream that girls here used was stripping human colours from her skin.

I looked over her sheet, saw a buffet of misspellings, but could not find her name.

“My—name—is—Happy.”
“That’s your English name? It’s unusual.”

She frowned. After some internal consideration, she said, “It is just English for my Chinese name.” As though any objection I could have to it was absurd.

I helped her ask one more question, smiling, finding her rather pathetic. The Taiwanese strained so hard to imitate the West, creating in themselves a copy of something they did not understand. Dan Dan in search of a white boyfriend, rich kids wearing gansta-fied shorts, and yet the facimile always a disaster. They were unable to see that every effort to be like us made them seem less Western, a supplicant nation of obvious aliens. If the West, or America, had one rule emblazoned over its gates, it was that you could not be a copy. Or, possibly, the one rule was that you could not call yourself, “Happy.”

I told Happy, “Okay, we have to move on. You’ve done the first three, that’s enough.”

“I want finish.”

It was easier to be tough as an American: “I need to start the next part of the class.”

She realised, at that moment, how behind everyone else she was. Blinking her eyes within her powdered face, embarrassed, she seemed like she was about to speak again, but I shushed her, promising she would have more time later to speak.

The next exercise was simple: students had to introduce themselves to the whole class, then give an example of something they had never done. While explaining this part of the lesson to me, Tanner had commented, “‘I have never’ is totally easy for the Taiwanese. They’ve all got a big list of stuff they are never going to do.” At the time,
I had told him to stop being such an asshole, but teaching this class was making me at least see his point, even if I was much nicer to the students than I suspected he was.

I put several verbs on the board to help them along.

Richard’s answer was flawless: “Hello everybody. I think I know some of you from the last English class, but many new faces. My name is Richard, if you don’t know me, or don’t remember me. I am proud to be Taiwanese, but I do want to visit Europe. It’s sad that I have never been to visit Europe, even though I really want to.”

We had one talented speaker in the room: I had to make sure he continued taking these lessons.

I asked him, “Where would you like to go in Europe?”

“Berlin, London, and Milan. And everywhere else. I want to see Berlin because it is a very modern city. Many technology companies in Taiwan come from German—I want to see how a modern country lives.”

I corrected his use of “German,” which nodding in regretful agreement, he wrote down.

I asked Happy to go next.

Trembling, her hands holding the rim of her desk, she announced: “I have never live myself.”

Oh Jesus. I had assumed that Bianca, mono-syllabic and glum, would constitute the lowest level of English in this class, which was, after all, meant to be the most advanced offered at Talking Planet. But Happy must have simply taken the earlier classes at this school, and been allowed to move up. There were clearly no exams, no standards. The policy was simply maximum bums on maximum seats.
I corrected Happy, and wrote out “I have never lived by myself.” When I turned back to my students, I followed their gazes to the classroom’s door, on the other side of which Tanner was standing, ready to rap his knuckles on the glass. I jumped ahead to the only writing assignment of the lesson, told them to open their textbooks, and once they were all bent over their note pads, I joined Tanner in the corridor outside.

He asked, “How’s it going in there?”

“Good.”

“How are the students?”

“Their English is far worse than I expected.”

“You still sound totally British. Christ. We are fucked. Did you do anything—”

“I worked all weekend. I bought tapes.”

“Do not fuck this up—do not get me in trouble. I will not allow you to give Ying any kind of hold over me, okay?”

“Thanks for your support.”

“That’s too much. Don’t try to be a cowboy. I’m thinking 1940s Hollywood—trans-Atlantic, you know. Watch ‘Casablanca.’ Lauren Bacall.”

“The students seem okay with me. I’m okay.”

“It embarrasses you, doesn’t it? Sounding like one of us.”

“It’s not something we like to—”

“You come from a tiny island, Robyn. You all act like you’ve got the only right way to speak English—but actually, everyone else in the world thinks you sound funny. Sexy, maybe, but also really fake. Affected. It’s pride, not technique, that’s
your problem. Come join the rest of the world.”

“I don’t think an American should be telling me not to be proud.”

“We’re not, not about the English language. We don’t care. Anyone’s accent is fine.”

“Except mine.”

“Yes, if you want to pass for one of us. British is out, sorry.”

“Leave me alone. Teach your own fucking class.”

“That’s better. Yeah!”

He had more to say, but I turned my back on him. Returning, I worked with my students, their stories, the places they had selected in Manhattan that they would like to visit, and why. I enjoyed working with them. The pretty-boy told everyone his plan first, and it seemed that we all could share his fantasy of travel. I wondered why I had got so angry with them before, so disdainful. Perhaps I was lucky that Tanner had shown up: I understood that these students and I shared a common enemy. They were attempting to prosper in the same world I was adrift in, one ruled by a smirking American face as large as the moon, asking everyone what the big deal was, why couldn’t everyone just “get with the program.” Although they were not as perfect speakers as I had been expecting, I could teach them that—I could teach them to be more creative with their language. I could help.

Happy’s hand was up.

“Happy, sure, go next. Where in New York do you want to visit?”

“I like Chi-ca-go.”
“Okay. What do you like about Chicago?”

“Ja-zz music. Pee-za.”

I was amazed Happy had any opinions at all, and so I was happy to let her derail the exercise for a few minutes.

“Go on. Tell us about Chicago.”

“Do you like teaching?”

“I’m sorry?” Happy was staring straight at me, which might have been unsettling if her English had been passable, but I still didn’t like her question. I assumed she had simply misunderstood what we were doing.

“I think: feels good teaching us to like you, but you hate us to be like you. We want to be acting like you, like Westerner: but, to you, it’s like a dog with three legs. When it runs it is always disgusting.”

Richard was seated two to Happy’s right, and I was shocked by the grin he was trying to hide, his eyes on his desk. Happy was mocking me, and he, and a few other students, were finding it funny.

I said, “I want to get back to the exercise.”

“To you we are robot, all sounding the same. Talk talk talk but so boring, like old children. You can’t believe we have no ideas in English.” Now I was uneasy—as if Happy had plucked the thought from my head, or something close to it. Had my expressions been that revealing? I wanted to protest that if I had thought anything like that, it had only been at the beginning of the lesson, but if I did so, I would be validating Happy’s tirade of broken English, and that, even I knew, would be professional suicide. It might also make me look crazy—possibly the rest of the class
just thought this was funny. I looked again at Richard, seeing how concerned he was, and I understood, in a shiver in my arms, the discomfort in his half-concealed smile. All the students were wishing I would shut this crazy psycho up.

Happy actually laughed, high-pitched: “You have no plan for this. No plan. Just keep us in chair for hour. But it’s okay, teacher. We are the same. If you tried better we would leave. All hoping for fire alarm, or earth shake to stop the English pain.” The dour librarian girl by Happy’s side was looking into her own lap, as if afraid of a gorgon.

I said: “It’s break-time. Let’s take five minutes off. Happy, thank you. We’ll start the lesson again in five minutes.”

Happy kept speaking: “It’s all painful. To watch—”

She paused, and we all watched her, waiting for the explanation of the sentence. Yet she seemed as confused as we were. No one had got up for their break, as Happy looked left and right at her classmates as if surprised to find them here, and then, raising her hands to her face, she began to scream. A maddened sound in the echoing, bare room, too large for the space. The students closest to her fell out of their chairs, getting clear of this bent-over, screaming woman who had covered her eyes, and yet as her anguish continued into more and more ticks of the clock, I felt a smug relief. She had accused me of some unpleasant opinions, and one or two of them had seemed to hit the mark, but she was insane, and so I did not need to worry. I was fine, and she was not, and with that relationship strong in my mind, I could to fix the solution. I could take charge: I looked at the boy nearest the door, and told him to get help. Conscious that Happy was taller than me, and possibly in possession of dangerous, crazy-woman elbows, I still acted in the way I knew I had to, and put my arms around
her, bending down to try to encompass her slumped, shuddering form, her shoulder-blades pointing into me. I was failing to offer her even a decent hug when the two nervous receptionists arrived, and they were able to lead her away.

We were silent a while. I asked the round, bald man, Ron, to give us his tour.

The mass of his double chin sank and rose, without sound, as if he had delegated speaking duties to it, and was only slowly becoming aware that no words were being produced.

He examined his notes in anguish, these marks on a page he could no longer understand, and then, without looking up, said, “I go to New York in the winter. The snow is in trees. Beautiful young women are wearing long scarf and boots for snow, and they run and laugh at everything and have long light hair. I stay with a friendly old woman. She lives in Green-ich Village and cooks simple meals for me every morning, with eggs and smoky fish and bread, and she understands everything I say although my English is poor, and I tell her stories about Taiwan. She has never travelled from America, and so she travels there in her head because I tell her the stories. We both find Taiwan things very funny. Each day I walk around the city in perfect snow boots. I visit the famous museum, and Times Square, and I eat Polish meats and Italian noodles. I see many churches, and they are all full of people on Sunday. In Chinatown I buy chao dofu and other special Taiwan foods, and I become so sad because I miss home. And because I know I must return home soon.”

We were silent again, although it was of a different kind.

I smiled: “Beat that, someone. Who’s next?”

When the class was done, I went to the office, finding Happy seated in the corner, an extra chair squeezed beside the little room’s two desks, four computers,
and wall of shelves, her eyes large, her face turned blueish-pale, offering me a frightened, helpless apology.

An unfamiliar older woman, who was sat next to Ying on the front desk, seemed to be playing intermediary between me and my student: “Happy wants to say sorry.”

Happy did her best: “I—teacher—sorry—”

In pain, obviously humiliated, she deserved a proper response, but of these four women, I only knew Ying, and my voice was still dangerous. One sufficiently convinced detractor could end this pretence.

I said, “It’s okay.”

Happy didn’t smile, but opened her lips a fraction, and relaxed her eyes, as if pleased.

“Thank you, teacher. It only time.” I wanted to ask if she was epileptic, like out of a Russian novel, but that would involve language I did not want to risk.

I asked: “Was it me? Did I make you upset?”

“No, no. Teacher you are fine.”

The older woman said, “Happy is very sorry she disrupted class. She thinks she is just under stress. She hopes you can forgive her. She will be always calm in future classes.” This statement carried the tone of a thorough solution.

I was dawdling there, unsure what to say, when Tanner appeared.

“Punched out yet?”

Ying said, “Tanner, Robyn had extra drama on her first day.”
“I’ll buy her a drink.”

With all the ladies watching, I lowered my card, three inches wide and nearly a foot long, into the wall-mounted punch clock, until the clock’s gorge choked and it stamped down the time. My card now pronounced that I had worked from seven to eight thirty two. I noticed that the clock on the wall read eight thirty five, and wanted to point out the discrepancy.

Ying, watching me, said, “Punch clock is only clock that is important. Only clock that Rocky sees.” The punch clock hid its time-piece somewhere inside its round, eyeless shell.

“Why don’t we—” I felt nervous about my voice, again, and stopped.

Tanner said, “Make all the clocks in this school the same? Everyone wants to know. But it’s too difficult, right, Ying?”

“Just always be on time for the punch-clock, Robyn. Only I can make changes if your time is wrong. No one else has authority.”

In the lift down to the street, Tanner didn’t want to hear about Happy.

“But Tanner, the problem was she seemed to know what I was thinking. She told everyone. She said I was judging them.”

“In English—how? You said she could barely talk. Were you thinking in pigeon?”

“She was thinking it, even if she couldn’t express herself. Language isn’t everything, you know? And they want me to keep her in the class. What do I do if it happen again?”
“If she disrupts again, ask them to move her. Say it’s making the other students want to drop out.”

Outside, the smog reeked, the factories bordering the city pumping out smoke harder, the island’s motorways thick with fuming cars. The island hot and saggy in the summer, too clogged to belch. Why were they doing this to themselves? Of course Taiwan needed money, to replace all this dripping concrete, to improve its schools and so on, and the only way to get money was to run its power stations, to welcome another tanker to these shores that the Portuguese had once named beautiful. From street-stalls at the crossroads, the scents of chili oil and frying dumpling-dough; further on, on the big Zhongxiao East Road, the whine of scooters and the hollow roar of trucks.

I looked at Tanner. He was swinging his arms as he walked, his eyes intent like his pace, all of his actions serving as a shield between him and the island. I had not really noticed before the circling bronze hairs all over his wrists and the backs of his hands: it seemed something archaic, farmer-like, out of the soil. He seemed deliberately not thinking hard enough about what I was saying.

“Sure, I can kick her out the class. But I think you’re not seeing the bigger picture, the remarkable side—”

He stopped, shaking his head, and, exasperated, gestured around us, and I followed his hands, ready to decipher whatever message he claimed this scene provided, the convenience stores bright in the evening, the two silly girls in school uniforms, visible through the glass examining different magazines, the stalls to our left stir-frying and stewing beside a low wall, where an old man in an apron raised hunks of blood-coloured tofu from broth, the water slipping through the sieve into the
steam. A red sports car, not nice enough to be a brand I knew, edged forwards without using its horn, the driver wry, sunglasses ornamenting his head, his girlfriend irritated, as shoppers continued to crowd the road. The heavy whir of air-conditioning units from every wall.

When Tanner spoke, he sounded kind, for probably the first time since I’d met him, as though he sympathised with my mistake. “No, you’re not seeing the bigger picture. Look around. It’s all going on—it’ll be going on tomorrow just the same. You aren’t going to change that. It’s like—everyone arrives and wants all the clocks in the school to match the punch-clock. I was that way, too, trust me—you’re going to get past it quicker than I did—you realise it just doesn’t matter. Make yourself happy, or busy, or whatever. Anyone who tells you different wants something out of you. Get used to saying no—”

“Only, being falsely employed, I worry—”

“Relax about it and everyone else will. The managers don’t want to figure out you’re totally inappropriate as a teacher—so they won’t. Probably. So let’s drink.”

Even out in the street, one block away from the crowds, the sun adding a final, brief purple to the dismal grey handing above the low apartment blocks, the sign for the Treehouse bar dismayed me: something in the jovial lettering inside the teardrop-shaped leaf, with a pair of Western guys smoking underneath it, let me understand this was an ex-pat bar, the kind of place I avoided with pride these last few weeks, expensive places that bound their patrons to Western-level incomes, garish corners of Taipei that Westerners had conquered, not infiltrated. Tanner, however, was already holding open the door.

It was larger and more impressive than I had expected, a bar to the right and
dark wood booths to the left, and a crowded circle of sofas and armchairs at the back.

In the air, the freshness of draft lager being poured, and the ravenous scent of ketchup that someone was adding to fries. From speakers, an American band I did not recognise was droning some complaint about the universe. The three small tables in the middle of the room, all but one unoccupied, gave the room a too-spacious feel: the people at the bar, the Taiwanese couples in the booths, and the loud, laughing Westerns at the back all seeming separate groups, all huddled away from each other.

A waiter collected plates from the single couple at the central tables, clonking one plate of half-eaten hamburger on top of another. When, with beers in hand, Tanner and I walked to the sofa area, I saw that this horseshoe faced a small, foot-high stage in the room’s right hand corner, to the side of the bar, these soft seats the key audience for whatever live acts came this way. I squeezed down next to a blonde girl in a low slung military cap, a Indian man, young and broad shouldered like an athlete, his purple shirt shiny under the ceiling lights, making room for me by rising to next sofa’s arm rest.

Tanner explained that this blonde girl was Cassie, and she too worked at Talking Planet.

I said, “My first lesson didn’t go very well. One of my students went crazy.” I said the word as Americanly as I could.

“You teach with us?”

“Just started.”

“Just your accent sounds kind of British—”

“I’m a mix. I spent a long time in England when I was young.”
The Indian guy seemed more convinced by this than she was, and with a strong American accent, Texan, perhaps, said, “The students love going crazy. It’s all repressed, you know, when they’re kids.”

His remark seemed to be enough to get the circle talking. Cassie, next to me, in denim, hiding her eyes under that absurd cap, told everyone about private students who wanted to study art or music in college, but whose parents had yelled at them until they agreed to sign for something else. A man across the coffee table, a little older than the rest of us, deep grooves in his pale cheeks and lines on his forehead, sporting a velvet jacket, leaned in and said, “We tried to get our kids to a water park last summer, and the parents wouldn’t allow it, because it was ghost month. Of course, no one should swim during ghost month. What were we thinking?”

I listened to them speak, drinking my Stella and chewing on the fries Tanner had placed among us. In London I hadn’t known that many Americans, and, when I had, always as singles, visitors to English circles, never among their own kind. I supposed that previously, I would have described Americans as loud and—well, I think most English people would have stopped at that. We thought they were too religious, ate badly and exercised too much, and none of them had passports. I knew I would have to sharpen my judgements, but the only thing I was picking up, listening, was that these English teachers sounded, to my ears, deliberately common. It was hard to define: there was something working class in the way they tried to come across—often, as conversations tugged at different sections of the table, I heard voices repeat, “sure,” or “I’m just saying,” “That guy’s got his head up his ass.” Yet none of them sounded like my dad, who really hadn’t gone to university, and still was a plain, old-fashioned cockney, despite his Shakespeare and his drunken demands that we all watch the History Channel together. These English teachers all had bachelor’s
degrees, assuming they were here legally—they had studied Peter Drucker and Emerson and German Philosophy, but they wanted to sound like plumbers out for a pint. Tanner was the same, diagonally opposite to me, muttering something about an American football team he and the Indian man liked, nodding like a gargoyle, a smart man, a thinker, it seemed, who felt he needed to lock that capacity away with his hunting rifles.

Cassie interrupted these thoughts, twisting to me on the sofa: “So, you’re really from England?”

“I went to school there.” I didn’t know, if I was trying to sound a little American, if I should be breezy like her, or try for Tanner’s terseness.

“Where in England?”

“In London.”

“Of course—in London.” I tried to work out who this girl was, my colleague, her hands together on her lap, nails kept short, unpainted, a vague collection of good looks—slim, blond hair, nice jeans—and her obscuring military cap over her eyes. Her tone suggested she found something odd about me, that I was in danger.

I asked, “Have you been to London?”

“Sure, I went there—great, isn’t it? So much history. The Thames, the monarchy.”

“I like it, too. The weather sucks.”

“It was fine for me, actually. We had a great time—a week, I went with my folks, in the summer. It’s a kind of a myth, you know, about the rain. It’s not every day.”
“Sure. Summer can be nice.” I found letting my accent drift was easier while speaking to her. Not trying to invent some ideal accent, but just the way this particular person spoke, her elisions and slurs, her rhythms. Letting her hear a version of what she uttered.

“You owned a car, in London?”

“Um, my parents did. I didn’t. The Tube was good enough, you didn’t need one.”

“The Tube—” she pronounced it *Toob*, and I wondered if I’d have to adopt the same ugly phrasing myself—”I remember that. How many lines does it have?”

“Sorry?”

“How many lines does it have? There’s the Piccadilly, that one that goes to Camden Town—”

”No idea of the exact number. A dozen?”

“Okay. What about the bridges? Across the Thames? How many of those?”

“You’re asking if I know London? I don’t have any fucking idea about the bridges—a lot.”

She nodded, her cap jostling her neat fringe, seeming satisfied, tipping back her head so I could see her eyes: “I’m sorry! I shouldn’t be quizzing you like that. I just feel scared when I hear British English—I associate it with Eastern Europe. That’s what they said, you know, these teachers in our school, a while back? They said they were from some weird part of Britain, like Wales or somewhere. It’s totally illegal. Only native speaking countries can teach. It was so awkward, waiting for him to get found out, you know?”
“You think I’m Eastern European?”

“Or something like that—the school’s had some bad experiences. Listen to some of the older students—the ones who have stayed here for a couple of years—you’ll hear the accent they got from those guys. A real mess. But the way you said ‘fucking’—that was totally British—then I thought, yeah, she really did live in England.”

“Rocky knew about those teachers?”

“Maybe. Who knows? They’ll work for less than we do. Think about it. Because they’re illegal, they can’t complain about anything. Taiwanese bosses love that.”

“No, that never happened. Romanians teaching English? I don’t believe you.”

“It happened! Oh, come on, don’t make me feel bad.”

“I’m going to make you feel bad. Plus, you were saying “Thames” wrong. Listen to how I say it—that’s how the British pronounce it—the “h” is silent.”

“Now I feel like an idiot. Thanks.” But the air between us felt relaxed now, easy. I asked her how she had come to Taiwan, and she began a long story about her college education, as if there was nothing within her she needed to guard. She was really happy to talk: this too seemed foreign to me. Were Americans just very good with new people? Like my dad and his work friends, the way they’d mock you just for sitting down—but that was a show, a performance to make you feel welcome and annoyed at the same time. This was different, somehow, just something natural and quick with them.

The guy in the velvet jacket was loud enough to stop us talking: “See how many
points this story’s worth—I heard it from a Jesuit priest. A Taiwanese kid, like twenty or something, learns he’s HIV positive. He goes to my friend’s clinic, and they work out a plan to tell his parents. The parents say they’re okay with it, that they’ll support him, but then later, he tells them he’s actually gay, too, and they flip out. He has to leave home that night and never come back. It’s over. So the clinic helps him move, gets him a new room somewhere, and he finds a job, earning thirty five grand a month. He’s taking medication, going great, even though the parents still don’t want to hear from him. But guess what—every month he still sends them ten thousand NT out of his salary, like a loyal son.” He opened his palms and shrugged, amused at the impossibility of the story.

Cassie said: “Quit it with the points, Bryan. And the Taiwanese are super family orientated—everyone knows that.”

“No, no—it’s bigger than that—listen—”

I wasn’t. With my glass of Stella turned to foam, I got up through the tangle of knees, offering everyone a round. At the bar I met Alice, tall and straight-backed, her greyish hair in a long plat.

She said, “I hear you’ve become American.”

“A little. Is that bad?”

“No, if the school doesn’t figure it out. Why would it be bad?”

“I’m not being myself?”

“If you’re only yourself, why travel? That said—you must really want to stay here.”

“It just happened. It wasn’t like my plan—but I do want to stay a while. I’ve got
stuff to figure out.”

“Good.”

“Do you know if the banks here give out small loans? Could a local person ask for a loan?”

“You’re broke?”

“No, I think I’m okay for living stuff. I’ve got the job at Tanner’s school. But a friend and I are thinking of starting a small business. I don’t want to put the whole starting expenses down on my credit card.”

“Getting into business—already? Has Tanner’s school even found a work visa for you yet?”

“Sure. I’m not actually moving forwards with it until I get paid.”

“And then what?”

We were interrupted by the velvet-jacket guy, Bryan, arriving at the bar and demanding a hug from Alice.

He faced me: “Your name’s Robyn, right? Just arrived here?”

“Yes. I work at Tanner’s school.” Bryan’s jacket annoyed me. Here I was, forming a nice picture of American-ness, and it clearly relied on this idea of class, or classlessness, their desire to seem humble, plebeian, even when their parents had handed over fifty thousand bucks so they could study a semester’s calculus at Harvard. Yet velvet did not sit well with that rule—it was too posh, too dandy-like. Always a velvet jacket around to screw up a good theory.

“Tanner said you’re from Canada—New Brunswick?”
“Don’t listen to him, please. He’s full of shit.”

Alice nodded: “Never listen to Tanner. It’s good advice.”

Bryan said, “And you’re doing business here? I overheard, sorry—it’s an awful habit.”

Alcohol always made blushing easy for me, and I had to look away, embarrassed.

I said, “It’s about clothing. Hip-hop clothing. We think we see a gap in the market.”

“In Taiwan? It seems pretty saturated, to my eyes. But keep me informed—my bachelor’s in marketing.”

Later, standing together just outside the circle, Alice asked me, “Hip hop clothing? Really?” The bar was now playing a rock song about being alive, one that in England I had tried not to overhear dozens of times, yet in humid, buzzing Taipei, I felt soothed by its familiarity, by something from the outside I finally understood, and could say I owned.

I said, “It’s even worse than that. It’s clothing—keep this a secret—but it’s for dogs, not people.”

“I promise never to compete with you. But why? Is this some attempt to feel like you’re using your time in Taiwan properly? Why can’t you just be nothing—for a while, anyway? Being nothing’s not actually that bad.”

“Okay, but neither’s doing something. There’s a factory in China that exports them to the US, and it has a sales rep in the port of Keelung.”
Alice didn’t reply, and, uncomfortable, I looked away. I discovered that I wanted Alice’s approval—I admired her more now that I had seen her interact with these young Westerners: she was funny, she was cordial, but she was never drawn to their level. She was talking to me, and ignoring everything else in the circle.

I said, “But do you think it’s wrong? If we were to sell these things? Would it be like exploiting people—or dogs?”

“Well, the dog-angle I can’t speak to. Obviously the summer is not the best time to be adding layers. But for the Taiwanese—aren’t you being a little insulting, asking that question? If people decide to buy your product, they must have a reason. Let them be the judge.”

I watched the English teachers talking to one another, and as I watched him, it struck me that Tanner possessed the same kind of self-possession as Alice did. He sat on the arm-rest of one sofa, listening to whatever Cassie was saying, responding in the short bursts I had become accustomed to, but when Bryan leaned in, swamping both of them voluminously, Tanner just leaned back, slipping outside, amused. I understood, from watching his face, how attractive this ex-pat environment could be: you could hang out with other Westerners, let yourself be washed again by English, feel witty and have that wit valued, and at the same time still feel superior to the crowd, still feel that this was just one thing you did. You could loathe it all the while you were clinging on.

Alice said, “He’s taken, by the way.”

“Tanner?”

“She’s Taiwanese, I think.”
“You’ve never seen her?”

“He’s got someone he’s serious about. All the time I’ve known him.”

“What is she—a ghost?”

“Maybe. It’s just a friendly warning.”

“And I want to point out that I’m not especially interested, either.”

“Of course.”

“You’re saying I should date Bryan?”

“Please don’t. Find someone Taiwanese.”

“Maybe one of my students?”

“This community could do with a scandal.”

When I felt ready to leave, I was pleased that Tanner complained: “Already? It’s like still daylight!”

Cassie asked me where I was headed, and when I told her about Tibet Hostel, she frowned: “That must be a drag.”

“It’s fine. I love it.”

“Really? Like, I get it’s a good way to start. But don’t you want your own place?”

I sat on the MRT home feeling smug, glad that I could live in both the ex-pat and local versions of Taiwan, a feat which Cassie clearly could not match. Do not get spoiled, I told myself—stay lean, stay hardy. And yet, when I climbed the dusty, bare stairs of the hostel, up into its bizarre floors and hostile, ancient neighbours, it was
hard not to see the place afresh, and not well.

And, in the days that followed, I continued to feel stung by Alice’s comment that I was trying to make my time in Taiwan feel full. Wasn’t importing dog clothing as carefree an activity as could be imagined? Not according to her, and this bothered me. I felt unhappy with the too-serious part of myself. It had been that part of me that had got me in trouble back in England, struggling for a job I did not want, struggling through a relationship I probably should have abandoned, generally just being too tense and cold, always half an eye on the next potential failure my hard work could avert. An ugly person. And sadly, I knew why I was like that. No great mystery, when you had a family like mine. One Saturday, when I was maybe ten, my mum had turned the key in the front door, to let me and my sis tramp our tired shoes into the living room. The two of us yelled in delight when we found our dad sitting on the sofa, a tall brown drink in his hand that we immediately informed our mum was one hundred percent whiskey, but which was later revealed to be a mix of ice tea and lemonade. Shelia and I were overjoyed because he was supposed to be at work.

“What happened?” said my mum, offering the most neutral question possible.

Clutching my dad’s knee, I sensed he was as happy as I’d ever seen him. He glowed; eyes wide and alert, his face washed with serenity. He said, “I just went into work for the last time.”

I remember that I tried to keep smiling through all of the conversation.

My mum was holding a few letters she picked up from the kitchen table. “He let you go? Why?”

“No! Better: I resigned. I walked out. Told Roger to go roger himself.” He announced it like he’d got the answer to a fiendishly hard quiz question.
“Ohhh,” moaned my mum, her face nearly doubling in length.

“I just figured it out. I didn’t need to be there. I could stand up and remember that any shit I took from him was purely my own decision. I just decided: I’m done.” He smiled, then attempted to be sombre: “I am sorry for not letting you know in advance. We could have planned something with the girls, maybe. But I couldn’t predict myself.”

She watched him.

He said, “It’ll be fine. I’m not planning to make it a habit: I am aware of the essential nature of toil in human existence. I’ll be back to the grindstone soon enough.” He had softened his voice, seeming bewildered by the intensity of the room.

“I can’t believe—what are we going to do? You stupid, stupid man. What were you thinking? Were you thinking at all?”

“I was thinking that I could get something better.”

“Are you aware that you have daughters? Two young, very expensive daughters? Who are relying on you to—oh god. Oh god, what did I do?”

He got up, looking down at me and smiling, and I smiled back at him, doubly-hard.

“Darling, I’ll find another job. I’m a highly skilled professional.”

She said, “You’re a highly fucking idiot. Girls, please go upstairs. Go to Robyn’s room for a minute. Close the door. Play music.”

Shelia and I listened, of course, from the top of the stairs. And it was a small house.
“How are we going to afford anything? You don’t even get severance—you can’t claim the dole, I bet, as a voluntary quitter. They don’t give money to men who throw their children away.” My mum was a secretary in a nearby primary school, so I wondered why we couldn’t just live on the money she earned. She always seemed to want to prevent whatever life dad and us girls wanted to lead.

“We’ll be fine. If we have to, we can just borrow a little money. I’m on good terms with—”

“You didn’t think what it meant to have them, did you? Today, I grabbed their hands each time we had to cross a road. They both tried to pull free—Robyn thinks she’s grown up already, and Shelia has to copy everything Robyn does. Shouldn’t I have bothered? Maybe I should have just let them run into traffic, smash their bloody brains out—then you could quit every stupid job you wanted to—” She was crying.

Upstairs, Shelia whispered, “Does mum really want us to die?”

“No,” I explained, “It’s just the stress talking. It’s like I said before, you can’t take seriously the things she says when she gets nervous. Just decide that you don’t hear it. Let it wash down the drain.” I’m now not sure from where, exactly, I had found these psychological insights, but it was probably a merging of wisdom from the telly and comments from my dad.

Downstairs, he was consoling her with his arms, “Darling, darling, darling, you’re frightened. You don’t need to say things like that. It’s not such a big deal. I’ve already called a few honest gentlemen. Something’s opening at the Standard.”

That was how my parents were: like unexploded fireworks. And, while I still felt that she became too easily and too often hysterical, my mum’s complaints weren’t inaccurate—we had no money for weeks that summer. And while, at age twenty five,
looking back, we probably were only really poor for a couple of years, and were probably even close to comfortable while I was going through secondary school, as a child I didn’t know that. I adjusted to the fact that I was born to unreliable parents, and I would have to look after them, emotionally at first, and, once I was earning, more than just emotionally. And yet trying to follow that fate that way had got me nowhere good: I wanted to stop thinking in those terms, and I didn’t yet know how.

Talking Planet assigned me my remaining hours, giving me four low-level conversation classes, and one three-hour TOEFL exam prep class, a fiasco that repeated every Saturday afternoon because I had no idea how to teach it, and the instruction Cassie had given me only explained how to order the lesson, and not how to order the vast vocab and fluency needed to pass the audio sections. They were valiant, my kids, but it was like knights charging machine-guns: each session, the TOEFL test destroyed them. And so, once I had been teaching for three weeks at Talking Planet, the only students I looked forward to, the hours I anticipated during the dross of listing phrasal verbs to housewives, were my American Culture students. They were able to relate me as a fellow human being.

Happy continued to come to class with no more outbursts, even though this new quietness did not bring about any positive change to her English—she still treated the past tense like kryptonite—and, as she barely spoke, she had no chance of improving. That weird bout of perfect perception, at least of me and my thoughts, seemed impossible in the girl I saw twice a week, who blinked, open-mouthed, at even the simplest questions, who stared uncomprehending even when I tried a second time in Chinese. She, alone of the students, moved to a new seat—in the corner, where she could slump against a wall, annoyingly silent and often half-asleep. Yet, she was regular. She, Ron, and Richard had come to every single class, perhaps the only three
that had never been absent. Bianca’s attendance was not bad, but her double role sapped my enjoyment of Tibet Hostel just like I had suspected it would. If she came into Lily’s room while I was there, things became awkward: she refused to speak English “outside of class.” Even Mei agreed she was a pain, calling her “ma fan”—troublesome. Since getting the teaching job, I spent more and more time out of the hostel.

The eighth time I had taught my Culture class, Happy arrived in a long sleeved white blouse, tightly buttoned at her neck and wrists, a little blood spattered on its left arm. Not a huge amount, but enough spots to notice—I did not think it was ketchup. She seemed even more woozy than usual, and Ron sat next to her when she took her place by the wall. When I asked, she laughed, too sharply, and claimed it was just food she had spilled.

I had written on the board:

*I used to*

*It used to*

*The population of Manhattan used to live in a tiny area of the island.*

*It used to be impossible for most people to live far from where most jobs were.*

*Horse-drawn cabs used to be the primary means of transportation, and these cabs fiercely resisted the creation of the subways.*

I had realised, after the second lesson, that my first impression of these students had been completely wrong: they were reasonably fluent, just awkward. They knew much more than they could use: it was just unfortunate that few Westerners would ever take the time to figure that out.
Richard wanted to speak. “I liked reading this chapter, teacher.” He had the giddiness of a solitary learner, finally able to share.

He explained, “I am always afraid that Taiwan is not a modern country. We have the advanced technologies, and we have many industries for music, and for movie, and for science. But we are not really modern, yet. I was happy to read, last night, that American cities have anti-modern pressure, too. The horse-drivers.”

I didn’t really care if we studied the grammar or not: “What do other people think about this idea? Is Taiwan modern? And what does modern mean?”

Ron said, “That’s why we go to study in America, teacher. More modern.”

“What do other people think about this? Do you agree with Ron?”

The room had an odd feel, as if several people were no longer accepting my questions. Two girls in the second row were staring at their books, and the boy with the nice eyes looked distinctly unwell. Not everyone seemed that way: Bianca merely seemed bored, and the librarian girl was smiling back my way, even if possessing, it appeared, no intention of speaking. I wondered why the class was not as keen as before: had they figured me out?

I said to Richard: “But in some ways, Taiwan is very modern. It’s very non-violent. The city seems completely safe.”

This earned me a room-wide disagreement.

The librarian girl said, “No, teacher. Taipei is dangerous. Too many scooters.”

From the back: “And thief. From other Asia country. Too many Vietnam people.”
Richard said, “I agree, it is right to say a modern country must not be violent. If all countries were modern, they would be no war. But Taiwan is still very stupid. Politicians fight in the government, with their fists! And people break little laws every day. We Chinese are very bad with the laws.”

Ron spoke up: “He is correct. Taiwan is very shame. And the government is a big mess.”

I said, “But guys, come on.” As before, I found it easier to be blunt in American. “You haven’t been to London or New York. You don’t know how frightening they are. How women have to be careful all the time.”

Librarian girl said, “I am frightened. There are gangsters.”

Richard said, “Boss cheats worker. Worker tricks boss. Children move away and forget parents, or parents do horrible things to child—we hear this on news many times. Traffic is so dangerous, and the food stall maker uses dirty ingredients. Take a bowl of noodles in a night-market. Everyone thinks of Taiwan as a place you can eat great noodles all times of day. It’s our pride. But in one place in the market, it has just soy, and salt, and other nature things. In another, some extra wei ji, to make the flavour. In another—” He said a word I did not know, and the whole class chuckled.

The librarian-girl explained: “Cement.”

It was a pity I did not find him physically attractive. Probably more communicative, in this, his second or third language, than many English people were in their first, I wondered how Richard lived, how he earned a living, and if he understood how special he was.

I set everyone to writing, using “used to” in sentences, and floating among the
scratching of pencils, I came to Happy’s desk, and crouched down.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Happy.”

She seemed scared.

“Yes, Robyn. I fell down.” I could see, as she moved her arm to her lap, through the white fabric of her sleeve, the darker shades at least three over-sized plasters. Band aids, Americans called them.

Ron had been watching me. He nodded at this: “Yes, teacher. Happy is so clumsy. She fall down before class.”

When the class had limped to its finish, I asked Richard to stay behind.

“I have a question.”

“Sure, teacher. Anything? How are you finding Taiwan? Is your life good here?”

“It’s very good. Great. I feel there was a weird atmosphere today, in class. Do you know what’s going on with Happy?”

My question closed down his smile. “No. I don’t think anything is going on.”

“Really? She fell down?”

“I don’t know her. She’s not a close friend.”

If I kept asking, he might report it to the rest of the class, so I let him go, my first informal chat with him wasted, Tanner’s isolationist philosophy victoriously proven right, and half an hour later, I met Mei at the Main Train Station. We caught a train north to the port town of Keelung.

The station itself, its grim platforms, and the towns the northwest train rose
through, were reminders of how far Taiwan was from being modern. Taipei’s Main Train Station, for instance, South East Asian immigrants collected inside diners and clothing shops that proclaimed the Thai alphabet, their street-worn clothes the uniform of the ignored. And in Shi Da night-market, my favourite place in the city, the most elegant of the city’s social hubs, where exquisite tastes reverberated, at a stall at the north end, three workers in bloody white stuffed ugly over-sized dumplings, the meat fatty, the dough soggy and limp, the herbs bitter, as if tinged with some astringent cleaning fluid. A couple of months earlier, I might have just considered these dumpling tradesmen another exotic item of the East, but with my new eyes, I found them crude. Not trusting my instincts, I had somehow eaten there twice, and now the main guy, missing a couple of lower teeth, called out “xiao jie” (“Little Miss”) every time I walked past. Or the ancient man and woman who came by Tibet Hostel each week, in a rubbish-laden, creaking pickup truck, to sift through the bags we threw away, adding what they could to their mound of jagged detritus. Modern Taiwan might have its command posts, its cells of dedicated insurgents, but the country as a whole—vast, industrial, and troubled—was either not changing at all, or in every chaotic direction at once.

Of course, something similar could be said for rough old England, or any country. For any person, in fact—the whole project of re-making, of flattening abs, defeating shyness, and building the necessary knowledge of Woody Allen. That project went on in Taiwan: my new American friends all belonged to a gym: location could not halt it. Yet despite all that work, the vast, troubled unconscious was still down there, roaring and wetting itself, the skin throwing up absurd hairs and mistaken wrinkles. We trained ourselves to be good, and we watched people weep at our words. In the shadows of every skull, a fat man was shouting, “Xiao Jie!”
“It’s not rude,” said Mei, “‘Xiao jie’ is okay.”

“It is rude. You call a waitress, “xiao jie.”

“Because you’re foreign. You don’t like him calling xiao jie because then you’re like a Taiwanese girl. You want him to say, ‘Oh, mei nue, hen piao liang,’ or maybe do bai bai.” She put her hands together for a prayer and bowed.

“No, I do not require prayers.”

“‘Excuse me, excuse me, goddess, would you like try our cooking?’”

“I’ll put you in one of his bloody dumplings.”

“No, my meat is too expensive. Especially for an ugly man.” She looked around: ”Ai-yah. Making me hungry.”

Our train passed through yet another small town, the same cramped streets and dark temples, every apartment’s window barred.

Mei said, “Maybe you are goddess, Robyn. You make so much money. Six hundred, already, and seven hundred with Rose’s student. And you come to Taiwan yesterday.” My time was worth three times hers.

I said, “Well, in June. Over a month ago.”

“Oh my god—June? It’s like you born here!”

“You are about to be chopped up for bao zi.”

“Don’t worry, goddess. When we are making our dog business, both of us can be rich. Only fine foods.”

Even there, though, the discrepancy continued: we planned to start off by buying a small shipment from the Keelung-based sales rep Mei had located, and it
was my credit card which would fund all but 20% of the purchase.

I said, “We will be famous, too. As entrepreneurs.”

“Oh, famous afterwards. But Robyn, before we make the money, we must be secret. We just two girls. Just xiao jie. If we tell everybody our plan, they will take it. Pow! Then we have no plan. Because I watch you. I think English people are good. Friendly. They like to follow the system. But Chinese people are very clever. I worry you don’t understand this.”

“I do have a business degree, darling.”

“But you know about England. In your country, does Starbucks gives customers free milk?”

“For coffee?”

“On the side table: two jugs, one for fat people and one for thin. Just buy a coffee and take milk. So funny. I think of big American men taking only a little and passing the jug: ‘Thank you!’ ‘Oh, no problem!’ But in Taiwan Starbucks, no free milk. You have to ask. You know why?”

“Because Starbucks is a racist company—they don’t give a full service to Asian people?”

“No! Now I am happy I am telling you this story. Because in Gaoxiong, when Starbucks first opens, they offer the free milk. Then, lots of grandmothers come from home with their own jug, and they take all the free milk. Pow! Everybody agrees American companies are so stupid. Starbucks loses money every day, and the grandmothers walk home with milk and put it in fridge. Buy one small coffee, or maybe no coffee, and get two jugs of milk. Chinese people are clever.”
“By ‘clever,’ you mean ‘evil.’”

“Clever. So don’t tell any handsome Taiwanese night-club man in about our plan.”

“You think that’s what I do at night?”

“Please don’t tell me—I am still innocent girl. But just be secret about this, okay?”

“How can we promote our business if no one knows about it?

“Good question.” Mei was nodding, proud that she had taught me so well. “We must be clever, too.”
CHAPTER FOUR

Taiwan bloomed in the passing of the storms and sweat-agony of summer. I hated more and more the Main Train Station’s bulk, the vast cold of its high, plain, arches, and I walked there listening to a familiar old song by Cars. Romantic songs never go bad, no matter what smart people think they have decided, and as the world becomes more modern, more solitary, we only need them more. However, on this day the Station quaked with life, and I couldn’t help loving the crowd. Two beautiful, tanned women stood near me—and women, too, not girls, holding themselves upright, their human frailties endowed with the quiet ballast of experience—the straps of rolled beach mats hanging from shoulders, a small, serious boy limply reaching up to hold the hand of the one closest to me. Both women similarly dressed in Birkenstocks and pedal-pushers; a heavy bag containing many snacks individually wrapped in tin foil. Taiwanese women so lucky, genetically, to grow old slowly, still just children at twenty five, really, blossoming decisive and reserved in their thirties. Could they be a couple, and this their child? No. They would be too perfect then. Around this mother’s careful accoutrements of self-improvement were the lines of sadness—both these women were alone, travelling together on Taiwan’s independence day, manless, but still smiling, taking this so serious boy, dressed in a lurid blue Hawaiian shirt, to the beach. I wanted to kneel down and kiss him, squeeze his cheek the way old women do, and say that life was everywhere blooming, that soon he would be stronger, and that in everything he did he would be loved. Somewhere a mother goddess, some wheat and wildflower giantess, is forever whispering this to all boys, and as they grow they are taught how to block out the comfort she brings. Every war the face of a man lost to his mother.
The boy looked up, saw my gaze, and jumped his eyes to the platform floor.

His mother said to me: “He’s so shy,” and all three of us women enjoyed his foot scuffing awkwardness, everyone around us bustling and excited. On so many faces that universal, comical worrying of trains, the way that in every country, ticket instructions are never quite clear enough, and too many people by the stairs and too long distances to dash to the next platform in time. Today was Double Ten day, Taiwan’s national day, a day to celebrate an independence that had not yet come, as all good festivals and visions celebrate the perfect world that is never quite coming into being, but for a second or two every day, seems just about to. A Friday, a public holiday, and the first day of a long weekend, and, as much as every Taiwanese person I knew said they hated work, they revelled in free time. Re náo was happening on this platform, this closeness in noise, people saying by their commotion that they would embrace if they could.

A murmur, a shared wave of turning heads, as a train came sighing under the high grey pillars of the Station.

I asked the woman with the bag: “Does this train go to Luo Dong?”

“Yes yes. You know Luo Dong?”

“And really. I’m catching a bus when I get there. To Ru-li.”

She smiled: “Are you a Buddhist?” Clearly everyone knew about Ruli’s retreat and hospice.

As the woman joined the slow push for the nearest door, I told her I would be visiting a friend.

Taiwan’s mountains were so high—the highest east of Tibet—that a train going
down the east coast had to go north first. I heard the shape of Taiwan compared many times to a sweet potato, or a long leaf, or, sometimes, to a whale, at sea-level a long curve against the Pacific, and, vertically, a long curve of mountains following, more or less, the line of the east coast. The train rolled north towards the coast, passing through the dog ears of the city, past a giant, grim temple of black and faded yellow, past gleaming, incorporated rectangles, and a thousand apartment buildings of varied colour stuck all over the side of a mountain. Small towns, small towns; the carriage swelled and emptied, and I stretched my legs a minute at our most northerly point, a port town that smelled even worse than Taipei, where gulls sailed in pairs over docked navy ships.

Then south, down among steeper mountains, the clouds and the houses confused with each other, spreads of fog down in gorges, far beneath high-placed rows of six or seven square homes. I exclaimed at the scenery of fern leaf, bamboo and mist: “Just like a Chinese painting!” laughing because I had mocked Mei for the very same programmed reaction. Then down, alongside the sea, brave houses alone among grass, or the ship-houses of the rice-farmers, their fields sunken in reflections of the sky’s haze of white and gold, connected to the human race by narrow bridges of mud and stone.

A half-uniformed man came down the aisle balancing a stack of the famous train company lunch-boxes against his chest, and, knowing how envious my girls had been of this train journey—specifically the chance to eat “gongche biandang”—I handed over money, rubbing my throw-away chopsticks together, and flicking clear the box’s elastic band. Tepid pork cutlet, a boiled half-egg, rice and fried vegetables. I tried to enjoy it as much as a Taiwanese girl would; even my students had instructed me, on hearing about my weekend journey, to try, “gong che bian dang!” Was there
anything in England over which we could grow misty eyed so easily? The chance to
consume fish and chips would bring a gasp to no mouth. Perhaps because in England,
fish and chips were so easily obtained; real Taiwan, the island of their dreams, was a
little distant for the Taiwanese, obscured by city life, muddied by nostalgia, existing
only in temporary spaces like night-markets and train journeys. Distance brought real
things closer.

Luo Dong was busy and a little terrifying. Laughing, I had told my
Conversation 2 students not to worry, when they had asked, horrified, how I would
survive outside of Taipei. They did not seem aware that I was a woman of the world.
However, as my right foot touched the Luo Dong platform, I knew that I had been
flattering myself. Luo Dong was not touristy, not quaint and historical, but dark with
the evening and densely populated. Taipei was shaped for me, the half-Western city,
the double city, and I had assumed the rest of the island would be the same. Twenty
two million in Taiwan, and only two million or so in Taipei.

I found a tourist desk, and tried my simple Chinese: “Wo yau qu dao Ruli. You
meiyou gongche?” I want to go to Ruli. Is there a bus?

One old woman said, “Oh! Ni de zhong wen hen hao ah!” “Your Chinese is
great!”

The other was more helpful: “Meiyou.” I had to go to a nearby town, and catch a
bus from there. I arrived at little San Xing hungry for my dinner, stepping down into
the hum of the countryside night, very dark everywhere the street-lamps did not
touch, and once I had eaten a quick dinner of stirfried pork and green beans, and no
bus seemed apparent, I paid a taxi driver to take me up the mountain side.

The SC compound had two long, low buildings, and one tall and four-pointed,
like a watch tower. I could make out a fence far off, the metal bars glinting from the
two flood lamps by the doors to the nearest low building, the only one still lit up. The
tower was completely dark, and I could barely distinguish its peaked roof from the
sky’s star-blackness. Pulling on a jumper against the cold, a firm breeze chilling me
as I rummaged through my backpack, I walked to the main doors, and met a prim,
well-curled woman of about fifty, who was wearing the same blue uniform that I had
sometimes see poor Happy wear to class. She and I exchanged the now-familiar deer-in-headlights confusion of Taiwanese to foreigner—her panicked English, my falsely
confident Chinese—while a younger woman was fetched. She too was uniformed.

“We are just waking Rose. We want to see if she still wants a guest. It’s our
system—some times we get relatives visiting who cause real trouble. They want to
fight—so many men who think they are in love with our residents.”

“Does your uniform mean that you are a nun?”

“No! I am just a volunteer.” That, therefore, was what Happy was. God, didn’t
the girl have enough on her plate? “I come here from San Xing at the weekends.” She
explained she was an English teacher in Luo Dong during the week, and came here to
help out with whatever the nuns asked her to do, and to teach the ‘residents’
English—”Just to give them a thing to do, apart from picking vegetables.” Most of the
retreat was run by volunteers like her, with only two nuns on site, and a doctor who
came up every Sunday, mainly to give medical check ups and write proscriptions for
anti-depressants.

“As Buddhists, you don’t have a problem with people taking Prozac? Isn’t that
like cheating bad karma?”

“Oh no. That’s silly. We can’t have people stay and take real drugs, because not
enough nurses. But Tzu Chi is not about making philosophy, or rules. It’s just kindness to others, and doing good. That’s all.”

Rose called my name. She was standing in the doorway, in jeans and a fleece, lit up with very gratifying delight, and I knew I was doing good by visiting. We embraced; she had lost weight.

In her room, simply a bed, a sink, a desk, a wardrobe, one shelf that was half full of books, and an electric kettle, she put it down to the constant exercise: “I’m working basically every day. Did you see the vegetable gardens? They’ve got goats here, which are super-cute, trust me, and even tea fields further down the mountain. They don’t ask us mental patients to pick the tea, thank God. The local handyman and his uncles do that. He’s slow, but kind of cute, if you like that kind of look.”

“The country bumpkin look?”

“See him without his shirt on. That’s all I’ve done, though. They might kick me out.”

“Sex is illegal?”

“Not like officially. But every month we interview with the head nun, and she asks if we want to stay on. Sometimes she tells people that they need to give their room to a new ‘resident.’ Very Taiwanese—subtle, but clear. So you’ve got to figure out what’s kosher.”

Her window was open, and a chill, fresh breeze blew in from the night. We drank hot green tea and Rose talked without pause.

“My Chinese kills now. My Taiwanese isn’t too bad, either. Lulu is the only volunteer that can speak good English, and I’m the only foreigner here, so during the
week it’s Chinese or nothing. When I was coming here, I guessed it would be a lecture after breakfast, and a lecture after supper. All those things they tell you in yoga class—"Om!" They have meditation rooms in the tower, but if they’ve ever opened them, I’ve never been invited. Not a single sermon, even in Chinese. It’s just sleep, help out, eat, read, play this French edition of Monopoly that some old resident left here. I thought: these people are really sad. I mean, okay, I’m the suicide victim, I shouldn’t be getting up myself, but these volunteers are all divorced chicks looking for something to do. And the only thing they can think of is this—living in a commune, pushing around the two or three really difficult ‘guests’—oh yeah, not all the girls who work here are angels—but none of them are what I’d call religious, they don’t have a clue about the eight-fold path. I could give a better sermon than most of them.

“Just, as I went on doing the life here, digging my eggplants—cool title for a blog, huh?—I think I was chilling one lunch time, hands on my vegetarian belly, when I realised that maybe this was it. When everyone talks about letting go, this is what they really mean. Coming to the middle of nowhere, working for half the day with your hands, and doing simple shit for the rest of it, like trying to be nice to sad old Mr. Chen, who lost his whole family, and now can’t ever keep his top hat out of Parisian jail. Sleeping well, eating rice and vegetables—and I’m getting better. It works. Kind of sad, huh? Imagine you go back to the UK and say, ‘I figured out the meaning of life,’ and when people ask you what it is, you say, ‘Be a good person. Eat well and sleep early.’ There’s no way you’ll land a million-dollar book deal pushing that one.”

I mentioned that I had brought her a little extra money, if she needed it. We were both sitting on the floor, me against the wall, her against the bed, and she was
silent a while, regarding me.

“It’s voluntary. Like, it’s the standard thing to give something every month, once the queen nun has asked you to stay. But they’ve been okay with me. I got a great referral from the doctor in Taipei: ‘This one is total fucking nuts. Please help her.’ But this is the thing I’ve been stressing about—how is there any money left? Gao must have thrown my shit on the street—and my visa. So overdue. I must be on Taiwan’s most wanted.”

“I’m handling it. You’re fine. I’m teaching now, so I can’t spare a huge amount, but I do want you to be able to stay here as long as you need. And really get better.”

“You put my passport in a Chinese language class, huh? Clever. I’m one of those ghost names on the roster? Did you bring my passport with you?”

I stumbled to smooth over my stumbling: “I didn’t know how secure this place would be. I figured the safe in Tibet Hostel would be the best spot.” Just the two of us in this room, my brisk smile, her dark eyes—the quiet of the breeze, and the chattering madness of my life in Taipei. Rose had to be able to see through me.

I said, “But please don’t mention ghosts to me. I just discovered the school I work at is haunted.”

“They think everywhere’s haunted.”

“My school is much weirder than that.” Rose, I suspected, knew deep down that something was off with me, that I was too good to be true, but she wanted, and needed, me to be a guardian angel, and so I was. Additionally, everyone loves a ghost story, and Rose had been two months without a native speaking friend. She flicked the kettle back to boil, so she could refill my cup.
I told her most of what had happened to me. The week before Double Ten day, I had come to work on a Friday, subbing one of Ted’s TOEFL classes. Ya had met me in the office and explained that as they knew Ted would be away, many of his students would be likely to skip class—“Taiwanese students like to stick”—and so she was moving the lesson to one of the rooms in the basement. I was still hoping to avoid Morantz, but I didn’t see how I could believably protest. When I agreed, however, one of Ya’s assistants, Debbie, a slight woman with an oddly unChinese face, as if mixed with something Western, or Taiwanese Aborigine, handed me a stack of extra large worksheets from Ted, and exclaimed, “So excellent! You are very good teacher.” Everyone in the room seemed grateful about something.

I mentioned this exchange to Alice, on my way to the lifts. “That’s because the Taiwanese staff believe the basement is haunted.”

“No.”

“They never give one of those classrooms to a local teacher—only to one of us. Don’t worry—it’ll be an easy lesson. Most of the kids won’t show up.”

“Can’t—are there ghost exorcists in Taiwan?”

“Of course. God. I’ll tell you about that little cluster-fuck another time.”

I thought that any basement ghost was most likely Morantz, keeping his refuge safe by creeping on students and whispering scary things in Eastern European. The classroom was small but fine, close to the stairs, thank God, so I would be less likely to run into him, and my students might be less afraid. Comprehending Ted’s TOEFL worksheets, however, would take time, and I had learned that it was rarely a good idea to prep in the classroom in which I was planning to later teach. Students invariably showed up early and began asking questions about whether I liked using
chopsticks. I found myself another small room further down the corridor, my sandals slapping the pine flooring, and I spread Ted’s sheets out over different desks. TOEFL Exam preparation was the class I most wished I could drop: I knew I had no understanding of how to teach it. My once weekly TOEFL class reminded me that I was unqualified and untrained as a teacher; I was doing the minimum work for more money per hour than most of my students would ever earn. TOEFL tore through how I wanted to see myself, how I wanted to approach my job. In each lesson I ran through trial questions, offering general tips in advance, then seeing students car-crash into written and audio exercises of incredible lexical complexity. I then tried to explain why they had misunderstood, adding definitions of key words in a hopeless quest to make them ready: “Mercury is a kind of liquid metal—it’s also very poisonous.” Someone out there knew how to teach TOEFL—he was helping his students—but I was not that person. And within a minute or two of reading Ted’s worksheets, I saw that he was not that person, either. He had simply designed doubled-sized forms with lots of cool spaces for students to jot down words, paraphrase the main idea as they were listening, and the sheets were good for what they were, but they left the central problem untouched. Ted had no more clue than I did, and that meant the whole of our school was clueless. Students were signing up for help with the English exam for US colleges and we had no idea how to give it to them.

I was staring into space, when along the glass front wall of the classroom walked a Western man. He was pressing several textbooks to his chest, he looked a spry forty-something, and his strong chin and high cheekbones pointed him forwards, as if the fins to guide his single-minded purpose. This was either the ghost or Morantz. And as ghosts did not exist, I needed to ambulate quickly. He had not seen me, and if he had looked round he might have thought me the ghost, a pale, dark-
haired girl in an ankle-length black skirt (I was very proud of that slightly goth skirt, which I’d found in a vintage shop in northern Taipei, and how it was embroidered with silver Sanskrit lettering). But Morantz should not see me, especially as I was preparing to teach a lesson so badly, and so I didn’t want to give him a chance to come back this way. I gathered the emperor’s clothes that were Ted’s worksheets, eased open the glass door like a teenage truant, and crossed over on light feet to another corridor, going deeper into our basement. So much space below ground, as if an entire second school existed down here, teaching lessons to the dead.

Before I could find a suitable study spot, I heard a voice from one of the rooms up ahead. Chanting. It was neither English nor Mandarin. Chinese, even if spoken with a strong local accent, has a pretty small set of syllables, and tends towards certain rhythms. This was different, more stop-start, sing-song, higher-pitched—it was a woman’s voice, or a man in falsetto—and I supposed it had to be Taiwanese or a South East Asian language. Hearing it, alone in an underground corridor, was pretty fucking freaky. I had found Talking Planet’s basement ghost. Lucky Robyn: spend ten minutes below street level, and the two of you have already begun introductions.

The chanting stopped with a sharp exhalation. I heard nothing, but I was the kind of person who needed to check that no ghost was around before heading back. I re-shouldered my stack of papers, and walked forward. At the end of a side corridor, the unoccupied rooms dark, glowed one that had to contain people. As I headed to it, the classrooms on both sides lit up with my motion, announcing me. In the room at the end, several of my Conversation 2 students stood in a rough circle, around a female body laid out, face down, on the white-tiled floor. It was Happy.

They jumped when I pushed open the door, and one girl actually choked a
scream with her hand. Richard was among them, and he and I stared at each other. He
of all of them I had not expected. Something very fucked up was happening here, and
while I did not think that impossible in Taiwan, the island of concrete giants and
blood-stained dumpling makers, I did not associate Richard with the island’s darker
side.

“What’s happening?”


At least Happy was fully dressed. She raised her head, and smiled at me.

“Is she okay?”

“Yes, yes. She’s just resting.”

Happy eased herself up, and brushed down her blouse and jeans. “Sorry,
teacher, for frighten. I just lie down. Very tired.” Taiwanese people had a phobia of
floors—they believed the floor was filthy.

“Did you have a fit?”


My lesson was starting in a few minutes. I let them go.

Later I described the scene to Ted. “Jesus. How seriously weird. You know
what I’m going to say: don’t get involved.”

“It could be some fucking sex ring!”

“With no furniture? A little impractical, maybe. Look, you really don’t know
what these students are up to, and they aren’t going to tell you. What happens if you
tell everyone what you saw: first, you lose those kids from your class, most likely,
and if they leave the school, Ya and Rocky will not see that in a good light.”

“What?”

“The Taiwanese have a phrase: ‘hen ma fan.’ Trouble maker. It’s not a good idea to go stirring up the workplace. Who knows who the boss will punish? Do you really want Ya to dislike you enough that she leafs through your paper-work, checking to see if there’s anything not quite right?” By doubling myself, by imitating someone else—which had been a sensible, necessary step—I had made myself vulnerable.

He went on: “Here’s what I’d do. Go back to Ya, talk about some woman-stuff—get her advice about your hair or something—then say, like it’s no big deal, that you didn’t see a ghost in the basement. You’re a Westerner, you don’t believe in them, you find them sexy, even—lay on the cultural cheese. Then comment, real casual, that you thought you heard some students moving around the different classrooms. You ask, ‘Is that allowed?’ You hint that Ya could, if she wanted to, put out a notice reminding students not to hang around the basement. Then you get out.”

In the mountain-retreat, Rose re-filled my tea, and asked, “What did you decide to do?”

I said, “Nothing. I didn’t even tell Ya to do the note thing. I thought: maybe I don’t need to get involved. I don’t actually know anything, and these students are paying me to teach them, so maybe my responsibility is just to make sure I give them a good lesson. That’s what I’m paid for, after all.”

“It sounds sketchy. The chick was actually lying on the floor? Can you imagine a Chinese friend of yours ever letting you put your fucking bag on the floor? No way she was ‘taking a rest.’”
“Rose, I guess I’m trying to do the same thing you’re doing. I know I’m not living in a monastery, but I am trying to let go. Before I came to Taiwan, I spent my whole life running on the treadmill. Accumulating new skills. Since I got to Taiwan, I’m trying to change all that. I’m trying just to have fun and see what’s that like. I’m trying not to hold on to life so tightly. That’s not so bad, right?”

We talked some more, then Rose went off to a store-room and came back with a mattress and blankets. I asked her if I could listen to a little music on my headphones before sleeping, as thoughts of Ted and Happy and everyone else kept ranging around my brain. Soon I let the songs fade, rolled on to my side, and hearing the wind press and push on the locked window.

“Robyn?”

I woke up some time later, the small space of the room silvery-dark with moonlight, not knowing how I had come to be here.

“Robyn? Sorry. I woke you up.”

“It’s okay.”

Rose was perching her chin on the edge of her mattress, looking down at me. “I get scared some nights. Sleeping alone here. There’s a lot of space in the retreat—a donor in the US got generous, so they built it large. All these young girls suffering love-sickness. Obsessed with boys who killed themselves.” The wind was still reaching for the window’s lock.

She said, “I’m doing it, I think. What Catholics call, ‘Dying to the self.’ Like there’s less and less of me every week. I can remember when I thought I couldn’t survive another nothing-afternoon here, how I thought about killing myself again, just
to stop being bored. Now I can go by a whole one of those afternoons without having more than a few thoughts. Thoughts like—’I wonder how Robyn is doing in Taipei?’ Or: ‘I wish I hadn’t been so crazy around that other girl.’ They happen less and less. I’m just happy, doing my duties here, playing French Monopoly. At night though, I wonder what’s it really like when you let go of the ego. Not what they say it’s like. No one gives any lectures here, so I’m working all this out by myself. When this process is done, is there going to be anything left of me? And then I think, what’s the real universe actually like? Not the one we tell ourselves we live in, but the actual one, which I’m going to see once I’ve totally let go. Maybe it hates us. Sometimes when I’ve been alone all evening and I’m walking by the edge of the goat pen, just hearing the gravel crunch, I suddenly sense that I’ve broken through some barrier, and I look up and the stars are so full of hate. So many of them up here on the mountain. There’s no electric light to hide them. Maybe that’s why we like lights—to hide the sky.

“Dark things. That’s what I’m worried about. Maybe we have all this noise and heat to keep ourselves safe. No, we say, universe, no diablo, get back, as long as I’m alive. You can come for me once I’m dead—pull me down to hell. But if I stay here I’m going to be naked soon.”

I didn’t have words to respond to her. I took the hand that was not supporting her chin and squeezed it.

She said, “That’s why I’m so happy you came. Filled me up again. So I can go into the nothingness with a few more supplies.”

“I’m glad I helped.”

“What were you listening to?”
“Something silly.”

“Tell me. Do you think I’m going to laugh at you?”

“That ‘Take Me Home’ song by Cars. I just have it on repeat.”

“Oh, it’s a sweet one. You have a good heart, Robyn. Can we listen together? I just want to hear a little of the world.” I sat up, and gave her one of the ear buds. She lay back on the bed, and I pressed play. The song began, and I watched a smile appear on her face.