# The Love Wife

*Gish Jen*

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# PART I

I

# *Lan Arrives*

BLONDIE / The day Lan came, you could still say whose family this was—Carnegie's and mine.

We had three children. Two beautiful Asian girls—or should I say Asian American—Wendy, age nine, and Lizzy, age fifteen, both adopted; and one bio boy, Bailey, age thirteen months. Carnegie's ancestry being Chinese, and mine European, Bailey was half half, as they say—or is there another term by now? With less mismatch in it—'half half' having always spoken to me more of socks than of our surprise child, come to warm the lap of our middle years.

Our family was, in any case, an improvisation. *The new American family*, our neighbor Mitchell once proclaimed, tottering drunk up our deck stairs. But for Carnegie and me, it was simply something we made. Something we chose.

His mother, Mama Wong, thought this unnatural.

*The trouble with you people is not enough periods,* she liked to say. *You can say I think like Chinese, but I tell you. A child should grow up, say this*

*is my mother, period. This is my father, period. Otherwise that family look like not real.*

Always good about assigning blame, she blamed the family on me.

*I know Blondie. Everything a nut do, she do too. She is not even a real nut, like her friend Gabriela. She is only try-to-be-nut.*

To which my friend Gabriela would say: *Janie. Your name is Janie, I can't believe you let Mama Wong call you Blondie all these years. And Carnegie too! That is like the definition of low self-esteem.*

I tried to tell her that it was my choice—that I liked nicknames. I tried to tell her that she could think of Blondie as my married name, as if I'd changed my first name instead of my last. For that was the way I was—or thought I was, before Lan came. An open person. A flexible person. Had I not been voted Most Sympathetic to Others in high school?

CARNEGIE / Our very own Blondie had, in her day, held the Kleenex for the homecoming queen.

But, whatever. Gabriela minded the Blondie bit far more than she minded being called, herself, a nut. She being the first to admit that she had gone back to the earth two or three times, maybe more. Also that she had spent years finding herself without much progress.

BLONDIE / *At least you have your family,* Gabriela used to say, thumbing through the personals. She circled possibles in pink; her red hair looped out the back of her baseball cap.

At least I had my family.

I was forty-five when Gabriela last said that; Carnegie was thirty-nine. It was 1999. We lived in a nice town with good schools, outside of Boston—a town within easy driving distance, as we liked to say, of both city and ocean.

At least I had my family.

Every happy family has its innocence. I suppose, looking back, this was ours.

Back then, our bird feeder was the most popular in town. In the snow we could have a hundred birds or more. But squirrels came too sometimes, more and more squirrels as the years went on. I fixed a tin pie



plate to the top of the pole from which the feeder hung; I greased the pole itself. Yet still the hungry birds huddled in the bushes, some days—too many days—twittering. Clumps of snow pitched themselves from the branches as the birds refined their positions. Meanwhile, the squirrels leapt at the feeder from the trees, often from two or three directions at once. They gyrated midair—hurtling, twisting, flailing—only to plummet, midflight, to the ground. It was only every so often that one would make it to the seed, tail twitching; but then how the feeder would shudder and swing! Seed flying in black sheets onto the white snow.

— Squirrels will triumph, said Carnegie, observing this. — It's only natural.

But the seeds, surprisingly, sprouted in the spring—and wasn't that natural too? I had assumed the seeds sterile. They ought to have been sterile. One day I noticed in the grass, though, a rosetta of sunflower seedlings—each topped with a little leaf bow tie—which were almost immediately no longer seedlings; which were daily, miraculously, larger and larger—until there they loomed, modestly huge-headed, fantastic with a rightness I wanted to call beauty.

It was these that I saw when I sat up in bed, the early fall day that Lan came to us. Our house was an old house, with enormously wide floorboards and, between them, correspondingly wide cracks. I toed one of these and felt, for all our housekeeping, graininess. The children thumped hollering down the stairs; Carnegie called for reinforcements, meaning me. Still, for a half second more I enjoyed my flowers. In one way, they were all wrong—a sudden haphazard clump in the middle of the yard. And yet how I drank them in, through the window screen, and the sunlit fog—that awkward glory. So crowded; disorderly; addled. They looked as if they'd dropped their contact lenses, every one of them, and all at the same time. These were the homely, brown-faced kind of sunflowers—some twelve feet tall, single-stalked, scraggly-leaved. Their huge heads knocked into one another. How strange they were—that bird feeder still nestled among their knees, like something they might trip on. And yet how authentic, somehow. How blissfully undeterred; full of the triumph of having become, from the seed of themselves, themselves.

Would this Lan—her name was Lan, meaning 'orchid'—like them?

Back when I was a sophomore in college, I spent a summer in Hong Kong, studying Mandarin. A summer was not a long time. Still, I did learn, a little, about how the Chinese in general prized the cultured. The cultivated.

These sunflowers, meanwhile, were anything but.

Of course, Mainlanders were different than Hong Kongers. The younger generations were different than the older. The less educated were different than the more. Daoists were different. Lan herself could be different.

*In this family, we do not generalize,* my mother would say. *In this family, we keep an open mind.*

Still, in my heart of hearts, I wished that this Lan would never come to behold them at all. I wished not to have to explain their beauty.

Now I believed, please understand, in openness. In the importance of cultural exchange, especially what with globalization and whatnot. My family had always hosted exchange students. And whatever the circumstances under which this Lan came, she was, after all, a relative of Carnegie's. Family.

Yet if I could add a word to our language, it would be a word for this: the peace a grown woman feels on the days—the rare days—when she needs to consider no view but her own.

WENDY / Dad has the windshield wipers on but like no one can see on account of the fog. How can the plane even land, says Lizzy, but Dad says there are special instruments, no one has to be able to see anything.

— It's like jumping, he says, can't we land on the floor with our eyes closed?

— A plane doesn't have feet like ours, says Lizzy. That's reassuring but not true.

— Oh really, says Dad. And where did you learn that?

— Some things you know yourself if you're smart enough to realize it, she says.

— What's reassuring? I say.

— Oh, use your brain, says Lizzy.

— *Ah-ah-ah-choo!* says Bailey.

Baby Bailey is so little he still has this mirror in front of him in the car. Now he sneezes at the baby in the mirror again—*ah-ah-ah-chooo!*—and laughs and laughs, loving himself so much that he drools. Dad says he's like Narcissus making his own pool, but then doesn't tell us what that means. In the fullness of time you will get my jokes, he says. In the fullness of time.



— Maybe it will lift, Mom says. Let's hope for the best.

— Maybe it will lift, says Lizzy, imitating her. — Let's hope . . .

— Elizabeth Bailey Wong, says Dad. Stop now.

He twists his head clear around like an owl practically, so we can see how his neck skin always wrinkles in a kind of spiral when he does that. Dad's parents were Chinese Chinese, like from China, so he has the same kind of skin as me and Lizzy, soft smooth like a hill of snow nobody's walked on, only kind of tea-colored in the summer, and creased like in a couple of places, it makes you realize that every time he turns around he does the exact same thing. Over and over. But he keeps on doing it anyway, just like Lizzy keeps on being Lizzy, if she didn't we'd probably all float up to the ceiling with happiness and bang our heads.

— Maybe it will lift, says Lizzy one more time, in her imitation-Mom voice, and then says, in her regular voice: — When I grow up will I also spout inanities out of nowhere?

No answer.

— And what if we don't like her? says Lizzy. Can we send her back to China?

— Can we send her back to China, sighs Mom.

Lizzy is wearing a nose ring and earrings, and henna tattoos in the shape of snakes. Thank god the tattoos at least wash off and that short short blond hair will grow out too, Mom says, but of course not in front of Lizzy, because she completely knows what Lizzy will say back. Namely, *Why shouldn't I bleach my hair, it's no different than you highlighting yours, and besides why shouldn't I be blond when my mother is blond?*

So instead Mom just says things like how she doesn't like that phrase, sending people back to China. Because people say that even to people who speak perfect English and have been here a long time, she says, and how are you going to like it if people say that to you?

— They aren't going to say that to me, says Lizzy.

— We hope, says Mom.

She doesn't twist around like Dad to talk to us, she just looks in the mirror on the back side of the car visor. Mom is like the complete opposite of Dad. Dad is muscle-y. If you threw him in the ocean he would sink plunk to the bottom, while Mom would bob right up, Dad calls her za-za vavoomy. And she's like colorful. We can see her in the mirror, those blue blue eyes and that blond blond hair and those pink pink lips. It's the complete farm girl look, Lizzy says, that being where her family is from originally, on her mom's side anyway, a farm in Wisconsin where people were real and not phony. Of course she herself grew up in Connecticut. Still who would've thought she'd end up in a place where people actually buy those black designer diaper bags? That's what she wants to know sometimes, I guess she always figured she'd kind of drift back to the farm someday.

But like here she is.

— We hope, says Mom. But even if they don't, in our family we don't talk about sending people back to China. Because some of the people who get told that aren't from China to begin with.

— Some of them are from New Jersey, says Dad.

— Some of them aren't even of Chinese origin, says Mom.

— You mean some of them are who-knows-what, says Lizzy. Right? Japanese, or Vietnamese.

— Right.

— Or mixed-up soup du jour, like me. Right?

— Right.

— You're too sensitive, says Lizzy.

Mom flips the visor back up, making that little light next to the mirror blink out. Which now that it's gone was the brightest thing I've seen all day, I see that's how gray it is out.

— And how is it that the honky in the family gets to explain this? Mom asks the air.

Dad puts the windshield wipers on high even though it isn't really raining.

— You are a superior being married to a quasi-Neanderthal who has yet to internalize the mores of the middle class, that's how, he says, turning to her. And when she doesn't turn back, he puts his eyebrows up and down, he has these big thick eyebrows like caterpillars. Then he says, quiet like: — I do beg your patience.

His cell phone rings, this week the tune is 'America the Beautiful,' which he says is for the benefit of Lizzy and me, he wants to make sure we know more than 'Afunga Alafia.' Not that he has anything against Swahili, Swahili is very nice, he says, a language spoken by many.



— Sounds great, he says now, into the phone, in his work voice. — Just make sure the visuals are in order and . . . exactly.

Bailey starts crying, so Lizzy plugs him up with a passy.

— Anyway, she's from a little town someplace between Shanghai and Beijing, Mom says. Which are cities in China.

— You told us that already, says Lizzy.

But Mom keeps going over the whole thing anyway like it's what to do in case of a fire or something.

— She's very nice and she's our relative, says Mom. She'll be here for a couple of years, helping with you guys, and we are all going to like her.

— That's reassuring but not necessarily true, says Lizzy.

— No one can say anything around here, says Dad.

— That's not true either, says Lizzy.

— So what is true? I say. If you're so smart.

LIZZY / — Parents are liars, I said. When they're worried they reassure you and they steal your Halloween candy if you're not careful.

— Nobody stole your Halloween candy, said Dad. If you're talking about last year.

— I was careful, I said.

WENDY / —Some was missing from mine, I say.

I look at the black back of Dad's head, and then at the blond back of Mom's.

— I don't even like Reese's peanut butter cups, says Dad.

— Oh, for heaven's sake, Carnegie, says Mom.

— Nor do I care for Kit Kats, he says.

— Honestly! says Mom. You are my fourth child.

— *So sue me, sue me, what can you do me,* sings Dad. *I . . . a-a-ate . . . them.*

His cell phone rings again, we can hear the words in our heads. *Ohh beau-ti-ful for spacious . . .*

— Will you put that thing on vibrate, says Mom. And when Dad

doesn't answer: — Honey, please. Taking phone calls night and day is not going to help. If there are going to be layoffs, there are going to be layoffs.

— Thank you for that consoling insight, says Dad. It will bring me almost as much solace on a sleepless night as knowing the Great Greenspan saw this coming.

His phone rings again. *Ohh beau-ti-ful for . . .*

— And may I just point out that I turned mine off even though I have that board meeting tomorrow, says Mom.

—*Nobler than springtime, are you,* sings Dad then. *Sweeter than Kit Kats, are you . . .*

But he shuts his phone off and hands it to Mom. She puts it in the glove compartment, closing it up with kind of a bang because it doesn't work that great. Of course it falls back open again anyway, so she hits it again, only more gently, which works. There's that click. Then she looks over her shoulder and says: — Your dad is a joker.

— Better a joker than a joke, he says back.

— And all because his mother named him Carnegie, Mom says. Carnegie Wong.

— Who was Carnegie again? I ask.

But Mom says: — Who else but Mama Wong would do such a thing? Honestly.

Dad says his problem isn't just his problem.

— Don't you think at some point in life everyone has to ask, Whose joke is this?

— No, says Mom.

— That's because your family is from the Midwest where the eternal questions are, Is it going to snow? And, Is it going to rain? says Dad. Not to mention, Is it going to stop?

— The difference between us, says Mom, is that I can at least imagine a faith that's not laughable.

Road sign. Road sign. They pop out of the fog like out of nowhere, then get bigger and bigger until they're gone. Like *poof.*

— Whereas belief in the SATs generally lasts 1.0 generations, agrees Dad finally.

— Aren't the SATs that test Lizzy has to take? I ask.

The windshield wipers keep on wiping and wiping as if that's their homework and they just have to do it.



. . .

The airport is big and washable, that's what Lizzy says, every single surface is easy to clean because of all the people. People are dirty. They stick gum under the seats, they spill coffee, everything would get disgusting if it weren't for chemicals.

— Our Lizzy, truth teller, says Dad, cracking his knuckles. — Maybe you will be an investigative journalist.

— Journalists are liars, says Lizzy. All they are about is does it make a good story and the truth is not always a good story.

— Lizzy, says Mom. Please.

— No, don't stop, says Dad. Just try to say what you have to say in a way people can hear.

— You mean, in a way Mom can hear, says Lizzy.

— Mom and me.

— Hmm, she says. And then she surprises everybody by saying it again, louder: — Hmm.

There are no shadows in the middle part of the airport, and that makes everything sound funny.

Mom's bouncing Bailey and squinting at the writing on the screen. The diaper bag is swinging big and heavy behind her, it wouldn't be so heavy except for the bottles and ice packs she has to lug around now that Bailey weaned himself out of nowhere.

— Of course, I knew one day would be the last time, she told her friend Gabriela on the phone. Gabriela was in Italy, but still they talked and e-mailed all the time. — But I mean, for him to wean himself. A bottle's just a bottle. I wanted to keep him a little longer, that's all.

She was crying.

LIZZY / — Poor Mom, Wendy said.

But I said: — You see? She was never that close to us, even when we were babies. Not like she was to Bailey. Face facts, it was different.

WENDY / Though maybe Mom is going to be exactly the same with Bailey as us when he grows up, that's what I think. Maybe with Bailey she's going to be like, *We'll talk about it after supper, okay?* And, *I'm sorry, pumpkin, I know this was our special time, but this is the life of a working mother.* And maybe Dad is going to be like, *Tell me again, I'm listening, it*

*just takes time to open a heart. Because first you have to stop. Like this.* And he'll take a big breath. *Whew. Now tell me again, no laughing. What is it?*

LIZZY / Or maybe they won't.

But anyway—the diaper bag.

WENDY / — Can't you lighten that thing up? Dad says.

But Mom says, squinting: — With what time? And you're welcome to clean out the refrigerator while you're at it.

So that Dad has only just taken the bag from Mom's shoulder and is still mushing it into the mesh thingy under the stroller when she starts hurrying. Bailey is bouncing and her boobs are bouncing, and her white shirt is flying all around her like there's a big wind, and she's turning pink in the face. It's like her lips and her skin are matching, so that her eyes are as blue as this special-effect laser beam.

— She's here already, Mom says. Early! In the fog! Whoever would have thought she would be early?

— Early! we yell. Early! Her plane must have special instruments!

And we are running down the halls, running and running.

CARNEGIE / Selected preconceptions, wholly inexcusable:

1. That she would have an unfortunate perm.
2. That she would cook better than Mama Wong but require education as to the horrors of cholesterol.
3. That she would be reliable.
4. That she would look half her age.
5. That she would mend.
6. That she would speak Chinese.
7. That she would eschew center stage.
8. That she would favor hot-water bottles.
9. That she would wear sweater vests.
10. That she would root for both sides of ball games.

She was indeed capable, as it turned out, of rooting for both sides of ball games.

And she did indeed speak Chinese. Mandarin, of course, as well as selected other dialects.





And she did indeed look half her age. No gray, and nary a wrinkle, thanks to that Asian predisposition toward subcutaneous fat. You could easily have taken her for a slightly older cousin of the girls, though I knew her to be forty-six. Seven years older than me, a year older than Blondie.

What a surprise, though, that she moved as arrestingly as she did. When we first spotted her—or what we at least thought was her, from her picture—she was proceeding along ho-hum with the stream of other passengers from California, headed past the arrival gates toward the public waiting area. A medium-tall figure in black, slim. Low ponytail, long neck, Modigliani-like shoulder slope.

There was a clog and ensuing backup; some geezer's shopping bag had lost its bottom. Sundry people helpfully chased down the surprising array of rolling items, while others looked on. Lan alone began then to disappear, then reappear, slipping calmly through the confusion. Let others mill; she wove and sidestepped with quiet aplomb. Accustomed to crowds, it appeared. Disappearing, reappearing, disappearing, reappearing. Stopping just once, disconcertingly, to spit into an open trash can. A quick, perfect little shot; compared to expectorations I'd seen in China, this was positively elegant.

She disappeared again.

Then materialized out past security, a few yards from us. A plainish woman, neither pleasing nor displeasing. Face on the long side, eyes on the large side, nose on the flat side, mouth on the full side. High cheekbones, one on either side. Haggard, and yet somehow on the alert, as if in a war zone. Nothing dangled from her. How dangly everyone around her by comparison, how idiotically overaccessorized. And how she held herself; with what sweetly intimidating posture. There was nothing Chinese about it. Only Lan held herself this way, as if bent on disconnecting her head from her feet.

— Lan! we called. Lan!

She suspended, briefly, her travel.

What was it that crossed her face then?

Maybe she was simply jet-lagged. Maybe she was taken aback by Lizzy's nose ring and tattoos, or by her blond hair. Or maybe it was the all-blond lineup of Blondie, Bailey, and Lizzy that surprised her. (It so happened that black-haired Wendy and I stood a little in back of the others.)

Later we learned too that though we'd sent her a picture of us, thanks to some semi-predictable postal vagrancy she hadn't received it. In any case, there ensued some manner of small-scale system failure. You could see her hit RESET.

— How do you do, she said, a moment later, recomposed.

She clutched her purse as if it was full of contraband she had managed to sneak through customs.

— Welcome to America! How was your flight? we said.

— Hello, she said again. Smiling a smile we would soon recognize, a certain lopsided half smile.

— Are you Lan? I asked, suddenly wondering.

— Nice meet you. She bobbed her head.

Blondie resurrected her Chinese: — *Nin shi bu shi jiao Lin Lan?*

Lan relaxed her grip slightly and said in Chinese: —*You speak Chinese!*

— *I do*, said Blondie.

— *You speak very well.*

— *I studied for several years in college*, said Blondie.

A long pause; Lan receded a bit. That half smile.

BLONDIE / Perhaps I was supposed to say, *Nali, nali*—meaning 'Where? where?'—when she said that about speaking well. That was the Chinese script, after all. Perhaps I should have denied being able to speak, or insisted I spoke badly, terribly, at most one or two words.

Or perhaps I should have said something that started with *you*. She had said something *you;* perhaps instead of starting with *I,* I should have answered, likewise, *You. You are too kind.*

CARNEGIE / — Don't forget the blond thing, I said. A blonde speaking Chinese. That might have thrown her. Or maybe she thought you were putting yourself above her.

BLONDIE / — Why in heaven's name would I do that? I said.

CARNEGIE / — I just know that's what my mother would have thought, I said. She was very binary in that way. Always looking down on someone, or else convinced someone was looking down on her. As if all the world was a ladder to her, and we but poor climbers on it.



BLONDIE / He said: — Lan might have wondered too whether she was a family member exactly—if by 'nanny' we didn't mean *ayi*. A servant. And what did it signify that she was being brought over on a student visa when she wasn't a student per se?

— But wasn't that just the easiest kind of visa to get? I said.

She was dressed, in any case, all in black, like Lizzy, yet with entirely different effect. Everything Lizzy wore was torn or altered in some way—in-your-face clothes. Lan's clothes, in contrast, seemed gotten together with care. Everything looked new—her thick nylons, and high-heeled, leatherette sandals; her narrow skirt, and V-neck sweater. The sweater was pointelle, with a flame-stitch bottom. The skirt matched. Neither fit very well. Even her undergarments seemed not quite hers—her bust preceding her in an odd way.

CARNEGIE / A distinctly cold-war affair, that brassiere, suggesting advanced industrial engineering and projectile menace.

BLONDIE / You could tell—even we could tell—that she was not exactly from Shanghai. You could tell that she was not even from a city proper, but from the outskirts of a city—the sort of town where people have more than they used to, but can hardly be called rich.

She appeared an inch or two taller than Lizzy, who was a good five-four. And yet how similar they seemed. All in black, as I've said, and willowy, though Lizzy was longer-waisted. Or no, maybe Lan looked more like Wendy—so I thought when Wendy walked up. Wendy hadn't started developing yet. You could see, though, what a slender thing she was always going to be—a wonder to someone of my shape. Though shorter than Lan, she had similar torso-to-leg proportions. They both had too that shiny black hair.

Wendy, thankfully, was not wearing black. Wendy still wore, then, what I bought her. A flowered shirt, and flowered shorts. Flowered sandals. One thing good about her being a somewhat shy child was that she was, at nine, still mine.

Still mine, I say. And yet from the first moment I saw the three of them together, I thought they seemed, despite their differences, a set. Was that racist? Like kitchen canisters, I thought. S-M-L.

Carnegie and Lan chatted awkwardly by the luggage carousel. Then no one said anything. Then Lizzy said something and, amazingly, Lan smiled and said something back—about Michael Jordan, of all things, and about somebody else—a Yao Ming?—her manner surprisingly warm. There was another exchange I didn't catch. How ringed, still, Lan's person with vigilance; and yet her face, as she began to relax, flickered with quiet life.

— Such beautiful skin, you have, she told Lizzy. You must know how to eat. Have good water too.

Lan said this smiling gently, gesturing gently. Her movements like a murmur—not making a big positive point, as Lizzy always claimed I did. Lizzy in turn beamed, tilting her head down shyly, so that a roll of fat appeared under her chin. I hadn't known she still had that roll of fat; suddenly I saw her, a toddler again, demanding I follow her around and around the patio. *I engine! You caboose!*

— How clever you are. I can see by your eyes, clever, she told Wendy, a little while later. — People should listen to you.

— I like to play chess, said Wendy, looking at the floor.

No fat roll under her chin. Though she had been a fat baby in China, she'd thinned out almost as soon as she got to America.

— Will you teach me to play? asked Lan.

— I'll teach you right away! said Wendy. I'm a good teacher! I take lessons! You can practice on the computer! At school I have to play with the boys because none of the girls will play, but on the computer there are these websites.

— You teach me, said Lan. I practice with you.

It was impossible not to like her. I tried to smile at her, and to gauge whether she was smiling back. And sometimes I thought so. Yet still, as the luggage snaked around, I remained outside the circle of her charm. Perhaps this was because I was occupied with walking Bailey. Hunched over him like some newfangled plant support, I helped him step step step his way to the stairs—Bailey loved stairs. He wore his brand-new white leather tie-up shoes; his hot fists gripped my fingers.

— Look what you can do! Lan cooed at Bailey as, on one tour, we slowly passed her way.



Right, left, right, left.

— Such a big big boy, said Lan on the next round.

She touched his cheek—her nails were beautifully groomed, oval and pink. Bailey, shy, motioned to be picked up. But once in my arms he cooed back, showing off his teeth. He batted his lashes and clobbered my upper arm, mysteriously emphatic.

— Why everybody talk to baby instead of talk to big girls? she asked Lizzy and Wendy. — Have you ever notice that?

Bailey's face crumpled then—at what no one could say. He wailed; the girls showed Lan his pacifier. They showed her the stroller too, and how it folded up. They let her try it once herself. She folded it perfectly, without coaching, the first try.

— In China, this kind cart, many people have it, she explained.

— Really? said the girls.

— How do you call it?

— Stroller, said Lizzy. Strol-ler.

— Stro-er, said Lan.

— Strol-ler. Strol-ler.

Her one suitcase arrived damaged. Lan squatted gracefully, placing the suitcase on the floor. The girls squatted beside her as if they did this every day. The suitcase had been wrapped in plastic. She opened this, not by tearing the wrapping, but by slicing it neatly on the diagonal, with a pair of fold-up scissors. Nothing seemed to be missing. Still Carnegie strode off, indignant, damaged bag on a luggage cart, to demand the airline do something. We trailed him like ducklings, gathering obediently outside the claims office until, triumphant, he reappeared, with the announcement that he had arranged for the bag to be replaced with a new one.

At this, Lan smiled her first full, true smile—a completely sweet, open, girlish smile, so guileless and lovely that Carnegie Wong, my husband of fourteen years, blushed.

WENDY / In the car she insists on sitting in the third seat, in the way back, so that Mom and Dad can sit together and we three kids can sit together too, in the middle seat, not that we want to. She doesn't talk at all in the beginning, but when we talk to her she turns around, and after a while she talks too.

— Do you have favorite color? she asks.

— Guess, says Lizzy.

And Lanlan—she makes us call her Lanlan—says: — Black.

Or at least sort of. She doesn't say 'black' exactly, really she says 'brack,' but we understand her because we like her.

— You knew because I'm wearing black! says Lizzy.

Lanlan nods. — Black very nice, she says. Do you like draw picture?

— Yes! says Lizzy. But how did you know that?

— Black very—how do you say?—artist, says Lanlan.

— You're wearing black! I say. You're wearing Lizzy's favorite color.

— Wow, she says. Or do you say Wow-wee.

— Wow, says Lizzy.

— I see, she says, though this frown like nests in her face. — How about Gee whiz? Or Gee, what. Gee willikers.

— Gee willikers? says Lizzy.

— Better stick with wow, I say.

— Wow, she says.

— Are you artistic? Lizzy asks.

— Me? Oh, no no, she says. Then she says: — I can see American fashion is not like Chinese fashion.

— We have bellbottoms, I tell her, and flower power!

— Not everybody wears that stuff, says Lizzy. Like I personally don't pay attention to fashion at all.

— In China, we have fashion too, says Lanlan. But I am like you. Do not pay too much attention.

— Not even a little? I say.

— Well, okay, she says, smiling. — A little. Last few weeks. Now I am—how to say—fashion victim.

— I pay a little attention too, says Lizzy.

— A little? I say. A lot! That's all she knows, is fashion! A lot of people dress like Lizzy. Like her friend Xanadu. Ask her about Xanadu, Xanadu is practically her twin!

— That is totally untrue, says Lizzy.

— Wow, says Lanlan calmly. And how about you, Wendy? Are you fashion victim?

She talks and talks to us, patting Bailey on the head every now and then even though he's asleep.



— My turn! My turn! Lizzy and I begin to shout at the same time, but when Lanlan puts her finger in the air, even Lizzy shuts up like magic.

— My English not so good, Lanlan keeps saying. I only know a few phrases.

— Like what? says Lizzy.

— 'Call 911,' says Lan. 'In case of emergency call 911.'

— Your English is fantastic! we tell her. Did you study in college?

She smiles a little, then says: — Not exactly college. But like college. Usually we say university.

Instead of 'usually' she says 'u-ally.'

— Like university? we say.

— In China, many people, maybe they not so rich, or have difficulty pass exam, try study by self, she says. See teacher every once a while.

— Wow, we say.

— Can get degree this way. Of course, take some time.

— Did you get a degree? we ask. Did you?

She doesn't answer but just smiles and sits there kind of ladylike with her back straight up and her knees pressed together, so that her lap is like a table.

— We are rich Americans, says Lizzy. Aren't we?

Lanlan looks out the window at the big mist, as if there's something to see. There's nothing to see but still you can see her eyes jerking back and forth, because of its going by so fast.

BLONDIE / Of course, she was amazed by our house. We ourselves were amazed by our house—a lovely old farmhouse, walking distance to town, with a porch, and a large rolling lawn, and a converted barn housing cars and, these days, a black-and-white pygmy goat—Gabriela's, actually, as you will hear. Even in the fog you could see how the house commanded its little knoll. The land settled in green swales around it, like a skirt. I had my eccentric sunflowers in back—you couldn't see them right away. But there, by the driveway, stood our small orchard of seven wide apple trees, planted in a circle so that their arms all but touched. Of course, individually those trees were awkward, as apple trees can be. They had that arthritic look. As a group, though, they appeared, charmingly, to be playing

ring-around-the-rosy. And in the spring they formed a ceiling of blossoms. If from the front yard you made your way up the little incline—there were five or six stone steps—you ascended into a low sky of bloom—a heaven. Who could get enough of that magic? And in the fall! You could see the branches bending with fruit now—most of it edible, though we did not use pesticides. Soon the girls would be out apple picking, the old branches bending so low they all but dropped their fruit into the baskets. Both Lizzy and Wendy climbed on those branches when they were little, and pretended to be high in the air; both walked the branches like a circular balance beam when they were older. And both made it to the tops of the trees, one day, and yelled for Carnegie and me to come see.

CARNEGIE / The middle branches were squirrel diving boards; our Olympians sprang from them onto the driveway, that around the bikes and trikes, Rollerblades and roller skates, they might race. Overhead, the mockingbirds blithely popularized (okay, plagiarized) the more original songs of others.

Clouds drifted. The wind wafted.

Dew baubled the grass.

Altogether the house was a vision—the vision of my lovely wife, Blondie, whose extended description I here interject.

For Blondie, at forty-five, was herself a vision.

She had, it must be said, a dewlap. Lines patterned her forehead; she sported an asterisk on the bridge of her nose. Certain age spots, once indistinct, had found their proud round own. Her ears were both pinker and downier than they once were. Her in-truth lemon-lightened hair, once fluffy, now tended to go flat. How she would have been undone were it not for mousse! She sported a childbearing-related protuberance that disposed her toward rumpled linen jumpers. You would not call her limber anymore. The words Blondie brought to mind were all *lum* words: *lumber, lumbar* . . . I stop out of husbandly delicacy, but also because those words miss her paradoxical large lightness. A pufferfish, she was. A zeppelin buoyed by a certain singular gas.

She was not young. She complained of stress. She complained of short-term memory problems. She was perimenopausal. She took gingko, ginseng, echinacea during cold season. Huperzine A. Calcium



with soy. Black cohash. She needed reading glasses and could not for the life of her remember names. Yet somehow, brilliantly, she managed to head marketing for a socially responsible investment firm she had helped found, even while imbuing her station-wagon life with the illusion of unharried ardency. This was non-trivial. It filled one with awe to see how she worked around her work haunted houses for Halloween (complete with dry-ice effects), not to say all manner of other wonders involving yogurt, cheesecloth, two-liter soda bottles. How enraptured she could manage to be (for the purposes of a school assignment) by the history of navigation, the idea of India, the point system of dog shows!

No one went in for homework like Blondie.

She had smooth, delicate, in places transparent, skin, through which her veins most touchingly showed. Her plump forearms tapered into surprisingly small, twinkly hands. Her fingers moved deftly, but in a slightly splayed way, as if she had just left a manicurist's table. Other small surprises: a surprisingly small nose, and small but round, lively eyes. The last time Blondie had gone to a hairdresser she had come back with a wayward crew; an anti-flop strategy. Now she looked like Laurie Anderson gone Smith & Hawken.

In short, in her broad middle age Blondie had retained a certain unforced sweetness and small-town spark. She could be shy, but she could surprise you. And she was sincere, my Blondie, a precious block of something pre-veneer.

Yet, inexplicably, she did resemble a Realtor as she showed Lan her new digs, an apartment in the garage-née-barn built especially for an au pair.

— This is your kitchenette, said Blondie.

She indicated with an open hand the wood-tone doors of the Pullman kitchen. She demonstrated the use of its apartment-sized electric stove. Next, the half-height refrigerator. All these things had been put in by the previous owners, who had in general abhorred the genuine and full-sized. She picked a hair off the butcher block–look counter.

— Ah! said Lan.

She was, I thought, at least semi-smiling. She nodded. She stepped into the main room, with its sculpted acrylic carpeting, then just stood there, pressing her fingers together. She contemplated the carpet.

BLONDIE / —We thought we'd provide the basics and let you do the decorating, I said. So you wouldn't have to live with someone else's taste.

— Ah! she said.

— If you don't like the white, we'd be happy to help you paint. The girls love that sort of thing.

— Ah! she said again.

CARNEGIE / The furniture was my mother's. Big boudoir-y mahogany we had no place to store. You could hear the goat bleating downstairs.

BLONDIE / Carnegie would have given her the guest room. He thought it would have made her feel more welcome to be in the house—part of the house.

But that was right below our bedroom, and the apartment was larger. It had a kitchenette, and a bath. It had skylights. There were windows on two walls, and a ceiling fan. Even in the fog you could see how airy it was. And you did not enter through the garage—there was a separate entrance opposite the house, behind the toolshed. You went down a little path, then up a spiral staircase.

CARNEGIE / — If I were her I'd want my own space, said Blondie. If I were her, I would want privacy.

One must consider one's chromosomes before speaking these days. Still, summoning my piddling male courage, I tendered a sensitive observation.

— Did you see how she looked down at her feet? First she looked at the carpet, and then at her feet. There was something she didn't want to say.

— I did see her bow her head, said Blondie, after a moment. — I thought it was after she saw my sunflowers out back. You know what a mess they are.

Lan had looked down at her feet, her eyebrows a little raised; she had stared at her big toes through her stockings, as if looking to them for advice or friendship. Then she had very slightly shifted her weight. I heard a squeak, and saw how new her high heels were, how synthetic, how cheaply made. They dug into her feet. I saw how she



rocked back onto her heels, inching the balls of her feet up the ramps, out from under the front straps. It was a movement I'd seen many women make over the years, without seeing it. The female equivalent of loosening a tie. But never had I seen an instep as swollen as hers, nor welts so lurid. Her heels hung over the backs of the lasts; those shoes were too small. Maybe her feet had swollen up on the plane. That was possible. Still, Blondie would never have worn shoes like that. Today she was, in fact, wearing semi-orthopedic Danish clogs. When she walked she clopped.

Blondie would have rightly complained about how her feet hurt. Lan simply gazed, meditative, upon hers.

2

# *Beam Me Out*

CARNEGIE / Lan. Of course we have started the story with Lan, on whose account so much eventually came to pass. But I hereby restart it to begin two years earlier, when my mother was still alive; for in the beginning, believe me, was Mama Wong.

Is this not allowed? Never mind.

We will return to Miss Fine Spine soon enough, never fear.

How soberly exhilarating the first four or five years of my mother's stay at the Evergreen Overlook Assisted Living Residence Home! Other residents of the Alzheimer's unit came and went; only Mama Wong survived, survived. For the next couple of years too we remained guiltily proud. She was beating the odds. She was outliving other people. She was proving, as she would have liked, a winner.

Such victory was expensive. I could not help but note, by the seventh year or so, that it cost $4,500 a month and was not covered by



insurance; also that one could not say so. One was not permitted to recall that Mama Wong, then eighty-three, used to boast how in her family women often lived to be a hundred. That would be unfeeling.

— How often does she even recognize me? I said all the same, revealing my inner beast one fine suburban morning.

— But the times it does happen, said Blondie immediately. The times she's there.

Blondie held her hand to her belly as she spoke; she was then, at forty-three, to our most profound confoundment, pregnant. Before her thrashed the pygmy goat, its head stuck in a watering can. I was not too clear about the name of the goat; only that it belonged to Blondie's dear friend Gabriela, who had suffered a fencing failure such as had led to the destruction of her garden by deer. This had in turn led to her allowing a hunter on to her land, a man who shot with a bow and arrow, and dressed like a tree. He had donated the meat to a shelter. Nevertheless, Gabriela had been forced to recuperate in Italy.

This was how her goat had come to live (illegally) on our nice suburban property, where he butted our children and nibbled on their ice skates. He denuded our kousa dogwood. He made a mockery of our lawn.

His one charm: he could hold his ears out straight to either side, like a parody of a crucifixion.

Still Blondie doted on the creature because he belonged to Gabriela, and because he evoked, lucky quadraped, her sacred family-farm past.

— The goat butted Wendy again today, I said. She fell and knocked a tooth out.

Blondie absently left the goat to thrash, its balloon belly, like hers, heaving. The clanging of the watering can was loud.

— Was she upset? she asked.

— She ran off crying about how she was just glad she didn't live on a farm.

— And you said?

— I said she was right, she should be sure to remember this moment and stick to the suburbs all the days of her life. Also I asked if she wanted to eat the goat for dinner.