

Four Stories in One Season

(Field: fiction)

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CONTENTS

TEEN FEVER	1
TO THE END	12
THE THREE TRIALS	17
LAYERS OF LOVE	28

Teen Fever

It was Saturday morning, I presume, for hearing the trespassed racket of kids, the likes who could be so energetic on the first day of the weekend, and in front of me was milk and sauce-soaked eggs. *See, you've got to bring them together in a circle on the ground and hold as*

much as you can and throw them up into the sky and then you dance in maple leaves shower!

While I, for nearly two weeks, had been homebound moping around. After the last bite of yolk had been swallowed with milk, I rose from the table and shuffled toward the radiance of the balcony. Yanked off my cardigan, unhooked the shutters, and walked out. The first sight of the spilled palette of pinkish sky tinged with azure and orange fascinated me. My body leaned forward as if to embrace the childlike trace of autumn breeze and inhale its clear balm with my cheeks fanned by its caress. In the air rang the laughter of kids and their flapping arms and shadowy legs were as vibrant as the swirling leaves.

“Why, put on your cardigan, you're still sick. Come inside quick or the cold wind's gonna get you,” Mother called, her voice lifting up a full octave and her arms flinging back in a short arc. In two strides she came picking up the cardigan and had me wrapped in it. It was not raw but deliciously cool in contrast with the wool slathered on me, I thought without answering back, but retired to the table and finished the milk.

“Mom, the breakfast was good, but the egg was fried too old. I mean—”

“All right, all right. Don't forget your pills. I'm off to work. Lunch is in the second compartment!”

“Okay.”

“And?”

“Drink *water*.” I squeezed up a smile to some extent I could even feel the skin around my lips crinkled up into lines.

Holding a pitcher of water, I traipsed into my room and kicked the door close to tackle the next work. There, on the wooden shelf, a bottle sat beside the table clock; seen from far away, it was like a shelf sitter without legs hanging out, staring at my face as a reminder. I crossed the foot of the bed to its side, unscrewed the lid, and shook all the contents out onto a piece of tissue. Quite a handful. I partitioned pills off to one side and made sure this and that tallied with the prescription in spidery longhand. Back and forth, back and forth. It is a job of eyes, I daresay, for there were two tiny white round pills in similar size hiding in the ocean of other brats, one with a vague dent in the middle and the other without. Hunched over the desk, my two fingers clung into a pair of tweezers, fiddling up and down till the prey were captured. The odyssey was partly over. Eyes shut into slits, I threw my head back and flung all twelve pills into my mouth and drained a glass of water in a flash, preventing my palate from suffering, and sweetened it with a lump of sugar in defiance of Mother's exhortation.

The discomfort in my throat still lingered. I glazed over the desk wondering how this came to pass. Initially, regular medicine in the drug store had availed me nothing. I kept on coughing away at intervals without throwing up phlegm, still less the nasal congestion. Anxious, Mother then tugged me in the arm to a private practice three blocks away.

"No, I won't go. I don't want to be there! I can make it myself," I retorted, fretfully turning my back on Mother sitting at the bedside, believing myself old enough to handle it.

"Honey, come on, you have to. Won't take much time. It'll be too late when your condition becomes dreadfully serious." At meeting her lifting brows and persuasive eyes, I relented.

Waiting for Mother to come from parking her motorbike, through the window I spotted the doctor alone, under dim light from the ceiling, having rice porridge with two poached eggs, which was his custom in the mornings and evenings for ages. Chewing over the details rattled off from Mother with his meal, he laid down his chopsticks and went through the waiting room lined with washed-out blue seats to the hindmost pharmacy, did things up here and there, reappeared with a vial and took out another one from the third shelf behind the glass table and then asked me to follow suit—grinding pills into powder in a bowl. With caution I did, though knowing it was his style of practicing. Listening to his half-reproachful, half-bantering instructions like "Don't whisk too hard to spill" and all that, my guarded heart softened somehow. Gazing into the clockwise swirl, I was struck by images of worrying mothers with crying kids at their knees while he crouching down to make faces at the fidgets

after checking the IV drip. And now, turning my eyes up from the bowl, I felt he aged not and neither did I.

Back straightened with two slaps on my cheeks, I collected my thoughts to catch up where I had gotten behind. *That Beginning Algebra thing and I haven't even read Rip Van Winkle.*

But hardly had I started when I found myself assailed by the smell of drug bottles from the air. Weird. I should have become inured to that smell. Half stood above the prone body, I stretched out one arm to crack the window a bit, confronted by a long beam of light.

Instinctively I drew the blinds, ducked with brows furrowed and eyes narrowed. Again, the whole room was in hand. My eyes rested sullenly on the dynamic halos through the blinds on my book as I turned to a fresh page, then, even their slightest shifts would catch my eye and rankle me unceasingly. A morning concomitant with die-hard coughs as ineffective as were the other days. The only knowledge I absorbed was marketplace gossip and pleasantries while my eyes went watery from the computer screen. I sighed without relief. The march of time walked out on me as my youth. Throwing me heavily into the rocking-chair by the window with the assigned novel propped against a tasseled cushion, over the fringe, I peeped over at the sprigged bed in a clutter left this morning, as if intrigued by it, I bent over and climbed it up, shielded myself with a blanket and resumed reading. I could still perceive, given the closed blinds, jaunty clouds scudding across the sky and patches of the blue playing hide-and-seek; under them a skyward ginkgo tree marooned there for years, turning gold *overnight*; the bells clanging in unpunctual dullness, and the frightened birds flapping up the

high across the setting sun in crimson radiance, heading home—the last tumult before the dark fanning out its mantle over the earth.

The next sight was Mother and a bowl of steaming soup in her hands. Half of her face was softly lit up by the warm lamplight, in a moment, I was unsure which part I should lay my eyes on. The light of day had failed, I had missed lunch and the afternoon.

"You haven't eaten? I saw the food still lying in the fridge."

"Yeah, I sort of dropped off," said I, averting my sight for fear of a tiff.

"Here, finish this and pills. Seems we're running out," said Mother while shaking the bottle. With a pillow fluffed behind me, stiffly up I came to sit. "Tomorrow you'll be as right as rain, I bet," she claimed.

For sure I did.

The night routine of medicine and cough drops had been conquered, I took the unfinished book that had rolled down from the lifting of my legs, and no sooner had I skimmed to the third page, heavier and heavier my eyelids grew, I fell asleep. Now I guess it was partly for the effect of drugs and besides the heaviness of quilt on my sick body. The world closed around me. Dreamily, I ran into pills in different colors and shapes floating before my eyes, and all we were in a body besieged by a falling dark blanket. No amount of kicking and beating to lacerate the solid rug ended up in vain, it suddenly occurred to me that I was in a dream—yet it took more pains to realize I was unable to break it. My fingers, by the exertion

of will, should have been given vitality to start moving, but were found as still as stones.

Unaware of what space of time had elapsed, the next instant, not light but a deluge of pitch darkness surging toward me ever since I was forced awake with a gasp of horror.

Early sleep led to an awakening in the small hours. Uneasy at the sprawling darkness, I took out my left hand from the cocoon of the quilt and felt for the switch and placed my hand back into the warmth. Now sleepiness had died away as flashes of light pierced the darkness and filled up the room from one corner and had my eyes take quite a while to fit in the contrast. On the contrary, it inflicted on me a sense of unreality, for the command of time at night was intolerably immense, especially for the ill. Shortly after it was gone as I caught sight of Mother lying beside me in a deep slumber. Not me all alone at dead of night, I consoled myself. The rustling wind and rain outside, the capricious Nature, undying despite time and space, was in my company. Last-minute it was mellow, presently in a tantrum.

The rhythm of drizzle whispered a vibe of serenity like background strains, and the room now was quiet to me, except for the even breath escaped Mother. I felt oddly content with the residence I held, with the warmth of comforters, as if I lived in a womb. Have you ever felt desolate while waking up at an unusual moment? Yes, in the late afternoon after an untoward long nap, and now at this moment. But now I was free to look up at the ceiling and let my mind go blank until somnolence re-descending on me, insulated by birds, horns, and formulaic greetings of the street.

Silence.

Wait, what's that sound?

It is keeping on sepulchrally on its bare feet through the living room. I hold my breath even to the point of suffocation. Someone has broken in. A thief, a man? What should I do? Only Mother and I, two women alone. How can we survive were it a demon of man! My heart nearly throbs out as the sound draws nearer until it stops short and flows into another room giving on to mine with one flimsy wall in the middle. Is it because he saw the light is on? He might have a knife perhaps, no, an ax. My knotted heart almost pounding painfully, I wring out a respite of air for the narrow escape, knowing our thread still holding in temporality. All this comes beyond endurance, so swiftly and overwhelmingly that it leaves me no time to bring out solutions. Will he turn up here later? Does he believe I am asleep and out of sheer carelessness keeping the lamp on? What's he been up to?

He is rummaging on the writing desk. Somehow, I could localize his position. What astonished me is that he does not even bother to stay lowkey at all. Is it because the surroundings are too still that his every move is audible to me, or because he is just a desperado and his last merciful act is solely a veneer of kindness for the sake of expediency? As to the latter, I am frightened to death. The first SOS signal that enters my head is Mother, my wing, my harbor. Should I wake her up? The idea is instantly vetoed. She would thus make sounds asking why I am still up, which would only escalate the odds for Death. Should I pretend to assume a sleeping expression when he turns the doorknob? The direct sight he catches would be of me, for my bearing is diagonally opposite the door. But what if he makes

up his mind to cut off my head and Mother's by taking advantage of our circumstances? It would be a clean job for a criminal. Should I grab something to fight with? No—a book, a lamp—there is nothing handy within easy reach and not to mention I am no match for him. Is it hopeful to call the police? No. I am too stupefied to make noises, too petrified to turn over to scout for an object, the least to make a call on such short notice. He could hear me and rush here and kill me!

The room is mute with fear. Tight-lipped, I wait in the grip of despair, for his steps. What I most dread is the life of Mother, who has no idea of this emergency and is sleeping a natural sleep. The thought that this is the last chance I am her daughter who has been taking up the entirety of her love, my heart shrinks ruefully. I let my eyes travel to, while securing my head in the same position on the pillow, her closed eyes and parted lips. We are a hairbreadth. The untold apologies, the unuttered thanks, the unshared talks—all would vanish in the long sleep. I close my eyes and sob pleadingly within me. It all is too late.

Lying full length in bed with sweat breaking out all over my body, my eyes rest on the center of the front wall as if straining to see it through to identify the imminent nightcrawler, the butcher. The little space derived from comforters is no haven but a casket where alive I am buried. My body stiffened, my extremities paralyzed, my fists clenched, but their fingers have long gone mummified. My body sinks as much as my mind does. In sheer ignorance of the time, though, my cheek is slid by a drop of sweat perspired from my forehead, and inside the quilt, my whole body is febrile, as it were, being hemmed in a claustrophobic steamer for

good, with my head hanging out for want of beheading. Begging God to spare us, burn-out, I heave a sigh of resignation—the only sound I am entitled to give.

In the abyss of terror, my nerves are stretched to the breaking point, ready to snap at the creak of the door. The only note reported to me, for now, is the table clock in motion; in the tick-tick-tick that numbers the countdown of my end, I have lost track of the intruder.

New light is shining. A slight chill hovers over me. I tilt my head to the curtain side learning dawn has broken, the long night has been severed at last, the chattering of sparrows is never so sweet and soothing. Maybe he didn't want to make a scene, I tell myself. The noise of the opposite room has quelled and succeeded by the next living voice I hear.

"You're up," Mother muttered, an early riser who automatically wakes up at five a.m. She was in a semi-somnambulant state with eyes half-lidded. I did not respond but gazed at her rising with a grunt and turning around toward me. Concerning the dawn and her person, I leaned up and seized her by the arm, "I've been through a terrible thing at night. Someone, a thief perhaps, broke into our house and then I heard the noise in another room," I whispered in trepidation, though had been calmed by the sight of Mother awake, still, I imagined that guy was in some corner of our house lurking to pounce on his prey. I suppressed the subsiding fear boiling again as though the act of recalling that eerie night was reliving it.

“Really?” said Mother with a dubious expression, “I’ll go and check it out.” Staring at her leaving back, hesitantly I pulled bedclothes away, put my feet down, shivered by the sudden chill of the tiled floor, put on slippers and set off.

“You might have misheard,” quipped Mother with a reassuring smile spread over her round face, “I guess it’s the sound of raindrops battering on the air conditioning unit.”

“No, I did hear footsteps. It was so real, and the fumbling sound he made. It was right there—” confusingly I moved forward and looked about the once nightmare room, “I really heard it,” my voice lowered as I noticed the drizzle and the unfamiliar articles that were still to which I was a stranger and the desk littered with unkempt papers. Had it always been like this before I stepped in? I could not tell, for this room has been standing idle for a long time and except Mother, nobody had cleaned it. Or was it the evidence that the criminal had left? Nothing but a trick of senses? The fever, drugs, waking up in the middle of the night. Maybe I did mishear. God knows. But thankfully, no one got hurt and I could see Mother again in daylight.

“It’s all right now,” she patted me on the back.

Beside the desk, turning around on hearing her receding steps, I sensed a draught flitting around my arms, goose pimples. And now the bell rippled in. It dawned on me that there was no heavy twang when talking, no cough, no headache as well. I ventured one foot onward and rejoiced at finding it was light and palpable on the earth.

My fever had been sweated out.

In a delightful trance, I stood rooted to the floor and disenchanted by mother going out of the bathroom into the kitchen. Her back, something I have missed most, always belongs to the mornings. Drawn by an inexplicable impulse, I eased out of the room but blocked by thirst, thus swerving to the dining table on which two cups of morning tea lay, as usual, tepid, beside a vacuum flask. I grabbed my share, gulped it down and refilled my cup several times. At this, I cast a few glances through the ajar kitchen door at Mother and in a dazzle of light, her peripatetic motion in the steamy kitchen emerged before my eyes—now sat on a stool picking and sifting; now bent down over the sink washing and scouring; now strode forward cooking lunch amid sweltering smoke. She is a full-time juggler wearing the hats of cook, cleaner, caregiver, with her busy back shuffling in and out of kitchen and bathroom and living room and bedroom. The truth broke alarmingly. Every day, as a beam of new light falls on my face, I am fortunate to wake up from the high-pitched shouts of Mother, regaled with a cup of tea, a whiff of lunch, and our altogether clean, well-lighted home devoid of straggling hairs.

And here I was, here and now, at the table before the hard-swallowed eggs. Turning it over, I bit with tears mounted into my eyes and throat congealed. It was the best sunny-side-up egg that I deserve, who, as a daughter, was too late to realize its specialty: Mother is always too busy in the morning to check on the two sizzling eggs.

To the End

“911, what is your emergency?”

“I—I can't find my dad. My father's missing. God. I came back home—”

“Ms., listen, I want you to calm down, ok? What's your name?”

“Sadie, Sadie Goodwin.”

“Sadie, what's your exact address?”

“3459 Alder Street across from Sunset Park.”

“Can you repeat that for me?”

“3452 Alder St. 3452 Alder St.”

“Ok, the police are on their way.”

“Hurry!” The phone call is fizzled out in a wail.

Along with the siren, two policemen arrive at the steps and through the car window see the front door is already open, the lady beside it is middle-aged, agitated. Hardly had they got off the car, the woman has stood before them, piping up.

“All right, Ms., we'd like to know more about your father.” At this, the three walks in a file onto the steps and about entering the house the front guy with a thick notebook under his arm

pauses in the doorway and glances tacitly back at his colleague as hearing: pa suffers from dementia, says the daughter in the hallway looking at the medicine on the surface of a shoe wardrobe, I'm so worried about him, he knows no one and how long he's been away.

"Can you show us around your father's room?" says the policemen in the back.

The door bolt unfastens open with a smell. Worn-out mahogany furniture, a discolored pin-up calendar for a defunct year and a dusty frame of a wedding picture on the wall, drapes down, a writing table beside a bookcase, sheets with washed-out yellow smears, and a pillow flecked with blood.

"I've never left him more than one day, But I've been under a lot of pressure lately, the school, the kids (I'm a primary school teacher), and taking care of dad. I went to a bar. Dad wouldn't have been lost should I had come back earlier. It's my fault. I've already lost my mother, I can't lose him too!" cries out Sadie, breaking down again.

"Sadie, what happened, why there is a police car at our door?"

Turning back at the call in the hallway, the two policemen see a man in a puzzle and lumberjacket without taking off his knitted wool cap.

"This is my husband, Adam," replies Sadie looking past his husband's eyes up at the brim of his cap, "Father is missing."

"Oh, my, how come? We locked the door."

“I don’t know. I don’t know!” says the wife between sobs. And the husband holds her in his arms and fondles her hair with one hand.

“Sometimes, when my father-in-law flips out, rampaging, we’d lock him in his room,” explains the husband.

“Do you remember what clothes he’s wearing?” asks the policeman with his hand suspending on his notebook.

“Um, he’s in a grey sweater, khaki nylon trousers, I suppose, he usually wears that at home. Dear! how can he pull through on such a cold day.”

After issuing this information through his walkie-talkie, the other policeman replies, “Ok, I see. May I ask where you are after dark?”

“Well, I was in the company, working overtime. Some statistics glitches needed to be solved.”

Back in the car with a picture of the father and enough notes, he asks, “What do you think? The same corny missing old man case or a whole new story?”

“Well, if really missing, plus dementia, mostly can’t be found back. Dead in the wilderness or kidnapped by someone for organs or something like in the street. Our work would be easier.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Why do they have no child at such an age? And they’re not wealthy as you can see from the house renovation. It looks like the wife’s parents’ house. After all these years of toil, haven’t saved up any?”

“Maybe they are a dink couple. Pupils are the worst.” quips the other.

“Check their medical records,” he pauses, “I feel something fishy about them. Taking care of Alzheimer’s is hard.”

“Right, not a spur-of-the-moment thing. Many people would either hire a nurse or put the old in a nursing home. Let’s get back and see what the computer tells us.”

They hardly have any eye contact during reminiscing the photo album, the memories they have experienced and partaking in the chore, the couple senses nothing they can do or left to be mentioned, after bathing they lie in bed, motionless, wordless. With her back turning to his chest, though the two bodies still being in distance, Sadie feels his husband’s warmth and breath on her bare shoulder outside the covers, as if to comfort her. It is the first time in a month they have ever simultaneously slept in one bed. And they consent to it in silence.

Staring at her outline by the light of the lamp, Adam is afraid of his mind delves into what he has chosen to do in the morning. He attempted at turning his back but failed, for gazing at the wall with harsh lamplight made him feel left out, see none of his shadow only naked emptiness.

After coaxing and manhandling him to eat his dang breakfast I don't know whether I left the door unlocked on purpose or impulse. But I didn't expect that he really sneaked out. Is this the end? After all these years?

Gazing into the dark recesses of the room while refraining from meeting his look, and the light face-to-face, she begins fumbling his hand in the dark and takes it to her belly and covers it with her own as a hint of putting out.

I knew the door was unlocked. Saw father idly perching himself on the edge of the bed through the crack but did nothing, just moved on. I don't know what came upon me at that moment. It's Adam who left the door open, not me. The police would find him back, after all. Right?

The husband receives with a start but gets in the mood, putting his hand on her bare shoulder, knowing it is what he needs.

Rolling over and sitting on him, grooving, she bends over to put out the lamp.

In the wall-to-wall darkness, Sadie calls silently, "Give it to me. Yeah, give it to me, into my belly."

The Three Trials

On the way to the office, Jack is in a quandary about this meeting. Long ago, the urge of proving himself in front of his hallowed teacher; later, the agitation of confessing; now, the unease of behaving himself.

Somehow, his mind, after being told in the dorm a moment ago that Gale's father has pulled strings to pave the way for his son after graduation, drifts into recalling the small talk on the topic of cheating with Gale last year, the scene, the day of the last exam of their five-year bachelor's degree in Medicine.

Jack! Roused, he swung around and caught Gale Garnett waving at him with a broad smile. He joined the throng, picked his way toward his roommate around the corner, together they chatted about the exam while descending the curving staircases. In a moment, the two had switched onto the open area where the din was looser and more mingling.

"Look. The final exam of our time at uni. Want to eat out?" Gale proposed.

"Umm, sorry I can't. I'd be glad to but I'm studying at the library this afternoon. You know, the entrance exam," said Jack.

"Oh, right. I almost forgot. Now the study is your life. Copy that." Gale gave back a knowing nod, "Fingers crossed."

"Speaking of the exam...."

“What?” responded Gale, scrolling on his phone ordering take-out.

“Did you see... I happened to notice someone cheated.”

“Why. How come?” Gale looked up as if sniffed out some appetizer.

“Well—I was getting up from my seat then and caught—accidentally,” Jack lowered his voice, “Martin, Martin Porter, flipping a tiny sheet of paper under his desk between his legs. Remember? From physiology class.”

“Oh, I know of him. Only by sight. But I would not walk the tightrope if I were him. I mean, think about the consequences. I’d rather resit.”

“That’s what I thought. It’s a dirty business, unfair to the others. Besides, how can he square with his conscience, you know.”

“I gotta say, Smith, it’s a question of sink or swim. But then again, I guess he is such a daredevil because what he did is not in anyone’s way. A small test. No big deal.”

“Right, just a small test, after all,” Jack agreed in an even voice with eyes gazing into the refraction of the heatwave.

At the gate of the cafeteria, they parted. Jack watched Gale leave—his best friend at college who would leave a light on for him at his coming back late—light of foot, light-hearted, as if nothing would come to stick in his craw, if any, he would luck it through anyway. Part of him ached to follow those retreating steps, goofing off the day; rationality

reminded him of the imminent fair exam eight months later, the entry ticket to the higher medical game, his dream, his future. At this, he marched into the building, trawling for the shortest line. But Martin the cheater barged into his sight with a glow all over his face, swaggering gait and balderdash—at least in Jack’s eyes, who now cooked his head, looking elsewhere. A dark flash crossed his mind, to his astonishment, that if only Gale, after the knowledge, could let it slip to professors’ ears. Throwing all this behind, he dined before a windowpane while occasionally looking at his watch.

Pedaling his newfound second-hand bike through dappled light and shade at a time when hardly a soul was present, Jack slowed down and narrowed his eyes, face-up, on the rustling leaves and filtered sunlight. The five-minutes break in between. Face forward, he sped up into a turning toward the library.

A patch of orange light slanted on his book, edging. The passage of study time shot like a marble from a catapult bursting out without a trace. Relieving his hunger with low carbohydrates, he rode back in a shortcut with medical audiobooks buzzing in his ears for he was a believer in repetition making for retention, the same thing he did during teeth-brushing and before sleep. Food was such a snoozefest. He rushed to a light place downstairs and started reciting, pacing up and down, an iPad in one hand, the other weaving shapes in the air. As the bell of closure rang out, he tore himself away from the desk but dashed off as soon as his oversized bag was on his back.

The belated autumn was made public by the palpable crispness under the full moon suspended on the shifting treetops abreast with his pedaling. A sudden weariness ground on his nerves as he heard basketball bangs and clangs and bravo and percussive dance music. All of these, however, were mere trivia when Jack came across another guy studying in the kitchen room right now—after eleven—under the dim light. Quickly closed the door before being seen, he dispelled the thought to round off the day, scrambling upstairs and clumping on the same position.

And the days wore on as the leaves of the lined ginkgo trees turned from green-and-yellow to golden to fallow, full to scanty to stripped, wind-blown to soggy to snow-capped. Five months is long for Jack in his growing weight of clothes on the bike seat plodding through the indentation covered with watery foliage or unfrozen snowdrift. Five months was also a moment, vanishing like a puff of dandelion, swinging away in the dedication of Jack's belief. Life had become as regular as clockwork, enclosing himself among three places and one route. The day was coming. But was liberation less tiresome than law?

He scurried to the loo again as a precaution when near the front of the line. On washing hands, he gave a glance at himself in the mirror. His eyes were sharp with bleakness. Jaw taut. Lips tight. Entering the test room and looking for his place, he was a little dazed by the number of his cohort, holding on to the adjudication of several sheets of paper. The moment he sat down by the window he found the distance between him and the desk was different; the light from without was too bright; the evergreen nestling against the pane too young. He

waited. And now as the speaker reverberated through the deserted corridor with the volley of flipping sound on each desk, he had to go all out for passing the exam.

The next day after the examination, true to form, Jack on his bike trudged along the curb in the morning—though this time he was slower. *All because I was too nervous, all of these, too eager to win. But at least I made it out, right? The grades might not be good, but not too bad either. I'm not smart though, the months-long hardships I've braved will pay in return. Yes, it will. I wish God could stand by my side. No, what I earn only comes from myself.* The reflex of enforcing this process had entrenched in his veins, but the wheel in his machinery had grown dull for want of lubricant. Against the overcast sky, countless dark twigs rambled outward and upward on each thin bare branch, as if striving to pierce the grey—all together they were a palm of a labyrinth. Jack lowered his head only to find the last patch of leaves had been swept. The blacktop was soggily darkened with one or two distinct white lines and yellow stretching away into the level.

He stands before the building. Far from the classic red-brick style of the Faculty of Arts building with elegant lancet windows and stone arches, rung by a clump of sweet-william, overlooking a great lawn with crabapple trees and students here and there; the 8th cement building before Jack, tucked away amid numerous of the like, is a building of tomorrow, refurbished handsomely a year before—immaculate glass wall without, pallid marble within—smacks of cutting-edge apparatus and a cross of disinfectant, formalin, stink. There is no creak or resistance when Jack pushes open the swing door. Right in front of him is an

ink-stone-colored elevator with a smooth reflection of Jack's figure. As he leans into the octagonal lobby, he feels cold creeps up to his ears. He quickens his steps to the elevator door, and through his cuff puts his thump on the icy bottom, and robs his ears with his hands as being moved onto the fifth floor. Down the porch, Professor Wilson's door is open. Gently Jack knocks on it, comes in after a call of permission and feels a bit unaccustomed to seeing Professor in plain clothes who now smilingly rises to his feet, makes for the door, and closes it with a gesture pointing at the chair, signaling the opening of a light academical exchange.

"Won't you have a seat, Jack?" Professor returns to his chair and reclines back in a conversational posture. His brown greatcoat drapes over the hanger beside a divan where Jack is seated on another tip with his hands clenched on his legs; now the Professor is in a sweater with the window behind him casting light past his neck and about his head. In a moment Jack cannot tell whether the sweater is dark blue or just pure black.

"Good afternoon, Professor Wilson. I'm here to hand in my thesis," says Jack with his back slightly bowing.

"About the paper, I've read the copy you sent me. You've done a pretty good job, though there're several points wanting finishing touches." At this, Jack is a little twitched by, as the professor emerges from the shadows turning his upper body to reach to his drawer and take out a few pages of Jack's paper, the sharp closeness between him and this wrinkled man with his elbows resting on the red-wood table.

“I’m impressed by your analysis on biomarkers of inflammation and incident rheumatologic disease. But I noticed that one or two of your chosen modules and references are not from expert sources.”

“Sorry, Professor. I was preparing for the entrance exam while writing, and time was limited. I’ll amend it right away, Professor.”

“Time is no alibi,” says Professor thumbing through the paper, “and there is still some room for improvement in your framework. Your five years of study should give me a better display. I always think highly of you.” Again, reclining back into shadows and folding his hand on his lap, Professor adds, “It’s pardonable though, you’re on that big exam.”

“I was, Professor. But now I have more time and I will do my best on refinement.” Again, Jack is smarted by the beams radiating around Professor, hesitates to level with him the grades or asks for other stuff.

“Wonderful. I remember when I was your age, at a time of shortage, doctors and nurses were hotcakes. Now things are different. Competition is fierce. Of course, you’re also very hard-working,” Professor says.

“Thank you, sir. I just do what a student needs to do,” Jack says in a sheepish tone with eyes on the paper.

“Haven’t you thought about where are you going, Jack? Ever thought about getting a Ph.D. after an M.D.? Which hospital to work in?” Wilson asks fatherly with a professorial concern in his note.

“Well, I do want to keep on pursuing knowledge, the question is I don’t know whether I have a choice. Now I’m practicing for the final interview. To be honest, I’m quite at loss about it, sir. If possible, could you please tell me what makes a good candidate during an interview?”

“Well, I can’t give you a specific answer, I mean, schools are different. But there are a few general things, in my opinion, of which you may take heed. Stay articulate, confident, and your personal introduction should stick to your school’s—no, your teacher’s research direction. By the way, what school did you choose?” The Professor starts to look for some books in his drawers and bookshelves. “Here are some books, dog-eared parts, I’d recommend you take and read for as long as you want.”

“Thank you, sir. Saint Thomas University, sir.” Jack nods his head while taking the books and stays stationary.

“Excellent university. Great medical school. I have a couple of friends there. It’s a terrific place for you to keep on, but also competitive,” Professor leans forward and picks up the thermos on the table, lowering his eyes while sipping, saying, “Next semester I as well am going to leave. Oh, your grades, then?”

Though quite surprised about the leave of Professor Wilson, Jack answers, “Um, not very high,” replies he awkwardly, disguised with a feigned smile and a sideways glance as if all the bitter episode pouring back to him, “But I’m very thankful that I can be eligible to partake in the interview, really.”

“Sometimes the more you want something, the further it slips away. And success, believe it or not, is a little luck plus diligence. Don’t be too hard on yourself. I believe in you.”

“Thank you, sir. What you’ve said means a lot to me.”

“Alright, then.” Professor suddenly stands up, bringing Jack to the same posture, as it were, the conversation is about to end. He takes his greatcoat from the hanger, slips into it, bottoms up saying, “Send me your basic information, grades, number, code, CV, etc. Better be quick, all right?” Professor Wilson with his piercing eyes and friendly smile doles out all these without turning a hair as if ordering in a restaurant.

“Okay, sir,” Jack responds dryly while his mind is still startled by what undertones he has perceived. *Professor wants to do me a favor by using his influence to pull me through the interview, to make me join his group, become his connection, his henchman not only at school but in the hospital.* The whole figure from top to toe stands before him, upright and robust, maffled in the shadows with glacial beams gliding past the bulk as arrows in millions charging toward Jack who now feels he doesn’t even know the man before him. His eyes turn astigmatic; his heart pounds deadly; his brain leaps to explode. The boy’s flesh is

disembodied from the silenced world. The young man's beliefs are shattering into pieces.

Fitfully puffed from the vent the heated air is stifling him in a heavy jacket. He is seized with dizziness as if knocked down by a boxer.

When his mind comes back into focus, Jack recoils a step as though being tripped, falters, "I'm off now, sir." And he revolves on his back foot trying to leave this place while two claps send him a shudder on his shoulder from the creature in the dark, almost taking all strength away from his body. His right shoulder lolls momentarily.

The door is closed. He scuffles toward the stairs and recaptures the freshness in the marble hall. He moves on like a normal person, a trifle slower though. His soul agitates to run away but his feet are heavy. It crosses his head that night after two-month torment of waiting for the result that he was immersed in the dark with blinding shininess from the screen of the iPad, blindsided by the pop-up grades—not decidedly high, but enough—feeling a surge of hot blood shooting into his brain in a split second. Eyes gleaming and head giddy, for all night, he sat up envisioning the world beyond the roofs.

The light reflected from nowhere troubles his eyes. By following the trace, he puts his head a little to the right side and beholds water drops scattered on one piece of the octagonal wall. In the marble mirror, he is still himself—middle height, mismatched a little in his heavy jacket, brown hair, jeans—with a stack of thick books in his arm as of that every day in his casual wear. Approaching closer to it, he finds his face is impassive even to a fault; yet a stain of water is obstructing his *right* eyeball in reflection. *What of it if I take his offer? Gale has*

his father, everyone has a way out, and I'm not going to give up what's supposed to be mine, back to the days knowing that my chance was slim, and even now my chance is still unknown. Giving me hope for what! The world is unfair, the fate funny. You should've just declared failing grades on me. Stop being stupid. How funny I've worshiped Wilson from freshman year, how sarcastic I used to despise Martin. When it comes to personal interests, I am him.

He stretches out his *right* hand and erases it with his thumb. Takes a step back to give another look at his features for a moment. Strides out of the building.

The noon sun beating down cruelly. With his left arm holding the books, he takes out his cellphone and types in: "Dear Professor Wilson, I hope you will be doing well in the new environment..., herewith is my basic information."

After a double-check, he presses the "send" bottom. Jack dares not to look back. The bell starts ringing, disgorging the crowd onto the pavement. He joins up the mass—confronted by a student elbowing his way against the current—lowers his head from the point-blank sunbeams.

Layers of Love

Glancing out of the bay window over the scene from the desk with open books. He rests his chin in one hand, the other busily turning a pen. Shimmering with crystal drops after sunny rain is the verdant lawn and right now it is tinted with ducklinglike color. Not many people would like to sit or lie on the wet grass and get embarrassed after standing up. The swaying leaves gone with the wind is the only moving object until she comes. Walks into the scene. Walks into his life.

He puts down his pen.

Stopping and going as if scouting among something, she is prudent. Besides the vague side face she has presented in Act One, now she gives him more time to remember her reddish-brown shoulder-length hair as she is hunkering down, her wearing dress as lifting it, and her herself.

He realizes that she is collecting leaves inside the moist grass and following the newly formed stream along the slope to gather more. It makes him wonder what she is going to do with all the leaves. Bookmark? Specimen? It seems doesn't matter.

Funny he used to disbelieve that one can fall for a stranger within merely several minutes. Losing no time, putting aside all worries, he rushes through the library shelves, down the stairs, flings open the door, treads onto the grass with a soggy sound of spattering spots. Halting his steps dead, he becomes terrified of budging more than one inch. Gauging the

distance between them, he is stumped for words. The distance can be narrowed to none or elongated to two long opposite shadows. He takes a deep breath, and steadily, gingerly walks toward her like a gentleman (at least to him), or a normal student on campus.

“Hi, um, I just ended my class, passing by here. Happened to see you collecting something,” he stutters, “It seems quite interesting. May I join you?” Once that proposal comes out of his mouth, he curses himself inward for bringing up such a silly subject.

“Oh, ok. I’m making flowers.”

“Flowers? Leaves can be made into flowers? Wow, it’s quite an eye-opener.”

She says yeah casting her eyes downward, a smile dimpled her cheeks, after a pause producing something from her pocket, releasing her fingers slowly while holding out her forearm.

What comes into his sight is a roselike flower. Only the yellow is fading.

“Yes, you can call it rose,” she replies as if reading his mind. “A yellow rose made by ginkgo leaves. You can keep it.”

No sooner had he made sense than the roselike flower has already slept in the hollow of his hand, during which without the touch of her fingers. Though she stands against the light, he feels her face is full of brightness and her chestnut hair behind her ear hangs forward disturbed by a sudden waft of air that soon travels with her silhouette toward his soul.

“Thank you,” he breaks into nervousness again, groping for words. “It’s the first time in my life that I’ve ever received a flower. I’ll take care of it. I promise.”

“I’m Holland,” she chips in.

“I’m Linden.”

“Nice to meet you.” The two say and smile in soft unison against the wind, amid the scene.