

The water that falls on you from nowhere when you lie is perfectly ordinary, but perfectly pure. True fact. **I Matt** tested it **myself himself** when the water started falling a few weeks ago. Everyone on Earth did. Everyone with any sense of lab safety anyway. Never assume any liquid is just water. When you say “I always document my experiments as I go along,” enough water falls to test, but not so much that you have to mop up the lab. Which lie doesn’t matter. The liquid tests as distilled water every time.

Uttering “this sentence is false” or some other paradox leaves you with such a sense of angst, so filled with the sense of an impending doom, that most people don’t last five seconds before blurting something unequivocal. So, of course, holding out for as long as possible has become the latest craze among drunk frat boys and hard men who insist on root canals without an anesthetic. Psychologists are finding the longer you wait, the more unequivocal you need to be to ever find solace.

Gus is up to a minute now and **I Matt** **wish wishes** **he**’d blurt something unequivocal. **He**’s neither drunk, nor a frat boy. **His** shirt, soaked with sweat, clings to a body that has spent twenty seven too many hours a week at the gym. **His** knees lock stiff, **his** jeans stretched across **his** tensed thighs. **His** face shrinks as if **he** were watching someone smash kittens with a hammer. It’s a stupid game. Maybe in a few more weeks the fad will pass.

I Matt **do does** not know why **he Gus** asked **me him** to watch **him** go through with it this time, and **I he** **do does** not know why **I he** **am is** actually doing it. Watching **him Gus** suffer is like being smashed to death with a hammer **myself himself**. At least **Gus** is asking for it. **I Matt** **know knows** **I he** **am is** supposed to be rooting for **him** to hold on for as long as possible, but **I he** just **want wants** **him** to stop. **He**’s hurting so much and **I Matt** can not stand to watch anymore.

“I love you, Matt.” **Gus**’ smile is radiant. **He** tackles **me Matt** on the couch and smothers **me him** in a kiss, and at first, **I Matt** **kiss kisses** **him** back.

Not only does no water fall on **him**, but all the sweat evaporates from **his** body. **His** shirt is warm and dry. A light, spring breeze from nowhere covers **us them**. **He** smells of flowers and ozone. This makes **me Matt** uneasy than if **he**’d been treated to a torrent. That, at least, **I Matt** would understand. **I he** would be sad, but **I he** would understand.

He Gus has unbuttoned and unzipped **my Matt’s** jeans when **my Matt’s** mind snaps back to the here and now. It’s not that **his Gus**’ body doesn’t have more in common with Greek statues than actual humans. It’s not that **he** can’t explicate Socrates at lengths that leave **my Matt’s** jaw unhinged. It’s that not only did “I love you, Matt” pull **him** out of **his** angst, but it actually removed water.

Fundamental laws of physics do that. Profound theorems of mathematics do that. “I love you, Matt” doesn’t count as a powerful statement that holds true for all time and space. Except when **Gus** says it, apparently.

“Wait.” **I Matt** **let lets** go of **him Gus**. **My his** hands reach down to slide to a sit.

Gus stops instantly. **He**'s skittered back before **my Matt's** hands have even found the couch cushions. **His** head tilts up at **me him**. This is **the man** who seconds ago risked going insane in order to feel soul rending pain for fun. How can **he** suddenly look so vulnerable?

Oh, if there's anything **Gus** can do, it's put up a brave front. **He** does that stony faced thing where **his** mouth is set in a grim, straight line better than anyone **I Matt know knows**. But behind **his** hard, blue eyes, **I Matt** can see the fear that's not there even when some paradox rips **him** apart.

Best to take the pain now. **I Matt am is** half convinced nothing can actually hurt **him Gus**, even when **he**'s afraid it might. It'd only hurt **him** more later.

"That's some display you just did there, Gus." **I he am is** stalling. Stop that. "I don't love you, not as much as you obviously love me."

The water that falls on you from nowhere is freezing cold. **I Matt slip slips** on the couch, but it just follows **me him**. When it's this much water, it numbs you to the bone. **I Matt want wants** to scream, "What the fuck?" but if **I he** even breathed, **I he** would drown. **Gus** tries to shield **me him**, blocking **my Matt's** body with his, but not even **he**'s fast enough. **I Matt try tries** to push **him** out of the downpour. However, **he Gus** is a mixed martial artist and **I Matt am is** not. **We they** share everything after the initial shock. The torrent lasts for seconds. **We they**'re both soaked and **he Gus** is laughing so hard that **he**'s fallen off the couch, doubled over on the wet floor, flopping like a fish.

I Matt feel feels like **I he** should be insulted, but **his Gus**' laughter is joyous. It's like the peal of giant bells, low booms that vibrate through you and make everything in the room rattle. **I Matt** can not tell if those are tears on **his** face, or just the water from nowhere.

My Matt's body shakes so hard, **I he** can not stand. The cushions squeak around **me him**, keeping **me him** bathed in ice cold water. **Gus** stands up. **He**'s not even shivering. **He** picks **me Matt** up, wraps **me him** in **his** arms, then kisses **me him** gently on the forehead.

"I'm sorry, Gus. I just ruined your couch." The floor is covered in rubber weight lifting mats. **I Matt** will mop that up once **I he** can move again.

This just sends **him Gus** into another fit of laughter, more controlled this time. **His** hands are gentle around **my Matt's** waist. Without them, **I Matt am is** pretty sure **I he** would crash onto the floor.

"You've just told me that you love me in I think the only way you can, and you're worried about the couch?"

Coming from anyone else, that sentence would make **me him** feel too stupid to live. Still, **he** has a point. **I Matt fumble fumbles** but can not find any words to answer.

"It'll dry off," **Gus** says. "Besides, you bought the couch for me."

Biotech engineers make more money than personal trainers, even the world's most overqualified ones. Who knew? Rather than actually moving in together, I **Matt** **have** **has** been slowly furnishing **his** apartment. **Gus** has patiently assumed that once the apartment no longer looks like a cross between a library and weight room, I **Matt** will move in. **He** **Gus** has long offered to move in with me **Matt**, but I **Matt** **do** **does** not want **him** to. My **his** efficiency isn't worthy of **him** **Gus**. It's just a body locker.

"I should clean up the mess I made." I **Matt** **pull** **pulls** away and **Gus** catches me **him** before I **he** **fall** **falls**. **He** literally sweeps me **him** off my **his** feet.

"Stop fretting. It's okay."

We **they** get out of **our** **their** wet clothes in the bathroom and huddle together under blankets in bed. It isn't until **he** **Gus** starts shivering that I **Matt** **realize** **realizes** **he**'s just as cold as I **Matt** **am** **is**. The mixed martial artist has just been more heroic, or stupid, about it.

"You know." **Gus**' voice is surprisingly steady given how **his** teeth chatter. "Now that we know how we feel about each other, how about we solemnize the relationship? Make it official."

My **Matt's** brow furrows so tightly, it hurts. **He** **Gus** is serious. As lightly as **he** tossed it off, **he** meant it.

"You risked permanent insanity just to ask me to marry you?" Honestly, there are less life threatening ways.

"No, that was just training." **He**'s not joking. "I can't imagine life without you. You can't imagine life without me. Say yes?"

The air stays resolutely dry. **He** could have made it all one big question to avoid letting whatever makes the water fall have a say.

"My family ..." I **Matt** **have** **has** no idea how to broach this. It's totally possible for **him** **Gus** to love me **him** and still never want to see me **him** again.

"They know about me, right?" I **Matt** **swear** **swears** **the man** reads minds.

"Yes?" It's not a lie, but it's not the truth either. The air gets distinctly humid. My **his** arm hairs stand on end, as if thunder were about to strike. I **Matt** **am** **is** still shivering from my **his** last lie. My **his** mind is in tatters, torn between the cruel truth that will make **him** **his partner** lose all respect for me **him** and the blatant lie that will plunge me **him** into fatal hypothermia. The pang that gnaws at my **his** heart grows and spreads. It wrings me **him**, twisting and squeezing the life out of me **him**. I **he** **jerk** **jerks** my **his** face into what I **he** **want** **wants** to be a smile.

"Matt, this isn't a root canal. Don't stretch it out. Whatever you have to say, it's okay."

I **Matt** take **takes** a deep breath. The release of saying something true though warms as if I **he** were buried in **Gus**' arms on a winter's night and **we** **they** were the only people in the world. No wonder all the cool kids suspend themselves between truth and lie. However, rehearsing this speech for months in **my** **his** head has not helped one bit. The words rush out so quickly, I **he** **am** **is** not even sure what I **he** **am** **is** saying.

"Mandarin doesn't have gender specific third person pronouns. Well, the written language does, but it's a relatively recent invention and they all sound the same and no one really uses the female and neuter variants anyway. And it's not like there aren't words for 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend' but I always refer to you as '愛人.' It means 'sweetheart,' 'lover,' 'spouse.' And never using your name isn't all that unusual. Names are for friends and acquaintances. Members of your family you refer to by title - "

When **Gus** interrupts **me** **him**, the only thought in **my** **his** mind is "Did I just tell him that I call him my spouse to my parents?"

"Wait. Slow down. " **Gus**' intellect trains on **me** **Matt** like a sharpshooter. "The way you talk about me to your family, we might as well be married?"

"Yes. " **My** **Matt's** stomach is in **my** **his** throat. The world bobbles around **me** **him** and I **he** **am** **is** stumbling at a cliff's edge.

"But they don't know my name, or that I'm male. "

"Yes. " **His** bullet strikes **my** **Matt's** heart and I **he** **have** **has** just crashed on the rocky shore.

"Hmm. " **He** wears **his** "I'm going to fix this " face, but then it hardens into that grim, stony thing that breaks **my** **Matt's** heart. **He** **Gus** nudges **himself** against **me** **Matt** then holds **me** **him** as if only I **Matt** can fit in that gap between **his** arms and chest. "We can't marry until you're ready to come out to your family. I'll wait as long as you want. "

His skin transforms from cold and clammy to warm and dry. **He** uses declarative sentences. The truth of each one is obvious. No weasel words or qualifiers. Instead of being soaked in water though, **Gus** is soaked in disappointment. Normally, **his** smile glows and I **Matt** **melt** **melts** in its heat. Right now, **he**'s wearing a cheap copy. **He**'s about as likely to admit that I **Matt** **have** **has** hurt **him** as **he** is to use anesthesia.

This isn't like **him**. I **Matt** expected an argument. I mean, I **Matt** should have come out to **my** **his** family a decade ago. If they don't suspect anything, it's because I **he** **am** **is** still years younger than **Dad** was when **he** married **Mom**. Instead, **we** **Matt and Gus** behave as if I **Matt** had not just said no to **him** **Gus**, albeit tacitly.

Gus chatters on about Procopius's *Wars of Justinian*. **He**'s just finished volume four, in the original Greek. I **Matt** **talk** **talks** about stem cells and gene splicing. It's as if tonight were any other night I **Matt** **am** **is** over, and **we** **they**'re just catching each other up on how **our** **their** day went. **His** **Gus**' hands and **his** tone slowly ask if I **Matt** **am** **is** interested even though **he** **Gus**

always interests me **Matt**. I **Matt** am **is** still cold and he **his partner** covers me **him** with **his** now warm body. The thoughtful smile, the affectionate way **he** holds me **him**, nuzzles and kisses my **his** neck, they try so hard to let me **him** know that everything is fine between us **them**, that **he** desires me **Matt** as much as I **Matt** desire **desires him**. **He**'s not aggressive. We **they**'ll go as slowly as I **Matt** want **wants**.

“ Let's visit my family this Christmas. The two of us. ” My **Matt's** voice is louder than I **he** had expected. “ Not the ‘Christ is born’ Christmas, but the ‘get together with family and give presents to the nieces’ Christmas. We stopped when my sister and I outgrew the whole Christmas present thing, but when she had kids, we started again. With the water falling now, I wanted to skip this year for my own sanity but - ”

“ Stop. ” **He**'s on **his** side, **his** arm around me **Matt**. **He**'s not as happy as I **Matt** want **wants him** to be. “ Are you sure? I can wait years if that's what you want. ”

“ I should have done this a long time ago. I don't think I'll ever be any more ready. ” If **Gus** realizes that I **Matt** am **is** outing myself **himself** to my **his** family for **him**, **he**'ll probably refuse to go out of sheer principle. I **Matt** am **is** not sure I **he** can do it with **him**, but I **he** know **knows** I **he** can not do it without **him**.

Gus senses that all I **Matt** want **wants** is to be held so that's all **he** does. The condoms stay in the drawer. **He** drifts off to sleep, and I **Matt** lie **lies** next to **him** listening to the calm rhythm of **his** breath. I **Matt** am **is** the only son. All I **he** can think about is my **his** parents' “ you're responsible for carrying on the family name because when your sister marries she will become part of her husband's family ” speech. It freaked me **him** out even before I **he** had come out to myself **himself**.

The family gathers in the atrium of my **Matt's** sister's mansion as we **they** stomp the Christmas Eve storm off our **their** boots. The high vaulted ceiling has room for the sweeping staircase and the Christmas tree, big enough to dwarf **Gus**, that sits in the handrail's curve. Ornaments. Tinsel. Holly. Ivy. A copy of Michelangelo's God giving Adam life tacked taut on the atrium ceiling. We **they**'ve entered Victorian Christmas Land. No half measures here.

The disappointment when the family sees that my **his** friend is a man is palpable. It's like the adults were all my **his** nieces' age and someone told **them** there was no Santa Claus. Mom asks me **Matt** if we **they**'ve eaten. According to the textbooks, it's a polite greeting, but **she** always means it literally. If I **he** tell **tells her** I **he** am **is** not hungry, **she**'ll say, “ 不餓還需要吃啊. ” (Even if you're not hungry, you still need to eat.) That must be true since that never causes the water to fall. Fortunately, rather than being forced to eat dinner again, this time I **he** have **has** **Gus** to derail the conversation.

I **he** introduce **introduces** him **Gus** to my **his** parents, my **his** sister, **Michele**, **her** husband, Kevin, **their** kids, **Tiffany** and **Amber**, and, to my **Matt's** surprise, **Kevin's** parents. As I **Matt** negotiate **negotiates** the simultaneous translation, a horrible thought hits me **him**. Everyone in

the room speaks at least two languages, but there isn't one language everyone speaks. Beside English, **Gus** speaks only dead languages. **Kevin's** parents speak Cantonese and Mandarin, but not English. **My Matt's** parents haven't needed English since **they** retired, not that theirs was good before. **I he have has** trapped **Gus** in a mansion where **he** can't speak to half the people. Repeatedly slamming **my his** head against the handrail now would send the wrong message, so **I he do does** not.

The instant **Gus** crouches down and starts talking to **the nieces**, **they** stop being scared of **him** and start playing with **him**. All physically imposing people seem to be able to win over little kids in mere seconds. **They** head off to the living room. **I Matt start starts** to join **them** when **my his** sister marches **me him** into **her** home office.

“How dare you?” **She** slams the door behind **her** and **I Matt remind reminds myself himself** that **I he am is** bigger than **her** now and it'd be harder for **her** to beat **me him** up. “Are you trying to kill Mom and Dad?”

Well, that was easier than **I he** had expected. **She** knows and **I he** did not even have to tell **her**. Also, **I he have has** broken **my his** record. It usually takes an entire day before **I he make makes her** angry. At this rate, **I he** could be kicked out of the house and in a motel room by sunrise. **I Matt reserve reserves** one for every trip. **She** gets all offended if **I he do does** not stay with **her** at first.

“No.” Ideally, **Mom** and **Dad** accept it. That can happen. “I want everyone to meet the man I'm going to marry.”

The future's not fixed, but right now, **Gus** and **I Matt** are headed toward marriage, so the air stays dry. **She** slaps **me him**. **My his** cheek stings. **I he** would slap **her** back but **I he need needs** to out **myself himself** to **our their** parents before **she** throws **me him** out of the house.

“Mom and Dad always let you get away with being selfish, don't they? I don't do whatever I want.” **She's** blocking the door. “Doesn't it matter to you that you're embarrassing Mom and Dad in front of 婆婆 and 公公?”

Phrasing things in the form of a question. That and weasel words work as insurance against the water that falls from nowhere. They just make it extremely obvious that you're hedging against the truth.

“Like I knew your husband's parents were even coming.” Not that **I he am is** embarrassing **Mom** and **Dad**. Well, not this time anyway.

“Your job,何德培” **my his** full name in Chinese including family name, just in case it isn't clear **she's** furious at **me him** - “is to give our parents a grandson.”

We they both already know this. **She** just enjoys showing **me him** the dry air.

“I don't think I can do that by myself.” **I he wish wishes I he** had not said that.

She slaps me him again. My his cheek hadn't stopped stinging from last time.

“ Do you love Mom and Dad? Dump that slab of beef. Find a Chinese woman to marry. Put your penis in her vagina and make Mom and Dad a grandson. Make them happy. ”

She turns to leave but not two steps stomp by before she whips around. Coming out to Mom and Dad, she hasn't ordered me him not to do it yet.

“ And you're not coming out to Mom and Dad. ” With that command, she leaves.

No water. She must mean it. She'll never leave me him alone with Mom or Dad.

I Matt close closes my his eyes and remind reminds myself himself why I he am is doing this. Right. Gus. He refuses to stop insisting it's okay if I Matt do does not come out to them. He'll understand if I Matt do does not. That just makes me him want to do what he Gus really wants, but will not say out loud. Coming out would have hurt less a decade ago and it'll hurt less now than a decade from now. Unless I he just keep keeps quiet and wait for my his entire family to die off. Now there's a cheery thought.

Christmas day. When I Matt wake wakes, Gus is most of the way through his forms, his movements silent and precise. I Matt make makes an exaggerated show of sneaking out of the bedroom. His Gus' face cracks the tiniest smile when I Matt look looks back at him from the door.

My Matt's sister pointedly ushered us them to different rooms last night. I Matt return returns to the den where I he was supposed to sleep to get ready to join Dad for his daily early morning walk. It's awful. We they'll plod in circles at some local mall while I Matt try tries to get him to talk about himself and he answers in single syllables. At least this time, I Matt will actually have something to talk to him about. I guess I Matt have has had something to talk to him about for years. This time, though, I he am is going to do it.

When I he get gets downstairs, my his sister insists on joining us them. First time in ... Actually, she's never done the morning walk thing with Dad before.

“ Great, sis. ” I Matt start starts back up the stairs. “ You go with Dad to the mall this time. See you two later. ”

I he ignore ignores her sputterings. If she wants Dad to keep thinking that she's their Good Child, she won't dare to do anything to me him right now, and she'll go with Dad on the mall walk. I Matt will pay for this later, of course, but by the time she comes back, Mom will have woken up and I he will have had a chat with her.

Or at least that was Plan B. The morning-walk ritual is supposed to be that, after the walk, he goes to have his sausage biscuit, luxuriates over a cup of coffee, two if you count the free refill.

Only then do **we they** come home. However, **they**'re home too early. **Mom**'s still asleep. **My his** sister has apparently forced **Dad** to skip the fast food breakfast part of **his** morning ritual.

When **I he** hear **hears** the garage door, **I Matt** lean **leans** over the sweeping staircase's handrail. **Dad**'s grumbling. **My his** sister's chirping bright words about how the kitchen has something just as good. **She** glares at **me Matt** as **she** rushes **Dad** past. Like it's **my his** fault **he Dad** is angry at **her**.

The rest of the day is like an extremely tedious game of basketball. **My his** sister plays a tight defense, but legal. No contact while there are witnesses. Since **I he** **am is** trying to get time alone with **my his** parents, one of **them** is always a witness.

She's even helping **Mom** make tonight's feast. **I Matt** **am is** kneading the dough for **Mom's** steamed, stuffed buns when **my his** sister inserts **herself** into the process. After years of preparing meals for large gatherings together, **Mom** and **I Matt** have a system. At some point, **she** stopped insisting that **my his** wife would cook for **me him** someday and started teaching **me him** to cook. Either **she** got sick of **me him** nagging **her**, or **she** realized **I he** kneaded dough more quickly than **she** did. Anyway, with some luck, dinner will not be too much later than if **my his** sister had just left **us them** alone.

Gus is doing **his** best imitation of an apartment mate who had nowhere else to go for Christmas. **I Matt** **wish wishes** **he**'d stop that. **He** spends time with **my Matt's** nieces, **my his** brother-in-law, even **my his** parents, but **he** only skirts the kitchen. **I Matt** **get gets** that **he** doesn't want to out **me him** for **me him**, but **I he** **like likes** **his** conversation too. It's stupid to be in the same house as **him** and still miss **him** so much. After **my Matt's** first few whacks at the duck with the cleaver, **Mom** takes the heavy knife away from **me him** then tells **me him** to go rehydrate mushrooms.

It doesn't take a solid day of cooking to make dinner, but **my his** sister conveniently has questions about how to make the filling for the stuffed buns and how much sesame oil for the scallion pancakes. **She** leaves the kitchen occasionally, but never long enough for **me him** to work up the nerve to tell **Mom**. Whenever **I he** **leave leaves** the kitchen, it isn't two minutes before **she** finds **me him**, claiming **she** needs **my his** help. **I he** **manage manages** to say, "Yes, I think you're a terrible cook too" in front of **her** husband and **her** parents in law in **our their** respective languages in common before **she** drags **me him** back to the kitchen. Water doesn't fall when **I he** **say says** that. **I he** **have has** to take **my his** pleasure where **I he** can.

When **the nieces** pull **Mom** away to play with **their** Erector Set, **she** decides that **my his** sister and **I he** can finish dinner without **her**. **My his** sister complains that **she** needs **Mom's** help. **I Matt** **agree agrees** wholeheartedly, but it's not enough. The two of **us them** are stuck with each other.

"You do know why Gus doesn't come into the kitchen, don't you?" Despite **her** casual tone, **we they** both know this is not idle chatter.

"Does it matter?" **I he** **am is** slicing pickled radishes. "You're going to tell me anyway."

“ Do you really think you can keep him? ” **She** drops spinach into a skillet pooled with oil. The water coating the spinach hits the oil and splatters back at **her**. “ He’s spent more time with Kevin today than with you. ”

I he force forces myself himself to slice slowly. Cutting **my his** fingers off is a distraction **I he do does** not need right now. **My his** heart pounds in **my his** ears. **I he am is** not sure who **I he am is** more angry at, **my his** sister or **my his** lover.

“ I have no idea what you mean, sis. ” **We they** immigrated here when **she** was a teenager and **I Matt** was a little kid. There’s a good chance **she**’ll miss the sarcasm. The water gets it though and **I he stay stays** dry.

“ Kevin’s a good-looking guy, maybe ... ” The line would have more impact if **she** didn’t look scared of the spinach sautéing before **her**. **She** jabs the spatula as if it were a fencing foil.

Kevin’s not **my Matt’s** type. **I he am is** pretty sure **he**’s not **Gus**, but **I** guess **I Matt do does** not know. It’s not like **he Gus** didn’t date lots of men before **me him**. It’s not as if they don’t all throw themselves at **him**. **My his** mind spins for seconds before **I he realize realizes she** hasn’t actually accused **Gus** of anything. **Kevin** is stolidly straight, and if **Gus** has tried anything with **Kevin**, not that **he** would, **she**’d throw **Gus** and **me Matt** out of the house, not taunt **me him** with the possibility that **Gus** might be unfaithful.

“ Maybe what? ” Usually, **I he do does** not have this much trouble arranging sliced radishes in a pretty pattern. Right now, they’re just a bunch of ugly yellow discs.

“ You understand what I’m saying. I shouldn’t have to spell it out. You don’t trust your own sister? ”

When **I Matt** was eight, **she** convinced **me him** that **she** was psychic, then foretold exactly how horrible **my his** life would be if **I he** did not do exactly as **she** said. It’s embarrassing how many years **she** got away with it. If the water had been falling back then, **she**’d have flooded the house.

“ Only your family loves you enough to tell you this. ” Listening to **her** is like being pelted by rocks. “ What can he possibly see in you? Dump him and marry a nice Chinese woman instead. Stay with him and he’ll cheat on you or dump you. ”

Three words into **her** last sentence, **I he know knows** what **she**’ll say. **I he leap leaps** to pull **her** pan away as **I he shut shuts** off the burner. The water that falls from nowhere drenches **her** and the burner where the pan was. Had the water hit the pan, the steam and splattered oil would have burned **her**.

“ Go get warm. ” **I he plate plates** the spinach onto a dish on the counter. “ I’ll mop up the water. ”

“ People change, but maybe he’ll still love you, even as you shut him out like you have me, Mom, and Dad. ” **Her** arms wrap around **her** body and **her** words come out between chatters.

“ We still do, but I wonder why we bother. You’ll break Mom and Dad’s hearts if you never pass their name and blood on. Are you really willing to abandon your family for that man? ”

She stomps off before **I he** can answer. Hiding so much of **myself himself** from **my his** family, in retrospect, that totally counts as shutting them out. There was only so much of **my his** life **I he** could share with them. Once the water began falling **I he** could not even lie to them. But **I he** hid because **I he** wanted to keep them, not abandon them.

Dinner is going well, too well. **My his** sister is a gracious hostess, too gracious to complain when **Gus** and **I Matt** sit next to each other. Instead, **her** eyes question **my his** every action. Why is **my his** right hand below the table? Why **am is I he** spooning tofu onto **Gus’** plate? What **am is I he** saying when **I he** whisper **whispers** into **his Gus’** ear?

Gus eats as if **he** has pig’s ear and cow’s tripe every Christmas. When **we they** get home, the next time it’s **my Matt’s** turn to cook, **he’s** getting pig’s blood soup for dinner. **I Matt have has** wasted years afraid **he Gus** would hate **my his** favorite foods.

My Matt’s nieces love **him Gus**. **They** stop dueling each other with chopsticks when **he** asks **them** to. To half the adults at the table, **he** may as well be speaking classical Greek, but they laugh at **his** jokes and listen with rapt attention as **he** talks about the time it thunderstormed as **he** and **his** brother were climbing the steep eastern face of Mount Whitney. **My Matt’s** mom resuscitates stories of **her** childhood in 台南. Even **my his** sister is sick of those stories. **Gus**, however, asks about raising chickens and about **the grandmother I Matt** barely **remember remembers**. Okay, **I Matt am is** translating like mad, but the point is they enjoy **Gus’** company and **Gus** enjoys theirs. In the rapid fire exchange of words, **my Matt’s** parents surprise **me him** by asking about **my his** research in biotech. **I he** almost **forget forgets** the impending doom hanging over **me him** like an uttered paradox.

“ 你已經三十多歲了, ” **my his** sister’s father in law says as **I he am is** clearing the table after dinner. “ 你甚麼時候會給你的父母生孫子? ”

No family meal is complete without the marriage question. Actually, it’s always some variant of “ You’re over thirty. Where’s the grandson? ” Marriage is just the necessary precondition.

I Matt think thinks I he am is smiling blandly, but **Gus’** eyes reach **mine his** and **I Matt realize realizes he Gus** sees the marriage question on **my his** face. It’s hard to believe **the man** doesn’t read minds. **My his** sister’s glare is this pressure that squeezes **my his** chest.

Telling everyone **I he have has** not met the right woman might humidify air, but it will not cause the water to fall. It’s true so **I he** will not even feel any angst. **Gus** will understand and, for once, **my his** sister will be happy with **me him**. **She** and **I Matt** can not be in the same room for ten minutes but **we they**’ve always wanted the best for each other. But **she** doesn’t need to tell **me him** what that is anymore.

“我找到了我的對象。Gus。”I **he** **have** **has** come this far; I **he** might as well go all the way. “他上月向我求婚。”

Providing a grandson can't be that important in the grand scheme of things. **Kevin's** parents still love **him**. Maybe **mine** **Matt's** will still love **me** **him**. And **they** seem to like Gus as **my** **his** friend. Now that **they** know **he's** proposed, maybe **they'll** also love **him** as **their** son in law.

My **his** sister's fury explodes and overwhelms every other reaction in the room. **Her** words are clearly in English, but the only ones that make any sense are “Get out, and don't ever come back.” **Kevin's** trying to calm **her** down. **Gus** weaves around the family toward **me** **Matt**. However, I **Matt** **am** **is** upstairs in the bedroom before I **he** **realize** **realizes** I **he** **have** **has** moved.

Gus is extremely tidy. It's easy to repack **his** luggage. I **Matt** never unpacked so I **he** **do** **does** not have to repack. **He** **Gus** is such a generous soul. For all I **Matt** **know** **knows**, **he** may still think **we** **they're** not leaving. I **Matt** should not have left **him** downstairs. Maybe **the** **nieces** can translate for **him**.

“Matt, you're leaving out of spite.” The doorjamb neatly frames **Gus**. “Okay, your sister had a bad reaction, but poe poe and gohng gohng don't seem to be taking it badly.”

I **Matt** **blink** **blinks** and **shake** **shakes** **my** **his** head. It takes **me** **him** a few seconds to realize that **he** **Gus** is talking about **my** **his** parents.

“Did you just call my parents 婆婆 and 公公?”

“Yeah, poe poe and gohng gohng.” **He** looks confused. “I tried to call them Mr. and Mrs. Ho this afternoon, but they both corrected me before I got past hello. Am I pronouncing it wrong?”

“We can work on that, but that's not my point.” I **Matt** **shut** **shuts** **his** suitcase. “‘婆婆’ means husband's mother and ‘公公’ means husband's father.”

That **he** can call **them** that without water falling on **him** ...

“They'd already figured us out.” **Gus** steps into the room to make space for **Mom**, trying to burrow past **him**. “Hi, poe poe.”

“Lonely boy.” My **Matt's** mom looks at **Gus**, but points at **me** **Matt**. “He always lonely boy.”

I **Matt** really **wish** **wishes** **she'd** just let **me** **him** translate for **her**. In Chinese, **she's** effortlessly witty and erudite. That's the person I **he** **want** **wants** **Gus** to know, not the inchoate stranger I **Matt** knew until I **he** had spent a decade trying to get **my** **his** Chinese up to snuff.

Gus takes **her** hands and doesn't speak too loud or down to **her**. Metaphorically, that is. Literally, **he's** about a foot taller than **Mom**.

“ Not if I can help it, poo oh poo oh. ” **He**’s trying too hard to imitate the way **I Matt** said it and now **he**’s overpronouncing. “ I’ll make sure he’s never lonely again. ”

Mom turns to **me Matt**. At first, **I Matt** think **thinks she** wants a translation, but **she** must have understood because **she** doesn’t give **me him** a chance to speak.

“ 你是研究生物科技的。孫子能給我嗎？有你們兩個的基因的？ ” Ok, this isn’t an example of **her** being witty or erudite. **My his** mom is also very practical and direct.

I he hear **hears** **my his** heart pound. **Gus** is looking at **me him** for a translation. **We they** don’t have a relationship if **I Matt** filter **filters** what **he** hears.

“ She said: You’re a biotech researcher. Can you give me a grandson? One with genes from both of you? ” **Gus** must have really impressed **her**. “ What were you two talking about this afternoon? ”

“ Not that. ” **He** looks as surprised as **I Matt** feel **feels**. **We they**’ve never discussed kids. **He** turns back to **her**. “ We need to talk about it. ”

And **I Matt** need **needs** to win a Nobel Prize if **she**’s dead set on a grandson with both **our their** genes. Parents.

The clincher is that **she** leaves, trusting **Gus** to talk **me him** back from the edge. Normally, **she** tells **me him** that once **Michele** calms down, **she**’ll want **me him** to stay. **Michele**’s only angry at **me him** because **she** loves **me him**. But now, it’s **Gus**’ job to keep **me him** civil. **Mom**’s probably so happy about this, **she** doesn’t care that **Gus** is a guy. **Gus** isn’t any better at keeping **me him** from the edge than **Mom** though.

The motel is a five minute drive from **my his** sister’s house, but it feels like another planet. For one thing, **we they**’ve gone from Victorian Christmas Land to Operating Surgery Land. It still smells like pine, but the flat, medicinal one. For another, when **I Matt** drop **drops** **my his** suitcase and **curl curls** into a ball on the bed, it’s as if **I he** have **has** held one of **Gus**’ bizarre isometric exercises for weeks and **I he** have **has** finally let go. Just like the end of any other trip home except this time **I he** am **is** still tethered to the world. **Gus** stands at the door. Snowflakes glisten off **his** hair and hooded sweatshirt.

“ They’re your only blood relatives in the country. ” **Gus** flicks on the light and clicks the door shut. When **I Matt** turn **turns** away, **his** weight dents the bed. **My his** body falls toward **his Gus**. “ Matt, don’t freeze me out too. ”

Gus’ words pummel **me him** no matter how softly **he** tosses them. **My his** own words scrape **my his** throat. **I he** taste **tastes** salt and metal when **I he** swallow **swallows**. Lying then letting the water wash **my his** throat and fill **my his** lungs tempts **me him** as much as pretending **Gus** isn’t sitting on the bed. Every trip, **I Matt** decide **decides** that **I he** will sort things out later.

Then I he go goes home and pretend pretends the trip never happened. That will not work this time. Gus is, if nothing else, a witness and a reminder.

“ Fine. ” I he sit sits up and stare stares at the carpet. “ Once, I gave Mom flowers for Mother’s Day and Michele humiliated me because flowers wilt and how dare I send Mom something that would die. Michele accused me of ruining her birthday because one year I sent her a card with blue birds on it. Like I knew her parakeet had drowned itself in her toilet. One Christmas Eve, Michele asked me to shave for Christmas day. I didn’t really have any stubble so I forgot. She couldn’t understand why I would refuse to do something to make her happy, especially something so simple, so she ambushed me with a razor. I wish she had better aim. Shaving cream stings your eyes. For weeks people wondered why I had scars around my neck and on my face. Is that enough, or do you want more? Why should I have to keep putting up with her? ”

I he am is so tired. My his body will not stop shaking. Air will not stay in my his lungs. Melted snow pools around my his boots. I he wish wishes Gus weren’t looming over me him. I he wish wishes he were in his apartment, or visiting his own family.

Gus sits, mouth agape, for a moment, but if he expected water to fall on me Matt, he’s done a terrific job of not showing it. His arm straps across my Matt’s shoulders and pulls me him to him himself. He presses a finger under my Matt’s chin and guides my his head until I Matt face faces him.

Part of me him wants to bolt, get into the rental car and find somewhere else to stay for the night. The rest of me him knows that’ll hurt Gus and he’ll be too much the hero to admit it. Like screwing up all of my his relationships at the same time is a good idea.

“ You shouldn’t have to put up with her. ” Gus unzips my Matt’s jacket, then peels it off me him. “ But are you going to write your parents off too? Say we have a kid, and I’m not saying we should or shouldn’t, don’t you want the kid to know their grandparents? ”

“ So I’m right and she wins anyway? ”

I Matt rub rubs my his face. Telling me him I he am is right is a change. Once, Mom told me him everything Michele does to me him, she does because she loves me him and wants the best for me him. Why couldn’t she just hate me him instead, I he asked. That talk didn’t go well.

“ What you mean by winning? ” Gus shrugs. He hangs my his jacket on the coatrack next to the door. “ You broke today. It happens. Maybe some time away from her is a good thing. Tomorrow, we’ll go back and we’ll try it again, okay? If you want, I’ll stick to you the whole day. ”

I Matt take takes a deep breath. It feels like the first time my his lungs have expanded in hours. The pine and wet leather assault my his nose. “ Sure. ”

I he take takes off my his boots. Melted snow has soaked through to my his socks. My his feet are cold and clammy. Gus is still standing at the door.

“ I’ll be back in a few hours. ” Gus holds a hand up to interrupt me him when I he ask asks him to stay. “ You don’t want me around and frankly, right now, you’re too wigged out to be good company. I know you’re not angry at me, but it’ll be better in the long run if I leave now while we’re still on speaking terms. ”

I Matt would protest but that would just make his Gus point. Gus turns out the lights before he leaves. The comforter is wet from melted snow. It sticks to my his skin when I he fall falls into bed. I he curl curls up into a ball and roll rolls the comforter over me him. Buried, I he finally start starts to relax.

This time, I he have has left the world but it still doesn’t feel right. The mattress ought to be sunk deeper. My his arms should be around the hulk of a man who can’t ever admit hurt or pain. I Matt should be immersed in the warmth of his body as he that man is in mine his.

“ I love you, Gus. ” Now, I he just have has to figure out how to say it while he’s in the room.

Snow evaporates off the comforter. I he am is warm and dry. I he wriggle wriggles my his head out. Flowers and ozone replace the smell of pine. A spring breeze grazes me him. I he stare stares at the door in the dark, wishing it would open.