

LOUISE

May Zhou and her wife, Lai, ate lunch every Friday on a grassy corner of a city park two blocks from Oakland Community College, where they worked in the bursar's office as accountants. Today they'd met for an early lunch, an hour before noon, but the temperature was already boiling. A thin haze hung in the air, smothering May's appetite.

Lai peeled back the bread on her sandwich and sighed. "I wanted banana on my peanut butter."

"You already ate all the bananas."

May watched as her wife folded the sandwich in half and took a bite out of the center. Lai then lifted the sandwich up to her face and peered at May through the bread's oozing hole. May wondered how Lai, who had the spirited appetite of a teenage girl, and who would eat the horn off a rhino if she was hungry enough, remained so slender while May's own small frame had begun to widen the moment she'd turned thirty, so that she resembled a shrimp dumpling.

Lost in self-consciousness, May did not notice the approaching duck until Lai squealed.

“Oh my god! A duck! Look at it!” Lai’s brown, almond-shaped eyes were wide with excitement; her long black hair spilled over her shoulders. She tossed her unfinished sandwich into their shared lunch cooler as she bent to get closer to the bird.

“It has one eye. And . . . god. One toe. It’s got one toe.” May took a picture with her cell phone. She focused the camera on the scabby, bald patch of skin on the bird’s head where only one iridescent green feather clung. She imagined the bloody, beak-cracking fights it must have been in. Was this duck the bully or the victim?

“Ducks don’t have toes. That’s web. I’m going to name her. Louise,” Lai said. “Little Louise. Come. Come.” Retrieving her sandwich, she tried to tempt the bird with it, giggling each time the duck inched toward her.

“Why would you want half a duck?”

“She’s all healed.”

“Its eye socket looks like a . . . a peach pit!” May said. But Lai did not hear because the bird had walked into her outstretched arms.

“Oh my god. This is so amazing,” Lai whispered loudly, trembling.

“Something is wrong with that duck, Lai. Can birds get rabies? Mange?”

“Nothing’s wrong with her. She’s perfect.”

“We don’t have room for a duck.”

“You said it: she’s only half a duck.”

“This is just crazy.”

“She looks sad,” said Lai.

“It’s fine. It belongs out here . . . in nature.”

“This isn’t nature,” said Lai. “I’ve seen golf courses wilder than this. Besides, look. She only has one eye. She can’t see cars coming from her left! Or dogs or cats or anything else that eats ducks, for that matter. Here.” She tipped her chin at May’s pocket. “Take a picture of us.”

“How many lampposts have you walked into, little one?” Lai asked the bird as she stroked its bent feathers.

May rolled her eyes.

“And see how tame she is? So tame! I think she already loves me!”

“We can’t take care of a wild animal. You understand, don’t you?”

“Hey, little ducky bird,” sang Lai. “*Little duck bird is flapping her wings and singing a song for me, for me. Little duck bird is quacking a song and wagging her tail for me, for meeeee!*”

“Lai?”

Her wife cooed into the bird’s face.

“Lai?”

Lai carefully set the duck into the cooler, using the remainder of her peanut butter sandwich as a mattress for the animal. She tickled its back. “Hi, happiness. Hi, my birdy beast.”

May frowned, even though she was secretly impressed by the way the duck responded to her wife by opening and closing its wings slowly and giving a timid squawk. Why was the bird so tame? Was it sick? Would it get Lai sick? How had Lai gotten this far in life acting like a child, always in awe of everything? Whereas May worked hard, squaring her sloping shoulders, deepening her voice, making steady eye contact, constantly fighting the urge to apologize for speaking assuredly or expressing her displeasure. Didn’t Lai understand that her childish eagerness undermined all the effort May put into making people—their supervisor at the bursar’s office, their families, the mechanic, their landlord—take them seriously?

The sun was high in the sky, reflecting off the pond filled with curds of algae. May felt drowsy and overheated. “Look, I’ve never had a pet before. And there’s nothing appealing about having a bird that’s missing body parts. Can you blame me? And what about diseases? Don’t birds have bird diseases? What if you get sick?”

“I won’t get sick.”

“You don’t know how to take care of anything,” said May.

“Just picture it. You and I would come home from work, and Louise would waddle to the front door, nip at our pant legs, hop up on the hall tree, beat her wings, and squawk and wiggle her feathery tail until we pet her little bald spot. We’d be a family!”

“You kill cactuses. If I weren’t around, you’d probably kill our rock garden.”

“You know,” Lai said, squinting into the glare, “I dreamed last night I was right here . . . and I was looking for something . . . and the pond was melted butter, and full of bread crumbs. Crumbs crumbs crumbs. Bread all over the place. Soggy, salty, buttery. And I think, now, maybe I was looking for our duck.”

“Mmmmm, sounds good. Now I want to go home and eat something greasy.”

“Stop it. Anyway, I dreamed that I went in the pond, and I thought it would be warm but it was cold. Cold. And I couldn’t see through the yellow . . .”

“You are not its mom,” said May.

“And I saw . . .”

“You don’t know how to take care of a duck,” said May.

“I saw you. Underwater. I wanted you to climb up. But you were . . . down deep. Down and in the dark, and you failed.”

“Failed?”

“I don’t know.” Lai dug her sharp thumbnail into the pad of her pointing finger, a gesture that often meant she was struggling to find the right words. “I just . . . I just got this sense that you failed.”

“I’m not sorry that I don’t want a duck.”

“You should be. Is taking care of a duck so difficult?”

“It’s more than just bread crumbs, Lai. It’s taking time off work for visits to the vet. It’s duck-proofing our entire house. You just go through life jumping from one thing to the next. First, it’s cooking classes. But you still don’t even make your own lunch!” May pointed to the partially eaten bird mattress in the cooler. “Then, viola lessons, but you didn’t like tuning your own instrument.

Then, it's moving to Ireland—but you hate flying! Seven years of this . . . of us. *I'm* the longest-term *anything* you've ever had. You take this duck in, but who's going to be caring for it in two months?"

"Yeah, well, at least I'm not the person who doesn't travel because I'm afraid I'll hate my life when I return home."

"This isn't about me."

"You don't even have siblings," said Lai. "All you had was a cat."

"I trusted my cat. You can't teach a duck to bury its own poop."

"You don't know love 'til you have a duck."

"I don't know love because I don't have siblings?" responded May, trying to control the heat rising in her cheeks. "I feel love. I feel it every time I hug my friends, or you."

"I didn't mean that you don't know love. I just mean . . ."

"I take care of you. I listen to you. I comfort you."

"Louise needs us, and you can't bend."

"Are you telling me that I don't know love because I don't give a shit about this duck? Do you ever listen to yourself? What do you really want? Why do you need this duck?"

"I just do! I just want something *more*." Lai threw her hands in the air.

"I don't need anything more. My life is full. *Full*."

May was too hot to walk anywhere. She looked around for the ice cream vendor that circled the park on sweltering days. She wanted a decadent It's-It ice cream sandwich, or a slice of frozen cheesecake, something she'd regret, to keep her mind off what Lai had said. She wanted desperately to dip her feet in the water, despite being disgusted by its coating of lime-green algae. And though she was certain that at least two feet of the pond's depth was a thick underwater carpet of bird shit, she started to take off her shoes. As she kicked off her second sandal, she spotted a figure in green walking with purpose toward them.

"Uh-oh. Hide the duck, Lai," said May in a frantic whisper.

“What?”

“Hide the duck! Look.” She gestured with her eyes. “It’s a ranger.”

“Maybe he’s here to give us a medal for saving the duck.”

“No. He’s here to take the duck.”

As the ranger got closer, May could see that he was broad-shouldered. Perhaps Filipino. He stopped a few feet away, near enough that May caught a whiff of the man’s aftershave, a peculiar blend of sweet pickle, metal, and rose.

Lai smiled crookedly at him.

May cleared her throat. “Is there a problem, officer?”

Eyeing Louise in the lunch cooler, the ranger reached for a notepad in his back pocket. “What are you doing with that duck?”

“This is our duck,” chimed Lai, straight-faced, her eyes bright brown mirrors.

“Were you planning to leave with the duck?” asked the ranger as he started to write in the notepad.

May, terrified her wife’s doggedness might really get them in trouble, responded, “Not exactly.”

“I don’t see anything wrong with that. What’s the harm?” said Lai.

The ranger stopped writing to look at her.

“Geez. All right, look.” Lai closed the lid of the cooler with the duck inside. May knew that her wife was employing her useless out-of-sight-out-of-mind tactic. “We are saving this duck. It would die without us. And this one here,” Lai jutted her thumb at May, “thinks I have no maternal instincts!”

“It’s a serious crime to take wildlife out of the park.” The ranger clicked his ballpoint pen a few times, studied what he’d written.

Lai furrowed her brow. “If you let us take the duck, you can ask us for something that you want. Do you like ice cream? This park has great ice cream.”

The ranger crossed his arms. “You can’t take the duck.”

Ignoring him, Lai addressed May instead. “My wife, the ever-forever-right missus-with-a-plan. You can’t marry someone, tell them you don’t want a baby, and *then* take away their only duck.”

May shook her head, sighed tiredly. After seven years of adulting for two, she thought she’d seen it all with Lai. She studied her wife, who was now poking her head into the cooler and whispering to the duck. The ranger, who continued to write in his notepad, occasionally flipped through a thick pocket-sized book full of what May surmised were park rules and regulation numbers.

“I’m sorry, Lai.” May was now sweating profusely.

“You always think you know what’s best for me. Why don’t you think I am capable of doing anything?”

“Lai, this isn’t the time,” May said under her breath.

The ranger cleared his throat. “Look, it’s a felony.”

“Really? A felony?” May asked, alarmed.

“If you leave the duck, we can just forget everything. I won’t even write you a ticket.” May wondered if the ranger, having found the park code Lai had violated, had learned that dealing with Lai and the duck involved more paperwork than he was willing to process.

“No, you look,” said Lai to the ranger, her voice low, steady. “Louise is the victim here. We are saving her.” She took the duck out of the cooler and cradled it. People in the park had started to gather around to watch the drama: an old man holding a red balloon, two toddlers clutching their mother’s hands and stepping clumsily like drunkards, a teenage couple. May glanced nervously at their audience. How could her wife make such a fool of them in such a public way?

“I wish you could see yourself,” said May, “how idiotic you look when you act like this.” Pulling her cell phone from her pocket, she took her wife’s picture. The teenagers cheered. May took their picture too.

“Stop it.” Lai grabbed at May’s phone.

She dodged her wife's grasp. "No! I want everyone to remember you like this."

"Who is *everyone*?"

"EVERYONE!" May gestured at the strangers circled around them.

Lai tried to grab the phone again. "This is *my* Louise!"

May took another picture. *Click*.

"Go ahead! Take my picture! If you don't have proof, then we didn't have this fight, right? Is that what you need? Proof?" Lai turned to the crowd. "How can you all just stand there? This duck is hurt! We need to save it!"

"Stop this *now*!" exploded the ranger.

Lai crossed her arms protectively over the bird. May slid the phone into her pocket.

The ranger took a different notepad out of a pocket, one with alternating yellow and black carbon pages, and began to scribble. May could not see what he was writing, but glimpsed the word *nuisance*.

Lai freed one arm, laughed as she mimicked writing on the bird's back. "Look, May. Look. Who am I? Who am I?"

"Are you crazy, Lai?" said May. "Just let go of the duck!"

Undeterred, Lai used a deep, authoritative voice to mock the ranger. "Look at me. I'm an officer in charge, dressed like asparagus."

The ranger paused to ask, "Are you on drugs?"

"Sometimes," said Lai.

May jumped in. "No. No, she's not. No. No. Look, we're sorry. We won't take the duck. We love animals. I'm a vegetarian. Look! These shoes are *pleather*. They're so full of plastic you could drink a cup of water out of 'em! Lai doesn't want to hurt the duck. Please . . . Lai? Can you just grow up and apologize to the ranger?"

Lai did not look at either of them; instead, she continued to cradle her duck.

"Lai. Let. Go. Of. The. Duck."

The ranger began to lecture Lai on the sanctity of city laws used to protect animals from people like her, pointing out that her tampering with the duck was more harmful to the bird's survival than the wilderness it lived in. As he tried to pry the animal out of Lai's arms, the duck stretched out its neck, puffed its chest, then defecated; green-white goo leaked through Lai's fingers, onto the ranger's boot.

"Shit!" the ranger shouted, his face turning crimson.

"Literally!" Lai laughed hysterically. "There's poo on your shoe!"

The ranger, who was at least six inches taller than Lai, made another grab for the duck and scratched Lai's arm in the process. Struggling against the ranger, May's wife held tightly to the feathery body. The duck squawked loudly when Lai's finger accidentally poked its mangled eye socket. "I'm so sorry, Louise!" Lai cried out. May's heart squeezed when her wife wiped angry tears from her own eyes with the back of her forearm, trying not to get poop on her cheek. Pushing away the ranger's outstretched hand, Lai lifted the duck close to her face, practically burying her nose in the filthy feathers; she squinted into the duck's empty eye socket. May could tell that Lai was trying to assess whether the duck was in pain, whether she'd really hurt the animal. As the ranger reached once again for the duck, May stared at the scratches on her wife's arm—she pictured jackals, coyotes, rabid dogs, all the things that ate injured ducks. And when she saw that Lai's abrasions were turning from magenta to a dark oozing red, she reached into the tangle of authority and feather and squawk.

"Stay back!" roared the ranger as he yanked the bird roughly out of Lai's hands.

The park "jail" was a hot office in a converted metal railroad car on the other side of the pond. While the ranger filled out a stack of paperwork and charged Lai's credit card to pay for her \$250 fine, Lai sat calmly on a hard wooden bench, studying the room.

"This place needs a different look . . . something a little less . . .

industrial,” she said, eyeing the corrugated walls and tiny window behind the ranger’s head.

“Industrial? That’s what you have to say?” asked May. “We missed a half day of work, fifty deadlines. No one knows where we are. For all they know, we fell into that disgusting pond and died! I’m starving. We were almost arrested because you couldn’t let go, and you’re worried about how they decorate?”

“When I was a kid, my parents taught me how to decorate. For a party, it’s got to be festive. It’s got to have the right ambiance. When my family got together, we’d have music. We’d do menu planning, nice lights. All the cleaning and setting up the flowers. We’d do ambiance. You can’t have awful food and good ambiance. And you can’t have awful ambiance and good food. But with *your* parents, god, there’s no ambiance *and* there’s no good food. It’s always so messy. How could you grow up living like that? That’s why I don’t like going there. There’s no ambiance. It’s always the same thing. Barbecue sesame chicken, rice, and soggy salad.”

May, who had not been raised in a stylish neighborhood like the kind her wife had grown up in—where posh grocery markets never smelled of fish, where there was a posh university and Lai could blend in with a colorful backdrop of posh students and posh professors in posh coffee shops—said, “Lai. Life isn’t a party.”

Lai signed the receipt, bent down to pick up the empty cooler, and gave the ranger a tired wave before heading for the door.

The sun was lower in the sky, and the park was now filled with families setting up for evening cookouts.

“When my family got together,” said Lai, “we’d have dance parties. We’d tease each other. We wanted to enjoy the time and have fun, and we did it successfully.”

“A duck wasn’t going to change our lives.”

“I just wanted to bring home something magical. I want there to be magic in our home.”

May thought of what life without magic was really like; it was being raised by immigrant parents who worked impossible hours

at a liquor market to keep a roof over their heads. She thought of how her parents, who were interested only in teaching eight-year-old May about “real” life, voiced disapproval or resentment when May tried to escape her family’s struggles by going to imaginary worlds in books her parents did not have time to read, to bubbly bathtub spaceships they could not envision, to cardboard-box castles they could not believe in.

May had spent her twenties battling her father’s homophobia, her adolescence contending with her own pimply teenage confusion, and her childhood battling her mother’s stringent expectations. She struggled constantly with being raised by people who consistently pointed out her exponential vulnerabilities. Now, as an adult, May could breathe; each day was rational, linear, simple—all right angles and even numbers. She loved math because it was predictable yet imaginative. In accounting, the math told a story with probable endings that helped you make sense of your past and helped you plan for your future. May was finally living a life filled with stability, plus lunches in the park, plus diligent work, and math—math *at work*. For May, becoming a parent would have meant relearning how to see the world through the eyes of their child, vicariously experiencing their teenage failures, their tender heart’s neediness. Going through this once was enough.

Though May did not know if she really wanted Lai’s answer to her next question, she found herself asking, “Isn’t it enough that we’re together?”

Lai placed the cooler back on the ground. She dug around in her pockets in search of her cell phone, which she held in her hand but did not turn on. She squatted and untied and then retied her shoe. She ran her fingers through her hair, picked a feather from the oily tangles on her head. Finally, she looked up at May, then said, “It’s not enough.”

“Look at everything we’ve gone through just to be together,” said May.

“I know,” said Lai.

“My dad stopped speaking to me. Your siblings treated you like a mental patient when you first came out. Fuck. My hands still shake when we go home for Christmas together. Having a kid will not make your family stop tiptoeing around you. And having a kid will not make my dad speak to me.”

Lai squeezed May’s hand. When she spoke, her breath smelled of warm milk. “Forget about your dad. Don’t you want to give your mom grandkids?”

“Does it matter? I’m not the son. You’re not the son. And our parents are too Chinese. You know that shit matters to them.”

“Why are *you* so Chinese? Maybe you just need time to see what it might be like.”

“Like what might be like?”

“To be a family,” said Lai.

“I don’t need more time. I found my family. I already have it when I’m with you.”

“Give it more time.”

When Lai and May returned home, the women sat on their front step in the growing dusk. May passed her wife a lit joint, looked up into the sky. “What a nightmare.”

“There’s something I want to say,” said Lai after taking a deep inhale.

“Not now.”

Lai released the smoke. “Me and the duck.”

“I didn’t know who you were today.”

“We were outlaws! Like Bonnie and Clyde.”

“Clyde’s a dude.” May took a drag off the joint.

“Fine. We were like Thelma and Louise. Whatever. But I miss my duck. I already miss her,” said Lai.

“I hate that name. Thelma.”

“Okay. Fine. We were Louise and Louise. Does it matter?”

The two women sat in silence. Lai put her arm around May’s shoulder. May leaned in, pressed her nose into Lai’s cheek,

breathed in deeply, admired the lingering scent of salty sweat, the park's grassiness, and their passionate, feathery day. She kissed Lai's ear, tugged her earlobe with her teeth. Lai giggled, pushed her away, and sighed. "Do you think I'm a fuckup?"

"No. I keep thinking about Louise shitting on the ranger's boot."

Lai laughed. "No. I mean, what are we doing?"

"We learn from our fuckups."

"I don't like to think about the past. I believe in the future," said Lai.

"How can you believe in something that doesn't exist yet? That's . . ."

"Remember what I gave you last Christmas?"

"The dream journal? The one you filled with dirty jokes because I kept forgetting to write in it?"

"You mean the one you *refused* to write your dreams in because 'Why write down something that didn't really happen?'" Lai chuckled, rubbed May's back. "No, I mean the earthquake preparedness kit," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And you loved it."

"So?"

"*That's* preparing for the future. Right now, there's no shaking. No trembling. Everything flat and level. Clear skies." Lai smiled.

May wrinkled her brow. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"It means that there will be cracked sidewalks, collapsed bridges in our future. That's what. You can't see it?"

"No."

"Why not?" asked Lai.

"All I see right now is your sick duck."

"*Our* sick duck."

"No. Just a duck. A half-blind, limping duck." May played with the bones in her ankles, hard as marbles. Ran her finger up a long surgery scar from when she'd broken every bone in her leg after

tripping on a newspaper and flying down two flights of stairs. She thought of her seven long months in the hospital, doctors driving pins into her knee and ankle, rebuilding her leg with porcine cartilage and tendons—how during her recovery, the pain meds made her crave fermented cabbage and coffee ice cream and apple pie, how she'd loved her selfish whims. She remembered joking with her nurses when she was high on morphine, half her body cast in heavy plaster: she stretched the nurses' funny names in her mouth—*Bee-a-treese*, *Moan-ah*, *Soo-sun*—wished aloud that she was a slug because slugs didn't have bones to break, and asked if the surgeon knew the name of her donor pig.

During her months of recovery, May gained nearly thirty pounds. Lai lavished attention on May, spoon-fed her heaping bowls of buttery mashed potatoes, hand-fed her slices of smoked cheddar and Marcona almonds roasted in peppery olive oil and rosemary. When pain kept May up at night, sounds of the hospital beeping in her ears, she would stare at the ceiling and try to listen to Lai's snoring in the cot beside her bed. Instead of counting sheep, she counted pigs. And instead of jumping over a fence, her pig was queued up behind other pigs, an expression of terror in its eyes as its brethren were butchered and dressed right before it. May worried that she'd inherited their fear, their pain. Was her ungrateful body trying to reject the pig's sacrifice? May promised herself: If she survived those breakable months, if she could one day walk without pain, she would honor the pig's life by living her own in the way that she'd always wanted.

May stretched out her leg, wiggled her toes in her sandals, rotated her ankle first clockwise, then counterclockwise. *Click-click-oink*. Metal and bone and pig. But no pain. "Let's go inside."

Lai smacked the step with her palm. "I won't go in until you tell me that you can see it."

"See what?"

"What our family could've been."

"With a duck?" asked May.

“Yes. No. Well, I guess. Just . . . our family.” May thought about Louise, her tattered feathers, her scab and missing eye and toe. She thought about Lai’s desire for the uncertainty of motherhood, for filling up their lives with motherly duties and birdie pleasures. She thought about having to take care of another living thing that she didn’t understand, that she wasn’t sure if she would ever understand, that would fill her life with more unanswerable questions. And then she pictured Lai cradling the mangled duck, crooning lullabies into its empty eye socket. She pictured the stray green feathers she would find in the cuffs of her pants every day at work, the wet taste of pond deep in her fingers—the surprise of softened wood, green water, mist.

“May?” Lai bumped her shoulder against May’s, then buried her nose in May’s hair and inhaled exaggeratedly, smacked her lips as if she were tasting something delicious. May smiled at her wife’s guilelessness and knew that, yes, she (May) would be a great mother. Yes, she could harvest life out of a garden grown of her own tears. But that, yes, Lai would be her motherly end.

Lai, who noticed May’s smile, clapped her hands. “You saw it, didn’t you? You saw it!”

“Can we go inside? I’m exhausted.”

“I know you saw it!”

“What do you want from me?”

“You can . . . be up in the air! Turn any way you want!”

“And?” asked May.

“And whatever. As long as you’re doing something. Bending. Something! Okay?”

May started to stand, but Lai tugged her shirt hem.

“Loma Prieta. You remember it?” asked Lai.

May sat back down. “Of course.”

“It was 1989. In the parking lot. I was nine. Just skipping and skipping. And there’s this man. He has no *fucking* clue what’s happening. The whole world is rocking! He just sees me in his rear view, and leaps out of his Volvo, shouts, ‘Were you jumping on my

car?!' But I was skipping . . . didn't feel the earthquake . . . up in the air." Lai took a long drag from the joint, held her breath like a champion swimmer. She closed her eyes to exhale. "Think about our whole life as being up in the air. And we are Thelma and Thelma."

"Louise, Louise."

"You are you. In the air. Big and light."