

Diane Chang

The Apartment

Eloise Chen had purchased the apartment five years ago, shortly after her mother died, and was coming to live in it for the first time. The place was in one of the northern boroughs of Shanghai near Lu Xun Park and a metro stop, a pleasant enough location. When she bought the two-room, fifty-square-meter space on the third floor, it had been one of the most upscale available in the city, but since then, skyscraper apartments and penthouses had been erected everywhere to house the city's newly rich. Still, her apartment was a good bargain: she estimated that its value had increased threefold in the last five years and would continue to increase at a most profitable rate in the foreseeable future.

Because she lived and worked in America, she had lent the place to her cousin Peipei, a Shanghai native, who lived there with his wife and their six-year-old daughter. Eloise hadn't asked for rent, but it was understood that Peipei would see to the apartment's upkeep.

Eloise was thirty-four, a professor of post-Colonial literature at Carleton College in Minnesota, where she'd secured tenure the year before. She was on sabbatical and had decided to come to Shanghai to live, as she always knew she would.

She'd written six months earlier informing her cousin that she would be arriving in June, but when she got to the apartment at 596 Quyang Road and let herself in, she found Peipei, his wife, and their daughter seated in the living room that also served as a dining room; their elbows on the table, bowls lifted to their lips, the three of them were shoveling their dinner in.

"Cousin!" Peipei said in genuine surprise. He set his half-empty bowl of rice on the table and stood up.

With his sinewy muscles beginning to sag, his tangle of greasy and badly-cut hair, her cousin looked like many other Shanghaiese on the brink of middle age. He hadn't changed much in

the past five years except that his hair had more gray in it. The only indication of the adorable boy he'd once been was the habit he still had of pursing his lips into a pout whenever he wasn't going to get his way.

"I didn't know you were coming today," Peipei said, slapping his thighs. "That letter you wrote, so long ago, I forget!"

Peipei spoke remarkably good English for having never in his life traveled beyond a hundred kilometers from Shanghai.

"Where are your luggages?" Peipei asked, looking past her to the unfinished cement hallway behind.

"I was going to rest a minute and then go get my things." Although she'd packed light – only two suitcases containing her clothes and all the books she considered essential, twenty-nine of them – after having arrived from halfway around the world, she had been unable to face the immediate prospect of carrying her suitcases up two flights of stairs.

"Come inside, I get for you!" Peipei said, and before she could protest, he rolled up his shirtsleeves and was out the door.

When Eloise got a closer look, she was horrified to see that, although the place was in good condition, clutter filled the outer room from floor to ceiling: Against the far wall, under the double windows, Peipei had set up a folding metal bed for his daughter; stacks of newspapers sat under it and in a corner. There were bottles of medicines and creams on a little table next to the bed, stuffed animals and dolls and little wooden playthings, baskets hanging from hooks on the wall, plastic washtubs stacked underneath the dining table, three brooms behind the door, books and papers spilled across the desk against the far wall, wooden stools as high as her waist and as low as her ankles, old knick-knacks crammed onto one cabinet shelf, a VCD player attached to a television that must have been at least two decades old, piles of blankets on top of the rickety cabinets, wicker armchairs, tea mugs and odd metal cups, rolled-up straw mats, boxes of mosquito coils, a tire pump, two disintegrating bicycles, and what looked like parts of a truck tire.

"Peipei, where's my furniture?" Eloise said when he came back with her suitcases. Amid all of the family's things, there was no sign of the black-lacquer living-room suite she'd purchased five years ago.

"Ha! Ha! Don't worry, cousin. Your things are safe," Peipei said. "I don't want to spoil your beautiful furniture."

"You'd better get it back. I will be living here for the year."

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"A year!" Peipei's eyes grew as large as bowls. "I thought you stay the summer only, for vacation. What about your job?"

"I have the year free from teaching."

"The year free, waaah!" He looked over at his wife, who was still seated at the table, a dark woman with thick lips and wiry hair containing not a single strand of white. His wife was not smiling. "Did you hear that, Juhua?" he said to her in Shanghainese, "A whole year free! What a great country, America!"

"A funny mistake," Peipei said to Eloise in English. His pursed lips looked just like a faded strawberry.

"I hope it won't be a problem."

"No, no, no problem. I get your furniture, and me, my wife, my daughter, we go back to old apartment. Tomorrow, you move in."

Peipei had an apartment of his own, a place assigned to him through the state-owned factory he'd worked at for fifteen years, but it was much further to the north, far away from any metro stop, and only twenty-four square meters.

When her mother died at the age of seventy-two, Eloise had come to Shanghai to bury Violet Chen's ashes in the grave plot that had been purchased long ago, and it was on that trip that she had decided to purchase her own bit of property. She naturally thought of lending the apartment to Peipei because he'd been her mother's favorite nephew, and she was ashamed of the way she'd treated him when they were younger.

When Peipei was six years old, his father, Feng, did not ask in so many words, but had set out on what was at the time a five-hour journey to the location of the nearest telephone and made a call to America that had cost him two month's salary, three bags of new rice, and five bundles of the green sugarcane that officials liked to chew while they stamped papers. "Oh, big sister, you don't know how it is on the mainland!" Feng had said. "It's a shame we can't afford to send little Peipei to Chuansha Elementary, he's such a bright boy. He'll be disadvantaged for middle school."

"How much is the tuition?" Eloise's mother asked.

"If only it were a matter of tuition! The gifts for the principal and the teachers to get the boy enrolled are enough to bankrupt a family. And then we would be expected to donate to the school each year. You've been in America too long, you don't know how things are."

That day, Eloise's mother sent a check for three hundred U.S. dollars, a sum that was roughly five times Feng's yearly salary in those days.

Because Eloise was born in America, she did not meet her cousin Peipei until she was eleven years old, when it became possible to travel between America and China again. It was a long miserable summer in the countryside, where the houses in the village hadn't yet installed the pipes carrying running water, much less air-conditioning. Sweat constantly fell into her eyes and clouded her vision. At night, the mosquitoes rose from the rice fields and attacked her and no one else. She scratched the bites open in her sleep so that in the morning, she looked like she'd come down with some horrible skin affliction.

The two of them were scarcely a month apart in age, yet she was half a head taller than Peipei in 1978. Clearly, he was the adorable one with half-moon eyes and lips like a flower bud; anybody could tell he was his grandparents' favorite from the way his grandmother slipped him an extra orange, the way his grandfather sat him in his lap and bounced him and laughed and laughed until the aunts and uncles, fearing the old man would injure himself, took the boy away.

Of the twenty-three cousins on her side, Peipei was Eloise's mother's favorite, too. Eloise would become friends with her cousin as an adult, but at eleven years old, from the moment she saw her mother stroke little Peipei's hair and proclaim what a lovely boy he was, Eloise was afraid that her mother would leave her in China and take Peipei back.

In the middle of July, days before their flight back to America, bite-marked and perspiring and ugly Eloise pushed her cousin down and threw his slippers into the sewage tank behind their grandparents' house. Little Peipei stared unbelievably at the blue plastic soles bobbing like drowned swallows in the chemical filth and then at Eloise who stood with her hands on her hips, laughing at him, and he didn't know whether to laugh or to cry because nobody had ever done such a thing to him, and then, uncontrollably, his sobs burst forth so loudly that his grandmother came running out of the house.

Eloise's mother came out of the house too, floating, it seemed, like a beneficent goddess, and it was she who fished the slippers out of the sewage with a bamboo pole, rinsed and scrubbed them with dish soap, and she who presented them good-as-new to Peipei, whose sobs had begun to subside. *

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Eloise checked into the Radisson at the corner of Quyang and Handan Roads, a place Peipei had said would be suitable. The hotel, twenty-five stories high with two restaurants and a swimming pool, must have been built within the past five years because Eloise didn't remember it. In her room on the fifth floor, while splashing water on her face, she noticed the little soaps and shampoos, the stiff white towels, the sanitized drinking glasses, all the little hotel things set out just as they were in America. She was disappointed by the room after having seen the half-naked children playing in puddles outside, the old grandmas sunning themselves and smoking, the vegetable markets and fruit stands, the great iron pans of fried pastries for sale at snack stalls; but she had to admit that the air-conditioning was a relief after walking through the sweltering streets of Shanghai in June.

During the journey over, from Minneapolis, to LAX, to Shanghai, she hadn't slept in twenty-three hours. She stretched out on the bed and didn't wake up until four in the afternoon the next day, when an unnaturally red glow made its way through the slats of the window blinds.

Peipei wasn't home from work yet, his wife Juhua said. Eloise noticed that they hadn't turned on the air-conditioners that had been installed in the apartment, though it was beastly hot. "Please, sit a while," Juhua said in Shanghainese, stepping aside so that Eloise could enter.

Juhua cleared away papers and a plastic scrub-brush from one of the wicker chairs and brought out a cup of green tea. Eloise was dismayed to see that although they had moved some of the things around – stacks of newspapers had been shifted to the center of the room, the bicycles to a corner – everything still remained. If anything, the room looked more cluttered than ever from the disarray they'd created.

Seated at the square dining table and pretending to read newspapers that she must have been too young to understand, Peipei's little girl eyed Eloise with suspicion. A scrawny awkward thing Daoyi had turned out to be, her hair tied into pigtails with fuchsia bands; the folds of her eyelids unsymmetric, giving her face a crooked, stupid look.

"What are you looking at our things for?" the girl said in Shanghainese. "This is our apartment, and we're not leaving!"

Juhua's neck flushed plum. "Daoyi, don't be rude to Auntie. This is her apartment. She has allowed us to live here."

"I apologize," Juhua said to Eloise. "You see, this is practically the only place Daoyi has ever lived, and we never told her that the apartment belongs to somebody else."

The girl continued to study the newspapers, scowling while she moved her lips to the inscrutable Chinese characters. The wicker chair crackled under Eloise. She took a sip of the tea, which was lukewarm and coppery on her tongue.

Peipei came back presently, his hair tousled and damp, gray rags thrown across his dome of a skull. His mouth pursed to one side then the other when he saw Eloise. "Cousin!" Peipei said in English. Eloise stood up, dribbling tea across a stack of papers. "Please, sit down. I tried find you at the Radisson Hotel. Telephone, but no answer."

"Peipei, I thought I could move in today," she said.

"Heh, heh. I discover a problem with our old apartment," he said. He stuck his hands in his pockets and gave a little shrug. "The pipes are clogged because nobody live for such a long time. The problem can be fixed in three, four days. Five at the most. I have a friend who is wonderful with fixing. We move all our things, and you can move here, no problem."

Peipei stood on the balcony and smoked. Although Eloise had told him five years ago, in English and in Chinese, that there was strictly to be no smoking in her apartment, she decided to let it go right then. She was sipping another glass of the tepid tea when she noticed a tray of squashed cigarette butts next to her feet on the floor, half-covered by a crumpled newspaper.

"You are comfortable at the Radisson Hotel, no?" Peipei asked as he came inside in a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"It's just like the hotels back home. It's not what I wanted."

"In a week, you will be living here, cousin. I promise." Peipei's smile revealed a mouthful of stained and crooked teeth. His stale, ashy breath filled the room.

Eloise saw the sights of Shanghai while her sleep-wake cycle adjusted. She took a cab to the Bund, where the soulless faces of the British buildings from Shanghai's colonial era looked out over the water. Now, each building carried a Chinese flag waving to the east, and scaffolding was erected over several of the facades to support the crews of workmen in the process of painting over years of soot and grime. She walked down the pedestrian street of Nanjing road and browsed through the stores selling silk and jewelry and cheap trinkets made for tourists and foreigners. In the old

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city, she pushed her way through the crowds of sightseers with their color-coded caps and paid three RMB to enter the temple of the city god. At that altar of red and gold, where the young and old of Shanghai and elsewhere touched their foreheads to prayer mats, she prayed to the statue of the goddess Guanyin that she would have a good, productive year in Shanghai. Eloise was not especially religious and did not believe that a supreme deity had the power to influence her life, but it couldn't hurt to pay homage to the gods of Shanghai.

When she'd last come with her mother to this temple, old Violet Chen had held her eyes closed and moved her lips half-audibly. Eloise knew that Violet had prayed for grandchildren and had been too embarrassed to pray herself.

How terribly lonely she was now that both of her parents had passed from the earth. Her house in Northfield, where she had eight rooms to herself and could hear nothing but the susurrations of the wind through her own lawn at night, had become unbearable in the years since her mother's death. She had not a single living relative in America, a country too vast and empty and rich for its own good.

She dropped her incense into the roiling fire along with everybody else's; unlike her, some must have believed that the gods could be persuaded by the fragrant smoke. A monk in red robes stirred the fire in the urn, and by his grimaces, anybody could tell that he didn't like this job.

Through the completely still water of the hotel's indoor pool, Eloise could see the black and white tiles on the bottom as if she were looking through distorting glass. The foreign tourists would be staying in hotels downtown, of course, and she wondered if she were the Quyang Radisson's only guest. She stepped into the bubbling hot tub next to the pool and tried to forget where she was.

She tried to relax and was succeeding in making herself think of nothing at all when a fact surfaced and made the pleasant streams of hot bubbles irrelevant, and that one fact sprouted tendrils of implication that took over every part of her mind: She remembered that the comfortable apartment she'd purchased for herself, the value of which had increased over the years, had been under Peipei's name. She'd done it that way because she did not want to buy one of the garish overpriced apartments built for foreigners, and she wasn't allowed to purchase any other property. For the last five years, her cousin had been living in the apartment

purchased under his own name, and it occurred to her that he would not be so willing to leave.

She heard shuffling inside when she knocked, but nobody came to open the door. She knocked again and then more insistently a third time, thumping with the heel of her hand.

Finally, Peipei opened the door a crack, the sliver of his face illuminated by the 25-watt bulb of the hallway outside. Behind him, the apartment was completely dark. "Cousin! I didn't hear you, sorry. I was bathing." His hair was wet and smelled of detergent. His collar slanted up on one side; he'd failed to match the buttons on his shirt with their holes. "My wife and my daughter are just to bed."

It was eight o'clock in the evening.

"Peipei," Eloise said at the threshold of the apartment; her cousin did not step aside or invite her in. "I have been staying at the Radisson for more than two weeks now. Will I be able to move into my apartment?"

"So sorry, cousin. I tried find you, but nobody home, every time." Peipei hung his head and rubbed the back of his neck as if he'd missed a spot there bathing. "My girl is sick, we have no time move. Daoyi always get sick, what can her daddy do? She so sad to leave her friends."

"Cousin, are you going to move out of my apartment or not?" Eloise said.

Her cousin's eyes grew large enough to swallow her up. She thought she could look into the dilated pupils and see through to the calculating darkness on the other side. He swung the door open and waved for her to step over a box overfilled with wooden clothespins.

The apartment was in a greater state of disarray than she had seen it. They'd taken their things from the shelves and walls and laid them out on the floor so that not a square centimeter of it was visible. The stacks of plastic wash tubs, the cups and dishes and moth-eaten newspapers, the old books and little wooden toys, all those things were strewn across the floor of the apartment as if the husband and wife had just had one of those terrifying fights in which each of them reached for the items they'd built their home with to fling at each other.

"We've been packing, but the girl get sick," Peipei said.

In the darkened outer room, Peipei's wife was bent over the folding metal bed where his daughter lay. The mother was spoon-

ing black medicinal broth to the girl's lips. Tears dangled over the brims of her eyes. Stepping over newspapers and broken bits of plywood, Eloise strode to the other side of the room. Daoyi's cheek felt both hot and cold at once, as if some trouble inside were pulling her in opposite directions.

"Why does she feel like this? What's wrong with her?" Eloise said, and Peipei's wife continued to cry in her quiet way, and the little girl turned her face to the wall.

Peipei did not say anything for a while. His lips pursed so far out that Eloise could have hung a bottle from them. "She always sick," he finally said, "She was born so small and purple, she make her mother's heart break!"

Peipei shrugged and kicked at odds and ends on the floor. "She'll be better tomorrow," he said in Shanghainese. "You can move here in three days. I swear on your mother's grave! My dear, dead aunt, heaven bless her!"

At the Radisson, Eloise dreamed of the ghosts of her ancestors hovering over the sick girl; some of the ghosts looked just like Old Violet Chen and some just like the little girl. In her dream, she was practically a ghost of the air herself, floating above people and places that should have been familiar.

In the three days before they'd buried her mother's ashes, they had sat up eating and drinking at Second Aunt's house where the walls were covered with paper banners, her mother's three sisters who were still alive, their younger brother, all twenty-three cousins and all the in-laws and so many babies that Eloise could never remember who belonged to whom. They'd worn white ribbons in their hair. They'd burned the silver foil money in the shape of boats and an old wooden bed that Violet Chen had slept in as a teenager.

At two or three in the morning of the third day, in the yellow light of the crowded room, as the din of their voices and the hired percussionists were dying down, Eloise felt the wings of her mother's spirit brush against her back and suddenly had an insight into how her life would have been if Violet Chen had never left her family for a new life in America; if Eloise had known her cousins all her life, and there never was the barrier of language or of having lived on opposite ends of the earth. She had the feeling of finally coming back to her real life, of discovering that language and culture did not fundamentally change the blood that ran through her, which was her mother's.

Though her mother had lived in America since the age of twenty-one, she had never really become American in all that time. In the last years of her life, while Violet's mind did not otherwise fail her, she was often unable to recall the simplest English phrase. Her jaw would hang slack in mid-sentence, revealing the helpless cavern of her mouth while she racked her brains for a word like *dinner*. She began retreating to her bedroom, populating it with dead friends and relatives from the old country, and refused to see anyone. Eloise would hear her mother babbling to the dark and come in to try to talk to her, in English and in Chinese, but most of the time her mother seemed to be somewhere else entirely.

At Second Aunt's house on the night of the third day of her mother's funeral, when she felt her mother's presence through the oil and cigarette smoke, she allowed herself to think that, living among the noise and the relatives, she might begin to understand the fragments of dialect her mother had uttered into the dark those last months of her life. She decided then that she would purchase an apartment and come back to live in Shanghai.

It had been nearly one month since Eloise arrived in Shanghai with her two suitcases, and she was knocking once again at 596 Quyang Road. Nobody answered, though she thought she heard whispers inside.

When she unlocked the door with her key and opened it, she saw that nobody was home. The windows were opened and the cloth curtains thrown back. The afternoon light slanted over the rooms and threw into relief every wisp of dust, every chip in the walls that the family had made in five years. They'd cleared their things from the floor and placed them back on the shelves and in the cabinets so that the apartment, though cluttered, was orderly and almost exactly as she'd first seen it.

When Peipei came home, nearly four hours later, he did not seem surprised to find Eloise pacing through the apartment. "Daoyi is in the hospital with a fever of forty-two," he said. "I've come back to get her things."

"What?"

"The doctors in the hospital say she might have *white blood disease*."

Eloise picked up one of Daoyi's medicine bottles from the table next to the girl's bed and passed it from one hand to the other. Through the colored glass, the liquid that swirled against the sides

looked suspiciously thin, like water. She realized that this was how he'd been putting her off all along. "I paid for this apartment," she said, "and you have taken it for your own."

"I'm sorry, my girl is sick," he said. From one of the cabinets, he took out several gray-green shirts that must once have been white and put them into a plastic tote. "I took her to a witch-doctor two months ago, and the old master said that nothing in heaven or on earth will save her!"

"I don't believe your daughter is sick at all," Eloise blurted out. "You've been saying she's sick so that I'll go away. I have allowed you to live in my apartment, and you will not move out of it. You've cheated me and you've cheated the memory of my mother."

Peipei set the tote on the square dining table, where it dimpled in the middle and caved in. He looked at his hands and at the floor and at the stacks of newspapers in the corner, at everything but at her, his eyes darting back and forth as if seeking a place to hide. He began to pout, but then his expression changed, revealing something grasping and lizard-like. "Why do you want an apartment also in Shanghai? You have your beautiful house in America," he said in Shanghainese. "Why do you want to spend your free year in Shanghai? Such a waste!"

She opened her mouth to say something, gasped, and then closed it. How could she explain to him that she'd thought living here would change her, that she'd believed the dust of the streets would get under her skin and stay with her. How could she explain that Shanghai was the only city where she still had living relatives, that he was her cousin, and he'd betrayed her.

"I have lived in America all my life," she began to say.

"You think you can threaten me because you're an American," he said, his expression turning ugly. He took two steps toward her, and his face caught the late afternoon light, a reddish cast that played over his features and set off the hollows in his cheeks, "but I know my rights. Nothing you can do will make me leave."

Her heartbeat reversed itself. If it was her against him, with his name on the deed to the apartment, she had no doubts about the outcome in a court of law. Perhaps this was what he had in mind even as he had signed his name five years ago. What had changed him from the countryside boy pampered by his grandparents to the stranger standing before her now?

"Please, can't you move to your old apartment, to the north?" she said, desperate. "I will pay for the move."

"My apartment," Peipei said, laughing, the merriment in his eyes reminding her of the beautiful boy he had once been, but a resemblance that was distorted by bitterness, "Third Aunt and her family live there. Our village in the countryside was torn down three years ago, and they've been living in my old place ever since. For years, I have tried to make them move, but they won't!"

What about me, I am in China now too, where will I live? she wanted to say to him, but she had been away for too long, and he had no sympathy for her, she who could purchase an apartment by signing a check. She could not afford to stay at the Radisson for an entire year, but that was none of her cousin's business.

The light in the apartment waned and would not hold out for much longer. The medicine bottle was still in her damp and trembling hand. When she tried to set the bottle down on the little table next to the bed, it slipped, and the glass breaking on the floor sounded exactly like uncontrollable laughter.

"Don't worry about that," Peipei said as the black medicine produced a spidering pattern that spread and spread over the floor between them, "I'll take care of it." The line of his lips pressed together was hard and immovable, more a polite stretching than a smile. It was several moments before Eloise realized that her cousin was waiting for her to leave his apartment.