

1993

For our first date Joe brings me a huge bouquet of tiger lilies. He comes upstairs with them and I introduce him to everyone. Judy, wrapped up in her worries, hardly pays attention. Beth grins like a 12-year old.

Beth has mild cerebral palsy, and Joe will ask about it later. "Is it degenerative?" he will ask.

"No," I'll say. By then I'll know he's thinking of his mother, who has Parkinson's disease. He'll believe that my friend having CP means something, the way I believe thinking Joe was an old crush means something. We will have already begun looking for meaning where there is none, seeking evidence of fate.

We have dinner at Pete's Tavern, where O. Henry wrote "Gift of the Magi," Joe tells me. It's crowded and I'm nervous. My fish and chips lay untouched.

But later as we walk through SoHo in the bitter cold, I relax. We find a swanky café, where I have a cappuccino and Joe, an espresso with lemon rind. He tells me about the coffee shops he ran back in Chicago, how he worked his way up from barista to manager to regional manager. Yet his father still answers, "My son makes coffee," when anyone asks him what Joe does. He tells me about his mother, how she was first in her medical school class and has been a pediatrician in Harlem for

25 years. He tells me she had a stroke when he was 12 and almost died. He tells me she recovered only to be recently diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. He tells me he took that as a sign that it was time to come home.

“She's not so bad now,” he says. “Her balance is a little off. But she can still work.”

I feel special he's telling me such things so soon.

That night I can't sleep. Partly it's the cappuccino, partly I know something is happening, is about to happen. The smell of the tiger lilies is so strong I have to put them in the kitchen, away from me.

For our second date, we go to the movies. Although I like Joe, I'm still nervous. Afraid he'll want to hold my hand, I sit with my arms and legs crossed, my body turned away. Later he'll tease me.

“It was like you were trying to sit as far away from me as possible,” he'll say.

He won't know that the whole time I was furtively eying him – his wide shoulders and narrow waist, his strong legs.

For our third date, we go to the American Museum of Natural History. We look at the dinosaurs, the giant tikis, the big blue whale. We look at the gems, and he tells me how his mother collects jewelry.

“She'd have enough for a museum,” he says. “Well, a small museum.”

It's near the gems that my hand brushes against his, and he finally takes it. In the reflection of a display case, I watch him kiss my cheek.

At the end of the night is when he kisses me for real, on the street, in front of my dorm. It's not my first kiss. Jarrett was the first, in his apartment, where he made lapping noises like a dog. I'm glad that Joe makes no such noises.

It's the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, but people are still around. People pass us, as we kiss – anyone I know, I wonder? Anyone to ask me later, as though we're in junior high: “Who was *that?*”

For our fourth date, I invite him upstairs. “What do you want to do?” he asks, and I put my arms around his neck.

I'm pretending not to be a virgin. I assume Joe will freak out the way that Jarrett did. “I don't want hurt you,” Jarrett said. I didn't tell him he didn't have to worry about that, that I didn't care enough about him to be hurt by him.

I suck in my breath, just like in books.

Joe pauses above me. “Are you all right?” he whispers.

I nod.

I like it better afterward when we lie in my little bed and talk. I tell him my dreams of wanting to be a writer, how my parents disapprove. I tell him I want to write a history of my family, like when my father left China a child and never saw his father again.

Joe nods. The Communists did the same thing to his family in Korea. "My dad hasn't seen his father since he was 10 years old," he says.

He tells me he was born the year of the horse, not just the horse, but the white horse, a very lucky year. I tell him I was born the year of the rat. He says, "Isn't there a story about the rat who ate up the horse's grain?"

I've never heard of such a story. The only one I know is about the animals' race to the Buddha, and how the rat tricked the cat and used the ox to come in first.

He tells me how he picked the ponies as a kid, how his Italian nanny's husband would take him to the races. He'd show Joe the list of contenders, and Joe always somehow knew who'd win. He tells me that the day they left the Bronx and his nanny was one of the worst days of his life.

"I cried and cried," he says. He didn't cry much more after that.

He tells me about high school, how he and his friends would tease the younger kids, chasing after them in their car, opening and closing the doors and yelling at the tops of their lungs, "We're gonna get you!" How one of them dove into a snow bank and hollered back at them, "Fuck you guys!" He tells me how he got his slightly crooked front tooth, how James Mancini challenged him to a fight in the cemetery.

"I'm gonna kick your ass, chink!" James cried before sucker punching him so that Joe fell, mouth first, against a gravestone.

He tells me how he played football. "Wide receiver," he says, as though I know the difference. How his father made him quit because it was a "barbarian sport," how his coach offered to talk to Joe's dad to try and get him to change his mind.

He tells me about his high school girlfriend, Lillian Kuo, also Chinese and the only other Asian woman he's dated, besides me. She wouldn't sleep with him, he says, but he suspected she was hooking up with his friends. Finally, that summer after graduation, he caught her in bed with another guy, both dead drunk.

"He wants to marry me," she sobbed.

He tells me about his wild college days, the endless parties, how he almost failed out. He tells me about his college girlfriends, one wild and troubled, the other sweet and stable. He says that he feels he's been given a second chance with his parents.

"Tabula rasa," he says.

He confesses his rampant drug use to me. At first I'm shocked. When I think of drugs, I think of *After School Specials* and Just Say No. I think of Helen Hunt throwing herself out the window on a bad trip. I've never even smoked pot. But very quickly I get used to the idea. I even begin to think it's cool.

To me Joe is a football star and bad boy in one. He's like one of the popular boys I always crushed on in high school, boys I was too shy to talk to. He's not Jarrett with his perpetual

smile and soft voice. He's not like Bernard who wants to seem nice but is not. He's older, 27 to my 21, and has seen some of the world. And he, the bad boy, likes me, just as I am. He doesn't expect me to say something profound every two seconds, like Jarrett. He doesn't analyze our conversations as we're having them ("We always talk about our families," Jarrett would say, without offering an alternate topic of conversation). He's not afraid of my silences. He likes it when I curse.

One thing though: he still thinks I'm not a virgin when I am.

"Have you been tested?" he asks. He's talking about AIDS, the thing everyone is terrified of. He's been tested: clean as whistle.

"No," I say.

"Well what about the guy you were with?"

"Um." I fumble. Finally I say yes. He was tested and he was fine.

"Okay," Joe says, but I know he doesn't believe me.

Finally one sunny winter afternoon, I tell him.

"I have something to tell you," I say. We're on the phone.

His breath catches. Then, "You fool around with someone else?" He's thinking of Lillian.

"No, no." The exact opposite, I want to say. "I never slept with that guy I went out with last year. I never slept with anyone before you." I swallow. "You were the first."

“Oh,” he says, sounding surprised. I brace myself. “Well, that's okay.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “I can live with that.”

After that I'm his girlfriend.

We talk almost every night, sometimes barely talking, sometimes just listening to each other's breaths. When he comes to my dorm, he always brings me a little gift. A stuffed bear, a bar of chocolate, a bag of kiwis, which Judy eats, thinking they're hers.

Fridays I ditch Chinese class to visit him at his parents' house in Westchester. I take an early morning bus from 86th Street. I trudge up his snowy street and walkway. I hide a snowball behind my back and smash his sweatshirt when he opens the door.

“Look at the mess you made,” he teasingly chides me.

We have Nathan's hot dogs and french fries for lunch. He does his parents' laundry and shows me pictures from his trip to Korea over the summer. It was his first time. His classmates were Korean Americans and adopted Koreans from all over the world. One was a Swiss girl named Leta who had a crush on him. Playing Truth or Dare once, she kissed him, but he stopped it.

“It felt weird,” he says.

We have sex in his little twin bed. We have sex in the shower. Our lips grow sore from kissing.



Christmas comes, and I give Joe a black angelfish.

In Chicago he had a huge tank. A saltwater reef. The angelfish is fresh water, but I don't know the difference.

“Get him a goldfish,” advised one of my friends. “Goldfish are very lucky.”

They're also common. At the store I notice the angelfish, angel like my name. The black one is the only one that follows my finger all the way down its tank. Surely, another sign.

Joe beams when he sees the fish. “I was thinking about starting up another tank,” he says. “Now I'll have to.”

His present to me is a gold and diamond bracelet. “It's Cartier,” he says, helping me put it on.

For his drive home, we cover the fish bowl with plastic wrap and a rubber band. I wear the bracelet all night.

The next morning Joe's mother comes downstairs, sees the black angelfish, and nearly faints.

For what I don't know is that to Koreans black is a bad luck color. Black animals especially. They bring bad luck, or signal that it's coming. To Joe's mother it's a sign that I'm bad luck and always will be, even after she accepts me, even after Joe and I marry. I will always be bad luck, and will have to spend the rest of my life making up for it.