

REBECCA MAKKAI

Painted Ocean, Painted Ship

FROM *Ploughshares*

TO ALEX'S PERSONAL HORROR and professional embarrassment, the Clement College alumni magazine ran an obnoxiously chipper blurb that September, in a special, blue-tinted box. She read it out loud to Malcolm on the phone:

FOWL PLAY

Assistant Professor Alex Moore has taught Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" quite a few times since joining the English Department in 2003, but she developed an unexpected intimacy with the poem when, duck-hunting in South Australia this June, she accidentally shot and killed an actual albatross.

Moore, whose doctoral dissertation at Tufts University focused on D. G. Rossetti and his muse Jane Burden Morris, took aim at what she thought was a goose.

"My students are never going to let me hear the end of this," she says.

Because the birds are protected under Australian and international laws, Moore incurred a hefty fine—hopefully the extent of that legendary bad luck! She has no plans to hang the bird around her neck. "The wingspan was over two yards," says the 5-foot-2 Moore. "That would be asking for it!"

Those exclamation points killed her, the way they tacked the whole episode down as farce. And the cheery italics. None of Alex's tired sarcasm had come through. She vowed in the future only to give quotes via e-mail, so she could control the punctuation. ("You're my favorite control freak," Malcolm said. "No, listen," she said. "It affects my professional image. And 'muse'? I never said *muse*.") Plus there was that photo to the side, her book-jacket photo with the half-smile, perfect for suggesting Pre-Raphaelite intrigue and scan-

dal, but here verging on the smug. A month stuck dealing with the South Australian police and Parks Department; half her grant spent on the fine; her research summer wasted; and all of it snipped down by a freelance writer named Betsy into photo, irony, pretty blue box.

And as for the bad luck, it was just starting, waiting for her back home like her postal bin of unopened mail. Not the "hefty fine" kind of luck, but the "Your career is over" kind, the "Why aren't you wearing your engagement ring?" kind.

"Didn't take you for a hunter," she heard about twenty times that first department party back.

"I'm not," she'd say, or "You don't know who you're dealing with here," or "I'm really more of a gatherer."

She ended up telling the full story, and as she talked the whole party squeezed around where she sat on the arm of the couch—even Malcolm, her fiancé, who'd seen it all happen. He was sweet to listen again, and sweeter still not to chime in with his own version. Her colleagues sat on the coffee table, the bar, the floor, and sipped their white wine. She told them how her half-brother Piet had invited her and Malcolm to his place outside Tumby Bay for June. "He's not Australian," she said. "He just thinks he is." And then once they got there, Piet, in that way of his—just masculine enough to intimidate Malcolm, just Australian enough that everything sounded like a fine, foolish adventure—convinced them to come shooting at his lake, so he wouldn't miss the last day of duck-hunting season.

"Australia is the new America," announced Leonard, her department head. Or rather, he slurred it through his beard. The new hires nodded; everyone else ignored him.

After Piet brought down three ducks and his dog had dragged them in, he wrapped Alex's hands around the gun and showed her the sightline.

"What kind of gun?" someone asked.

"I don't know. A rifle. It was wooden."

She'd seen something barely rising above the stand of trees on the small island in the lake, and shot. If she thought anything, she thought it was a white goose. It went down, crashing through the trees, and Piet sent Gonzo swimming out to it. Gonzo disappeared

on the island, yapping and howling and finally reappearing, sans goose, to whimper at the water's edge.

"Christ," Piet said, and took off his clothes—all of them—to swim out. He emerged from the trees after a long minute, full frontal glory shining wet in the sun. Malcolm slapped his entire arm across his face to cover his eyes. "She's a monster!" Piet shouted. "You've slain a beast!"

Thirty minutes later, Piet, half drunk, was on the phone to his friend Reynie at the Parks Department, asking him to come out and tell them if that wasn't the biggest bloody bird he'd ever seen. They took two double kayaks out—Piet and Reynie, then Malcolm and Alex, who still hadn't seen her victim. It lay there, enormous, wings out, half on a bush, a red spot fading out to pink on the white feathers of the neck. Its whole body glared white, except the wings, tipped in glossy black. "It was beautiful," she told her colleagues. "I can't even describe it—it had to do with the light, but it was just *beautiful*."

"You shouldn't have brought me out here, Piet, Christ," Reynie had said. He put his hand on the bird's back, and Alex walked around to get a better look at the face. It had a rounded, almost cartoonish beak. "I'll have to write you up, and you'll lose your license and pay a fortune. It's a wandering bloody albatross. They're *vulnerable*."

"Vulnerable to what?" Piet had brought his camera, and he was moving the bush branches for a better shot.

"Extinction. Jesus Christ. Vulnerable's a step from endangered. Piet, I don't want to write you up, but you shouldn't have called."

Piet snapped a picture. "Didn't shoot it," he said. "She did. Not even *from* here, never shot a gun before. Girl's been good at everything she ever tried in her whole damn life."

"Which is how I spent the next three weeks camped in Adelaide," she told her colleagues. The ones who were out of wine took this as a cue to stretch and reload at Leonard's bar.

"Hey, great story!" Bill Tossman clapped her on the shoulder, used that loud, cheesy voice more suited to an executive schmoozing on the squash court than a professor of modern poetry. "Wish I could stay to hear the end, but my two friends and I here are late for a wedding!"

They laughed, then all started in: You must be parched! Can I get you some water? Hey, take a load off!

"You're going to do that all year," Alex said. "Aren't you."

And yes, they did, until the real bad luck became public in November and they suddenly didn't know what to say to her at all, as if she'd lost all her hair to chemo and they weren't sure whether to compliment the headscarf.

She actually taught the Coleridge that fall, and passed around a copy of the photo Piet had e-mailed her. It was an unfortunately dull section of 222, half frat boys who only took classes as a pack (one, confused by her story, later indicated in his paper that the Mariner killed the albatross because he thought it was a goose), a bunch of foreign students, mostly Korean, who never spoke, and a freshman English major named Kirstin who made every effort to turn the class into a private tutorial. They passed the photo listlessly, one of the boys raised his hand to ask how much the bird weighed, and Alex made a mighty effort to turn her answer into a discussion of the weight of sin and Coleridge's ideas about atonement.

Kirstin compared the poem to *The Scarlet Letter* and one of the boys groaned, apparently traumatized by some high school English teacher. Alex wished someone else would talk. Poor Eden Su, for instance, in the front row, was one of those Korean students. She wrote astonishing papers, better by a mile than Kirstin's, and yet she never spoke in class unless Alex asked her something directly, and even then, she whispered and pulled her hair across her mouth. Like everyone else in the department, Alex counted class participation as a chunk of the final grade, and Eden, who deserved a high A, would get a B. Before class, Alex had asked her to come to her office later, and now Eden was slowly tearing apart a cheap ballpoint pen.

By one o'clock she was in her office on the phone to Malcolm, the red leaves on the maple hitting the bottom of her window again and again. He was in Chicago, meeting with his thesis adviser. He'd be back the next night, and was asking if she wanted to grab dinner.

"I'll take you someplace nice," she said. "You'll need cham-

pagne." These meetings were probably his last before he defended, and they were going well.

"Sure," he said. "I'll leave it up to you. I just won't feel like getting dressed up."

"Right." She found herself saying it flatly and quickly, but he didn't seem to notice. So she went on. "You know, sometimes girls like getting dressed up. It makes us feel pretty."

He laughed. "Okay. Boys like to wear jeans."

"My student is here." She wasn't. "We'll talk later." She hung up.

The problem, the source of all her snippiness, her cattiness, her being such a *girl* about everything, was that since they'd gotten engaged nine months ago he had not once, not a single time except during sex, which absolutely didn't count, called her beautiful. In sharp contrast to the courtship phase, when he'd say it several times a week, one way or another. And of course she'd known the staring-into-her-eyes thing wasn't going to last forever, and it had been a crazy year, with the Australia trip and her getting stuck there, and his dissertation, but nine months and *nothing*. Not that she was counting, but she was. She'd have settled for a peck on the head and "Hey, gorgeous." A whistle when she stepped out of the shower.

She'd been so caught up in being engaged and close to tenure and publishing her articles and generally getting everything she wanted that it wasn't until those weeks in the Adelaide hotel, alone with Australian TV and her own thoughts, that she started wondering if she could live with Malcolm the rest of her life, never seeing beauty reflected back at her. And she wondered, if she felt like this now, what she'd feel like at nine months pregnant. Or fifty years old. Or twenty pounds overweight. Or terminally ill.

She felt regressive and petty and uneducated for caring about beauty, but she did. God help her, it was closely tied to her self-esteem and probably had been since about fourth grade.

Here was Eden, showing up like a prophecy, knocking with one knuckle on the open office door. Alex motioned her in. Eden's eyes had that glazed, jetlagged look common to all the foreign students. Every year Alex assumed it would wear off by October, but it never did. She'd mentioned it once to Leonard, and of course he'd had a theory. "You know why, right? They stay up all night texting their friends back home. Refuse to adjust to American time."

Eden sat on the edge of the chair, her red backpack on her lap. It almost reached her chin—a kind of canvas shield. “Eden, I just wanted to check in with you.” No response. “You’ve been getting solid A’s on your papers, but I need you to understand that twenty percent of your final grade is class participation.”

“Okay.” She said it through her hair, barely audible. If it hadn’t been a cultural issue, Alex would have worried about depression.

“Do you feel you are participating?”

She shrugged.

“Hello? Do you?” Which was harsh. She was mad at Malcolm, not this poor girl.

Eden shrugged again. “What else could I do?” It was the most words Alex had ever heard her string together, and she was pleased to note that the English was okay. When she’d been a TA, another TA actually told her to compare foreign students’ spoken English with their written English, to make sure they weren’t plagiarizing. The implication being that they were more likely than native speakers to do so, something Alex had never seen borne out.

“There’s nothing else you can do,” she said to Eden. “You need to talk.”

“Okay.”

“Look, I understand that back in Korea you weren’t supposed to talk in class, but you’re at an American university now, and part of an American education is talking. Not just writing about literature, but *engaging*. Out loud.” She always had trouble ending conversations with students, especially ones who wouldn’t look her in the eye. “Is that something you think you can do?”

Eden shrugged and nodded, but she seemed upset, staring at the bookshelf behind Alex. She looked, for once, like she wanted to say something. But she didn’t, just stood up and left.

Alex did take Malcolm someplace nice: Silver Plum, a twenty-minute drive from home. She overdressed, in a sheer green blouse and a silk skirt, knowing he wouldn’t say anything about it at all. It was like she was daring him not to.

He was exhausted. He wore khakis and a wrinkled blue polo shirt, and he was overdue for a haircut, curls everywhere. He ordered a Scotch and gulped it down. He didn’t want to talk about his dissertation, or Boston, or work. She didn’t even try to bring up the plans for the wedding in May, which he’d probably have talked

about, but the thought was starting to make her sick. Specifically: the fact that either, after months of preparations, he’d see her in her dress and say nothing at all, or he’d say something nice and she’d feel it was just out of duty.

“I finally met Jansen’s wife,” he said. Jansen was his adviser, and apparently something of a god in the world of sociolinguistics.

“Yeah? What’s she like?”

“Beautiful. She’s just this gorgeous, sixty-whatever woman with enormous black eyes.”

“Huh.”

“I mean, they’re like *pools* of blackness.”

“Huh.”

“Not what I expected, you know? I thought she’d be some little mousy person. And she’s just this amazing, exuberant, stunning woman.”

Winded from the effort of that much conversation, he returned to his lasagna.

Alex caught her reflection in the window to the street, and for the love of God she looked like a circus clown, all frizz and eyes and jawbone. It was a wonder he could look at her at all. But people had found her beautiful, they really had, and one of the reasons she’d even found her specialty (vain creature that she was) was that Donna Evans, her professor in college for Nineteenth-Century British Poetry, saw her that first day of the term and said, “My God, you’re a ringer for Jane Morris!” The next day, she brought in a book with Rossetti’s *Proserpine* and proved it to everyone.

She wanted to grab Malcolm by the collar with one hand and say, “People would have *painted* me. If I’d lived in the right century, they would have paid me just to sit there!” But with the other hand she wanted to scratch out her face with a marker or a knife, obliterate every trace of ugliness, of gawky eighth grader, of hope.

Some feminist.

That Friday it wasn’t even Leonard who called her in, but Miriam Bach, the Dean of Faculty. Alex was offered a glass of water, asked to take a seat on the soft leather couch. She wanted to compare the experience to being called to the principal’s office, but that had never happened to her.

“So we received a letter from a student named Eden Su,” Miriam

said. She had nothing on her desk, nothing at all except her picture frames and her closed computer, and she rested her hands in her lap. "It was a request to drop your class."

"I think I know what this is about," Alex said. It had been one of about ten scenarios she'd rehearsed since receiving Miriam's e-mail, and she felt her best strategy was to turn this into a friendly debate about how hard to push foreign students, and whether the class participation component was out of order.

"I'm not sure you do. Tell me what you know about Miss Su."

"She *does* seem borderline depressed to me, although I question whether that's cultural, just a matter of reserve. She's not an English major." Miriam was staring at her, so she kept talking. "I think she's a sophomore. Very good writer."

"Yes, her writing is excellent. Tell me something: You mentioned a cultural issue. What did you mean by that?"

"Oh, I wouldn't call it an *issue*. She's just very quiet, and I'm sure that's what the letter is about, that I asked her to speak more in class. I *did* acknowledge that in her previous schooling she likely hadn't been asked to speak much. I hope that didn't upset her."

Miriam opened a desk drawer and pulled out a paper. It wasn't folded—so it was a Xerox of the letter, and who knew how many copies were out there, and why. Miriam glanced through it. "In this exchange, did you refer to her schooling in Korea?"

"Right." And then her stomach turned to a wave of acid. Miriam had asked it so casually, but no, this was the whole point. "Oh God, is she not—"

"No, she's not. She's from Minnesota, fifth-generation American. And her ethnic background is Chinese."

Alex stared stupidly forward. Could she really have mistaken a whispered Minnesotan accent for a Korean one? She started to explain that Eden never spoke, that she looked so jetlagged, but she stopped herself; it might only make things worse. She put her hand to her mouth to show that she was properly horrified, that she felt terrible on behalf of the girl. When really all she felt was horrified for herself.

Miriam looked at the letter again. "The issue, of course, is the presumption that a student who looks Asian must be foreign-born. She's quite angry, and it seems she's involved the Minority Student

Council. She says her father is very upset, but we haven't heard from him yet."

"Can I ask why Leonard isn't handling this, on a departmental level?"

"He felt uncomfortable with the situation." Of course he did. He probably didn't even understand what the issue was. She'd heard the poor man use the word "Oriental" on more than one occasion with no apparent qualms.

"May I please see the letter?" Alex held out her hand.

"Not at the moment, no, I'm afraid not." Miriam slid it back in the desk drawer. "But you'll see it soon. And I want you to know that I do understand how we make assumptions about *all* our students—background, socioeconomic status. I really do understand. If it were up to me, it would end with this conversation."

Alex didn't know what to do, and she realized some principal's office experience would have come in handy here. Did one grovel now? Burst into tears? Make a joke? It was hot, so she rolled up her sleeves. In the office of the South Australian Parks Department, she'd just told her story again and again while they plied her with tea and cookies and tried to ensure she maintained a pleasant impression of Australia despite the legal trouble. A cookie might have been nice right now.

"What's going to happen next is that the Dean of Students will recommend Miss Su take this to the Grievance Committee, and you'll just have to do a written statement. I predict that they'll discuss this briefly and dismiss it. And if there's no disciplinary action, it won't come up in your tenure review. That's my very strong prediction."

On the way to her car, she called Malcolm and canceled dinner, saying she had a monstrous headache and ten phone calls to make. She'd just have seethed silently, and she couldn't bear his asking what was wrong, trying to guess if it was something he'd said or done.

Usually, it was.

That night she drank an entire bottle of red wine, stared at *A Night at the Opera* with the sound too low to hear, and attempted to catalog any racist thoughts she'd ever entertained. When she was

five, walking in Boston, she'd grabbed her mother's hand because there was a black man coming toward them on the sidewalk. But she was so young, and she'd grown up in New Hampshire, for Christ's sake.

More recently, she hated on NPR the way any reporter using Spanish words would roll out the thickest accent possible, just to prove to the stationmaster and the listening public that his ten years of Spanish class had paid off and that he was down with the people. "It's going to be a big issue with Ell-a-diiii-no voters," for instance. In a way he'd never refer to "the *français* community" or "*Deutsch* immigrants."

And there was a journalism professor, Mary Gardner, whose creamy brown skin Alex once stared at in a faculty forum, becoming (profoundly, inexcusably) hungry for chocolate.

But that was it. Honest to God, that was it. A resentment of overzealous reporters, a perverse admiration of Mary Gardner's complexion, a small child's ignorance.

She hadn't even been *around* that much racism. Once, in college, a girl on her freshman hall had said, "If everyone in Asia is, like, lactose intolerant, then how do they feed their babies? Is that why they're all so skinny?"

It occurred to Alex, lying drunk on the couch, that if all she could summon up was one incident of someone else's vague racism, while she could pin three on herself—no, four, let's not forget the big one—that made her the most racist person she knew. By three hundred percent.

Malcolm called at nine to see how she was, but she was too drunk to pick up. He called on Saturday morning, when she was too hung over, and again on Sunday night, when she was once again too drunk. He didn't seem terribly concerned about her absence, not even in the Sunday message. "It's me," he said. "Just checking in. Call me later."

She passed herself in the mirror late that night, and the gin and the bathroom lighting made her look somehow speckled, like a grainy photograph. She gripped the sink edge and squinted, to see how she'd look to a stranger. Interesting, maybe. Striking. From a certain angle, ugly, and from a certain angle, not.

Sometime after midnight, she called Malcolm's cell phone, knowing it would be turned off. She said, slowly, trying to enunciate,

ate, "It's me. *Just checking in*. I want you to know, Malcolm, that I cannot live the rest of my life being ugly. You need to know that. That is all."

She drank five glasses of water and passed out.

On Monday, Eden wasn't in class. Why this should have been a surprise, Alex had no idea. Was she expecting her to show up obediently until the registrar came through with official permission for the late drop? Did she, on some level, think this because she expected Asians to be more mindful of authority? No, no, no, she was just hung over still, from the whole long, miserable weekend, and the coffee had only made things worse. Let's be honest: she was still drunk. She thought she might be missing a couple of other Asian students, too, and the fact that she wasn't sure was a very bad sign.

"Tintern Abbey," she said, and found she had nothing else to add. "Let's read it aloud."

She ended class fifteen minutes early, threw up in the bathroom on the second floor, bought a grilled cheese from the co-op to absorb some of the alcohol, and went back up to put her head on her desk until her afternoon class.

She woke to the ring of her office phone reverberating through the desk, a hundred times louder than it should have been. It was Malcolm.

"Your cell's off," he said. Really, she had no idea where it was. "So you were pretty drunk last night." He was laughing. She remembered the phone call now, and thought she pretty much remembered what she'd said. "What were you drinking?"

"All of it."

"Everything okay?"

"You mean this morning? Yeah." She turned down openings like this all the time. Because what could she possibly say? Asking if he still found her attractive was desperate and unattractive; telling him he needed to compliment her more was worse. In either case, she'd never believe anything nice he said, ever again. She realized that what she was supposed to be upset about was Eden Su. That should have been what she was working up the nerve to tell him. But it had come down to this: after twenty-two years of schooling

and five years of slogging away at her CV, she somehow cared more about her appearance than her career.

"So what's new?" he said.

And she said, "I don't think I can marry you."

Bill Tossman found her on a bench outside the library, trying not to throw up again. She was sitting very, very still, her hands clasped around a paper cup of coffee she didn't think it wise to drink. "There she sits," he said, "as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean." She tried to laugh or smile, but it must have come out a grimace.

"I have something for you." He sat beside her, shaking the bench just enough to make her head throb and stomach slosh. He was a big man. Small bones, and a smooth, bright face, but a soft gut that aged him. He had a crush on her. (Or at least he'd always been sweet to her. She wasn't sure she could trust her judgment any more.) Tossman was a poet, the one department member with a Pulitzer instead of a Ph.D. It made his loud voice all the more surreal.

He slipped his hand into his briefcase pocket, pulled out a rubber-banded pack of playing cards, and shuffled them on his knee. "Cut," he said, and she managed to. He took four cards off the top and laid them facedown on the bench. "Okay," he said, "flip them up."

Seven of diamonds. Seven of hearts. Seven of clubs. Seven of spades.

"See? Your luck is turning!" He grinned at her, proud of himself.

"Where'd you learn that?"

"Where'd I learn *what*?"

He was making her feel like his niece, and although it was sweet, she didn't appreciate it. On a professional level. She gathered the cards and held them out to him, but he shook his head. "No, why don't you hang onto those. And hey, I'm sorry about the whole letter thing. That shouldn't have happened. It wasn't necessary."

She stared at him, trying to comprehend. He wasn't on the Grievance Committee.

"In the paper."

"The paper?"

"Oh. Christ. You've seen it, yes? In the *Campus Telegraph*. I should — there's a stack in the library, if you want to — okay. Hey, I'm going to run before I make more of a jackass. Look, come by if you need to talk." He literally backed away from her — walked backwards a good ten steps, then stopped. "It's not like I don't know about messing up, right?" He laughed at himself and walked on, hitting his briefcase against his leg. He must have meant his marriage ending last year, and then the time he broke down sobbing in front of his Frost seminar when they discussed images of adultery in "The Silken Tent."

Alex held her head a few more seconds, then pushed herself up.

The "open letter" in the *Telegraph* wasn't from Eden herself, but the entire Minority Student Council. It named Alex, described her conversation with Eden pretty accurately, and went on to include "ten stereotypes about Asian-American students" — number eight was "Asian-American students are more likely to cheat to attain high grades" — and a quote from Leonard, stating that "the English Department works hard to include everyone."

She put a nearby *Newsweek* on the stack of *Telegraphs*, picked the whole thing up and dropped it in the big blue recycling bin behind the elevator. There were plenty more papers all over campus, but it felt good to get rid of these fifty or so.

Out on the sidewalk, two girls from her Pre-Raph seminar were waving energetically.

"Professor Moore! We waited for you for, like, twenty minutes!"

She checked her watch. She wasn't even wearing a watch. They stood in front of her, smiling, expecting an explanation, or at least further instructions.

She threw up on their shoes.

Her phone was ringing, but she didn't even know where it was, so she put pillows around her ears. She'd taken two of the Vicodin left from her knee surgery, and now everything was padded with cotton. She had told those girls she had a stomach flu and offered to buy them new shoes, but then they were gone and she was back in the English Department, slumped in the door of her office, and then Leonard was asking Tossman to call her a cab, and now she

was in bed in her clothes. Something sharp was digging into her hip, but it didn't hurt. She dug around. Seven of hearts, seven of diamonds, seven of spades, seven of clubs.

Back in her office, on the phone, Malcolm had actually laughed at first, unable to take her seriously. She held her silence until he got it. "What the hell do you mean?"

She said, "There are people who actually find me attractive."

"I don't?" His voice was an octave above normal. It bothered her now, thinking back, that she had no idea where he'd been. She didn't know whether to picture him in front of his refrigerator, lying on his bedroom floor, out on the deck, driving downtown, sitting on the toilet.

She'd said—perhaps too cryptically, in retrospect—"It's like some horrible inversion of 'The Frog Prince,' like the frog convinces the princess to kiss him, but then she finds herself transformed into a toad. And the frog goes, 'Hey, I'm about as good as you can do now, baby.'"

There was a silence that hurt her throat. He said, "I'm supposed to be a frog?"

"No. You're supposed to *get it*." She'd hung up then, but he'd probably hung up too.

She ran a hand through her hair and realized she hadn't even showered since Saturday. Her bed swayed, and the room turned to water.

Every time she taught the Pre-Raph seminar, she waited till the end of the semester to bring out the actual photographs of Jane Morris. They would see her in Rossetti's and William Morris's paintings, they'd see her needlework, they'd study the decoration of Red House. And this in addition to the lectures from an art professor about the Arts and Crafts movement, the three days spent discussing Rossetti's "The Portrait," a major focus of Alex's own thesis:

This is her picture as she was:
It seems a thing to wonder on,
As though mine image in the glass
Should tarry when myself am gone . . .

Jane Morris was as much the lynchpin of the course as she'd been the goddess of the Brotherhood—that daughter of a stableman, who posed and flirted and married and adulterated her way to the

top of English society, outsmarting and outcharming the snobs. And so each year when Alex showed the photographs, the students—for some reason particularly the girls—were devastated. She wasn't half as beautiful as Rossetti and Morris had painted her. Rossetti had given gloss to her hair and depth to her eyes, added a good three inches to her neck, lengthened her fingers, straightened her nose.

It was only then that the students started to see how all Rossetti's women—Jane, Christina, Elizabeth—shared some indefinable look that wasn't their own but something Rossetti had done to them, a classical wash he'd painted over them. This was where the feminists in the class always started to have fun, and someone inevitably compared the paintbrush to the penis. At which point Alex could lean on her desk and take a breather as they screamed at each other.

She wondered now, lying in bed ignoring the phone, not about Rossetti's fetishes or the invention of the classical but about how Jane Morris felt, to look at a finished painting and see a woman more beautiful than the one she saw in the mirror. Was this the reason she started her affair with Rossetti—knowing she could only be that beautiful when she was with him—or did it feel more like a misinterpretation, an abduction?

And she thought about Rossetti himself, how she'd never considered before that he might really have *seen* Jane Morris that way, not just wished he had. The way she herself had taken an albatross for a goose, an American for a Korean. How easily is a bush supposed to be a bear.

She finally answered the phone around eleven that night, and didn't realize until she heard Leonard's voice how strongly she'd believed it to be Malcolm.

"Thank God," he said. "You're okay, then."

"How long have you been calling?"

"All day. We were starting to think—okay. What can I do to help?" She knew he wanted some kind of concrete plan to fix everything.

"Because I gotta be honest," he went on, "this doesn't look good for the whole department. As a whole."

She wasn't sure if he meant the grievance or the letter or her absence. Or the vomiting.

"Oh, come on, Leonard. It doesn't look *that* bad. Not as bad as half the stuff I've heard you say. I mean, 'oriental'? For Christ's sake, I've heard you use the word 'coed,' Leonard."

"I'm confused." He sounded tired.

"Of course you are."

And why not hang up on him, too, while she was at it?

From seventh grade (after she got over mono) through grad school, Alex had not missed a single class. Freshman year of college, her roommate had practically tackled her to keep her from leaving the dorm with a 104° fever, but Alex just kept walking, stopped to sit on the sidewalk halfway to Biochem, got up again and staggered the rest of the way. It wasn't a matter of maintaining her record, but of principle. Unlike Piet, who'd once shown up at home in the middle of the semester for "National Piet Week," which he celebrated by watching television and getting his mother, Alex's stepmother, to do all his laundry.

But the next day, she stayed home. Oddly, her phone did not ring. Maybe she'd scared Leonard off. Or maybe her students hadn't said anything, grateful for the free time. After that one missed day, she couldn't imagine going back the next, because she didn't know what to expect. She pictured walking into her 222 to find someone subbing for her. Or only three students who'd bothered showing up, the rest assuming the class had been canceled for the term. Or everyone asking if she was all right, and her not being able to lie. She wondered if her lifelong punctiliousness had just been a fear of losing her grip. She wondered if she'd known all along that one little thing going wrong in her world could unravel absolutely everything else.

She was shocked to find herself taking heart in the fact that Coleridge's *Mariner* had made it safely home. He'd done his penance, and continued to do his penance in telling the tale, and Alex wished for something heavy to hang around her neck, something horrendously painful. She thought of her ring, which she still hadn't removed, but hanging it on a necklace chain would only call people's attention to its absence from her finger. Instead, she took it off and put it in a Tupperware and put the Tupperware in her freezer, which she'd once heard was a good place to store jewelry.

She felt lighter, not heavier. But it was a start. She made herself

go for a walk around her neighborhood, staring at people's driveways and the falling leaves and chained-up dogs and unclaimed newspapers. When she came back, there were two messages on her phone. One was from Piet. The other was from the bridal boutique, confirming her dress fitting.

Piet was in town to catch up with friends and to see a woman he'd found on the Internet.

"That's a pretty expensive date, isn't it?"

They met up the next morning, and Piet was usurping the entire red velvet couch in the back of Starbucks. "Look at it this way," he said. "I get here, which is a nice vacay for me anyhow. She feeds me, if she likes me she puts me up, and maybe in the end I come out ahead." He was getting an Australian accent, and it suited him. The sun had aged his face fifteen years in the seven he'd been there, and that suited him, too. "Listen, Al. Where the hell's your ring?"

She managed to get the story out, or at least the parts about Eden Su and going AWOL at work and calling off the engagement. Not the girl part, the part about wanting to be beautiful. "I don't know what I'm doing," she said.

He laughed. "When have you ever not known what you're doing?" He was shredding the wooden stick he'd used to stir his coffee. "What I don't get," he said, "is what's this Asian chick got to do with Malcolm."

"It's hard to explain."

"I got all day."

"It just set me off. Or maybe it was—maybe the idea that someone could look at you and just not see you at all. See something totally different that isn't even you."

"Right, but this is different. Malcolm knows you better than anyone, right?"

"Theoretically." This was the place where she might cry, if she were the kind of person who cried. "I need you to do something with me. You're not meeting this cyberwhore till tomorrow, right?"

"Sure."

"Okay, we're going to go visit my dress."

She figured, if she already owned the dress, it might as well fit her. And a lot could happen between November and May. By May, she

could be marrying someone else entirely. But really, she'd gotten this stupid idea in her head that if she tried it on, something would change. She'd been hoping for something big and white and horrible to hang around her neck, hadn't she? And here it was.

It really did hang, too—it was a halter neck, crisp and shiny and gaping way too big. A little Russian woman flitted around her with pins. Maybe not Russian, she reminded herself. Maybe Lithuanian. Maybe Ukrainian. Maybe Minnesotan. Piet sat on a pink-cushioned bench and watched. "Looks great," he said. "Look even better with a ring on."

She stared in the mirror, not at the dress but at her horrible face. Her skin was dried out and her eyes were puffy, and her hair was a dark mess. She wanted a necklace with a big red stone, to match that brilliant red on the albatross's neck. What she hadn't been able to describe really to anyone about that day in Tumby Bay was the sublimity, the blinding beauty of that bird as it flew, and as it lay where it fell. She could bring back in an instant that moment of white light rising beyond the leaves, her hand shaking against the gun. The echo of the shot seeming to come first because her ears went dead, then the loud roar as they woke again. The flapping and cracking as something fell down through the trees, branch by snapping branch. She wanted black arms on her gown, to match the dead bird's wings. She wanted to take it all back, to return to that moment at the lake's edge and take back that one moment of horrible misprision. And if she'd seen that bird wrong, and seen Eden Su wrong, who was to say she hadn't seen Malcolm wrong, too? She'd been walking around blind ever since that day.

"You look miserable," Piet said. "I'm calling him right now." He pulled out his phone.

"No! Please don't."

"I already dialed." He held the phone out of her reach, like he'd done with stuffed animals when they were kids. She couldn't move away from the Russian woman's pins.

"Malcolm, listen. It's Piet. Yeah, my sister's been an idiot, she's sorry, and she's standing here in her wedding dress looking gorgeous. You'd be a fool not to take her back. What do you say?" He listened for a minute, and she could hear the rumble of Malcolm's voice, but not his words. "Sure, sure. Good man." He clicked his phone shut. "He says call him tonight and you can talk."

"I'm going to kill you."

"No, you're not."

They walked out into the street, her dress left behind in a bag like something hunted and caught and hung up. "See, your luck's turning," Piet said. "As soon as I show up."

"All that's happened is you've meddled."

There was a park up ahead, so they sat on a bench. There were geese flying overhead, real ones, with brown bodies and black faces and white chinstraps.

"So really you've got four options. You go back to Malcolm and back to work, you forget about Malcolm and focus on the job, or vice versa, or you leave it all behind and go live someplace you've always wanted to go. I mean, your problem is it's undecided. And you've never been a girl to leave things to chance, just sit there and let things happen to you. So, you take action and you select an option. One, two, three, or four."

Piet had that way of talking that you'd agree to anything he said. And if she no longer believed she could see clearly enough to find her way, at least she was starting to believe in luck. She reached into her pocket. She said, "Go ahead, pick a card."

The next morning, Eden Su was walking down the big sidewalk that cut diagonally across the campus green, hunched under a carapace of red backpack. She wore a loose, silky blue sweater over black leggings. Alex raced behind the music building so she could meet her face to face, rather than sneak up on her from behind. She had just dropped off her statement for the Grievance Committee, and it was a good one. Whatever Eden had to say, stellar writer that she was, it wouldn't hold up against Alex reasoning with the committee on an adult level.

When Alex was about ten feet away, Eden spotted her, and there was a slight trip to her step. She put her head down again, as if she planned to walk past and say nothing—which made Alex angry, rather than just desperate to end things. This girl had taken it upon herself to ruin an adult's professional reputation and tenure prospects, but now she was acting as if they were eighth-grade enemies with crushes on the same boy. And Alex wouldn't accept that. It gave her the courage to approach Eden as an adult talking to a child, rather than as a desperate woman begging a twenty-year-old for mercy.

She stopped walking right in front of her and said, "Eden." And smiled patiently.

Eden tried to look surprised. "Oh. Hi." She glanced around—not, Alex realized, out of embarrassment, but to see if any of her friends were around to witness how strange it was that a professor would accost her like this. "Professor Moore. I'm so glad you're feeling better." Instead of pulling her hair across her face, she tucked it behind her ear.

Alex had planned on asking her to explain, from her point of view, the problem. This would lead to a rational discussion in which Alex would not apologize—doing so would potentially give Eden more ammunition for her Grievance Committee statement—but they would eventually see eye to eye, and Eden would admit what a silly misunderstanding it had been. But now the girl was staring her down, and Alex didn't want to lose the little edge she had left. So she said, "Have you resolved the issue of those missed credits? You can't be picking up a new course now. Will you need to overload in the spring?"

"Yeah, I—it's okay." Eden was starting to look uncomfortable. "Actually, what I'm doing is switching to an Independent Study with Professor Leonard. It's the same reading, but just one-on-one." Her voice was still quiet, but it was determined, and even—something Alex would never have guessed—a little supercilious. "He offered."

"Right. Well, I certainly hope you're thanking him for his time. That's an awful lot to ask of someone already teaching two courses and acting as department head."

Eden adjusted her backpack. "Okay, sure. So I'll see you later."

"Hold on." She could absolutely not let Eden be the one to end the conversation. She put a thin layer of concern in her voice. "You know, Eden, part of me wonders if the real reason you dropped this class is because you weren't getting a strong grade."

Eden just stared ahead blankly, the way she always used to.

"Maybe you haven't really been challenged like that before, and it seems I was wrong about where you're from, but speaking in class is still a part of a liberal arts education. And I can see from your recent actions that you have no problem speaking up for yourself."

Eden looked around again for those invisible, incredulous friends.

"Look at it this way, Eden. How much do you know about me? Do you know my first name? Do you know where I did my graduate work? Do you know my genetic background?"

Eden was gawking at her like she was insane and drooling. Alex found it infuriating, even with the Vicodin still in her system.

"I'm going to take your silence for a 'no.' You've probably made assumptions about me, and I'm sure most of them aren't true. For instance, I'm not American." It was a lie, from Lord knows where. "I was born in Australia. I lived there till I was eighteen. If you referred to me, say, in an article for the *Telegraph*, as an American, you'd be wrong. And one thing I could say, if I were really unreasonable, is that you were intentionally denying my Australian identity. My point is, Eden, that we can't see *anyone*, really."

The girl shifted her backpack and smiled. She didn't look uncomfortable at all anymore, just quietly, enragingly smug.

"For instance," Alex said, "I thought you were a smart person. And I appear to have been mistaken." She turned away before Eden could say anything, then looked back over her shoulder. "Hey, have a super term with Leonard! I'm sure he'll enjoy your stony silence!" She managed a ridiculous grin and walked away, pleased to note in her peripheral vision that Eden stayed planted several seconds before pulling out her phone and continuing down the sidewalk.

She showed up outside her 222 five minutes late, just to see what was going on. The door was closed, and there were voices inside. She checked the hall: just a couple of chatting students she didn't recognize, so she put her ear to the door. It was Tossman in there, talking about "The Daffodils." She went to the co-op to bide her time with greasy food.

When she walked into Tossman's office later, he actually looked frightened for a moment. Then he grinned, and in that huge voice he said, "There she is in the flesh! The sadder but wiser girl for me!"

It took her a second. "Tossman, did you just pull a Coleridge reference by way of *The Music Man*?"

"Why, yes I did." He was quite pleased with himself. He leaned back in his desk chair and bellowed out the chorus of the song, banging his ballpoint pen on a stack of student papers to keep the rhythm.

She sat on the chair reserved for nervous students. "I just flipped out at Eden Su. I was trying to patch things up, but apparently I'm not very good at it." She knocked her foot against a stack of literary magazines on the floor, sending them flying. She started to pick them up, but he stopped her. "So you're covering my 222?"

"They're good kids. Sandy took the Pre-Raph." He searched the jungle of his desk till he found his coffee mug. "And look, Alex, I hope you don't mind, I told Leonard you were having health issues, dating from your time in Australia. You can tell him I was wrong, but maybe you want to use that to explain what's been happening. I didn't say specifically what the problem was, so you could make up whatever you wanted. If you need to take time off, you know Leonard would agree. He just doesn't want a scene. And he'd recommend you anywhere, as would I. But it would be nice if you stayed." He smiled at her. He was a good man.

She let out a breath. "Tossman ex machina. You and my brother both, trying to save me from myself."

He said, "You'd do the same for me. Take a couple more days before you decide anything. Rest."

Two days later, there was an e-mail from Miriam Bach: they needed her to appear in front of the Grievance Committee after all. "This is in light of an additional encounter between you and Miss Su," she wrote. "It's only fair to advise you that Miss Su has produced a witness to the conversation." A witness? The only other students had been passing at least twenty feet away. Well, if Eden could lie, she could too. Except it was two against one, and Alex could never convince another professor or even a grade-hungry student to pretend to be her witness.

She drank a lot and called Piet and told him everything. "Yeah," he said finally, "I like your friend's idea. Say you're sick. Feminine problems, so they won't pry too much. Maybe like cysts."

She flopped down on her bed. "Sadly, I can't think of anything better."

"So why didn't you ring up Malcolm?"

"Maybe I did."

"No, I called him to see. Look, I was there when you pulled the card. Seven of hearts meant you were supposed to go all out. Job and man and your life back on track, yeah? So anyway, I set up a meeting for you guys."

"You're an ass, Piet."

"Sure." She heard him drinking something. His date had gone well, and he was staying with this woman downtown. "Look, Al, what's the moral of the whole albatross poem? Isn't it something about taking charge of your life? Like, 'I am the master of my fate and the captain of my soul,' right?"

"No. It's about loving animals. He looks at these water snakes and decides he loves them, and then he gets saved. So the moral is love all God's creatures. It's a bad poem, Piet. When you stop and think about it, it's a *really stupid poem*." She was turning into a sophomore.

"Okay, so it's about love, though. There you go. Go love your man."

They met at a little café and bakery near campus, and Alex couldn't help feeling she was in a movie. She'd watched it a thousand times, how the former lovers met for coffee—at a table by the window, so one person could watch the other leave, then sit there broken-hearted—and now here they were. Except they were back in a corner, at a table that wobbled, with someone's kids running around screaming in soccer uniforms. Malcolm maintained an expression of deep concern and leaned a little over the table, his head tilted to one side.

"I shouldn't have done that," Alex said.

"Which part?"

She managed to smile. "I'd say the entire past six months. Starting with the albatross."

"Have you been seeing someone?"

She couldn't believe he'd think that. And she was actually flattered. "No, of course not," she said. "I would never do that to you."

His cup was frozen halfway to his mouth. "No, I meant—I was asking if you were seeing, like, you know. A psychologist. A therapist."

"Oh."

"You just haven't seemed like yourself."

"Honestly, Malcolm, I've just been drunk a lot lately. I was drunk when I said I couldn't marry you."

He nodded and considered this. "How do you feel now?"

"Now? I'm sober." Intentionally avoiding the question.

He made a concerted effort to drink some coffee. He set the cup

down and licked his lips. "What do you need from me?" God, the man was so sweet. And she wasn't the type to appreciate a man's kind heart while secretly wishing for the wife-beating Harley man. This really was what she wanted.

If she'd learned anything from Eden Su, it was that sitting there mutely doesn't get you anywhere. Tossman was right—she was idle, a ship frozen in a sea of trouble—and that would never do.

So she said, "I need to know how you see me."

"I think you're great, and I love you, but I think it wouldn't hurt you to get some help."

"No, I'm actually—I actually need to know what you think I *look* like."

He was confused, and for a second she thought she'd have to explain the whole thing, all her vain neediness, but then he reached into his pants pocket for a ballpoint pen, white with a blue cap. He turned over his napkin and began to draw.

"What are you doing?" She leaned to see, but he moved it behind his coffee cup. Finally he held it out, in both hands. It was a stick figure: round head, curly hair in every direction, smiling mouth, happy eyes. Under it, he'd written *Alex*.

She laughed. "That's me?" He put it down on the table and drew wavy lines emanating from her face and body. "What's that?"

"That's your amazingness."

He tilted his head and grinned at her, exactly like someone in a movie—the one the girl was supposed to end up with. And she thought, it wasn't a Rossetti, but it was good enough. And she thought, if he was dumb enough to take her back, she might be smart enough to marry him.

In future years, when she told that story, she left out the part about Malcolm. It became instead the story of why she left Clement, of how she and Malcolm ended up at State, of how sweet Tossman had been to her, that year before he killed himself. Of how even in assessing all her misprisions, she'd still missed something enormous. But where had the signs been? There had been no signs: just poor Tossman, slumped on the steps of the music building at midnight, gun in his hand. And no one seemed to know why. And really, she barely knew him. She'd only read half his books.

She'd tell the story to younger colleagues, starting with the alba-

tross, focusing on Eden Su, ending with Tossman, whom they all knew about already. The point, the moral, was how easy it was to make assumptions, how deadly your mistakes could be. How in failing to recognize something, you could harm it or kill it or at least fail to save it. But she wondered, even as she told the story, if she wasn't still missing the point. If maybe it wasn't something, after all, about love—something she was too cold to understand.

The telling was an attempt, of course, at penance. It never did work; penance so rarely does.