



Ho Lin

Charge

Two people are in a subway car: one sitting, the other standing with a bicycle. Both of them are a few feet away but obscured from the other by rush hour crowds. The one with the bicycle walks it towards the door, anticipating the next stop, hands squeezing at the brakes out of habit. The seated one is poring through the remains of a newspaper left by a previous passenger. The train supplies all dialogue: *thrum-thrums, click-clacks*.

The bicyclist passes and something hits the seated person in the shins. Maybe a pedal, maybe the kickstand, maybe the edge of a gear in the back. The seated person, lost in the fog of thought, reacts in slow motion. What? Pain. Sharp, insistent. Source? Bicycle. Heard before seen: the fragile little whir of the back tire, followed by a cracked shard of ruby where there was once a whole back reflector.

The moment drags on. Bicycle and bicyclist are receding. Going and going. No acknowledgment of what has just happened.

*Thank you*, the seated one says.

The bicyclist half-turns without stopping, as momentum rules the day. *Fuck you!* the bicyclist hisses. *Get the fuck out of my way!* The train judders to a stop, the doors bounce open, and bicycle and bicyclist are gone.

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*Thank you.*

Respond? Stay quiet? Say it. Those were his thoughts in order, so he says it. He imparts just a touch of lightness to the words, or he likes to think so. Intention is his, reception is out of his control. Anyway, he wants to leave open the possibility that he's half-serious. Best to protect yourself that way. It's a world of overreaction. Better in the old days when there were knives and not guns. Knives require work, a bit of effort. There was a story in the paper about China. Man walks into a kindergarten, stabs 20 kids. Sure some of them died, but most survived. Better odds than you'd get over here.

It's his mother. He's never been in therapy, fuck therapy, but it's his mother. She's infected him with this obsession over mortality. One ailment after another, what was she on about now? Four doctors in the last year, because no one could stand her for long, fifth life-threatening disease during the same period. He couldn't avoid her. No matter where he was, she had a knack for finding him. Once he took a week in Paris without warning, just to be away, and somehow she figured it out and called the U.S. embassy to track him down. He was on a bike trek with a group of Americans, and they were just about to enter the *Musee D'Orangerie* (Napoleon and the Godfather, they loved their oranges), home of Monet's Water Lilies, when their friendly guide from New Zealand answered his phone and then handed it to him. *Hey mate, they say it's your mother and it's an emergency.* The tourist family from Ohio alongside him gave him such warm looks of concern that he couldn't bear to tell them that it was just Mother dying for the umpteenth time from something-or-other. *Mom*, he would say into the phone to hold her up, *Mom, Mom, Mom*, and it was no use, she just would not stop talking, and why did he go off on a trip without telling her? If he hung up she would call him right back and keep right on going as if no time had passed, no interruption had taken place. And eventually he had stopped hanging up at all, for he had come to worry that this could be that one critical phone call, like someone saying *bomb* on an airplane, and yes, this time it really was a bomb.

His girlfriend had stopped asking him about Mother. She would get calls sometimes too. He'd be three blocks away buying groceries, his phone on vibrate and ignored. One missed call would do it. His girlfriend's phone would buzz, she would say in her politest voice, *Hi, Mrs.* -- and Mother would say, dead as an assassin, *Get him on now.* His girlfriend used to ask, *What's up with her?* In a very reasonable tone too (see, it's all about modulation). He was dying to talk about it, but he knew that once he started it would never stop, there would be years of it, and it would be way more than she could be expected to handle and she would leave. So he would say nothing. The energy expended in holding it all back would leave him sullen, and pretty soon Mother was a topic completely avoided.

His girlfriend had other priorities anyway. She was working out of the apartment. This was big, this thing she was working on. *Redefining the paradigm*, she had said, and she had gotten it into her head that it might make a superb name for a company. *RePar* or something like that. She had tried explaining it to him once: At the beginning of the day, think of a word to characterize your dream at that given moment. (*Dishwater*, he immediately responded. *You have to be serious for this to work*, she frowned.) Enter that

word on the website, and immediately you are connected with others who have entered that same word that same day. Imagine all of you, imbued with the same passion and same purpose around the same concept, hooked into a giant chat room, or a giant teleconference. Conversing, sharing ideas, sum greater than the parts. Active discussion, active learning. Think of the educational applications, the collaborative projects. He had thought about it, and then she said it would take about \$10 million to get it off the ground. The guys from Google were interested, but she had said no. Their interest was in the database, the marketing potential. She was determined that this thing would remain pure. So she was on the couch all day, making phone calls, charged with enthusiasm and goodwill and good cheer. It really was a beautiful thing to watch. It would make him feel guilty that he was the only one to witness it. Then he would remind himself that they were still together only because it was the only way they could afford to live in this downtown San Francisco apartment. (Or at least he suspected that was the only reason she was still around.)

The word *source* is the root of the problem. She considers it a verb, he said no way. He knows it is hopelessly out of touch to think like this, he knows he is nothing more than a weed buckling in the wind of tech progress, but he can't help it. Hours have been wasted on the debate over *source*. The irreconcilable gap has been established.

Paid parking is the root of the problem. One rotten hot September day they decided to drive down to Big Basin for the 11-mile loop hike. She was all *great, let's go go go*, before she found out that day parking there was \$6. Add it to the gas costs and it just wouldn't fit their budget. Better to go by bus. We can take a few buses and then hike up to the park. It would take four hours to get there, compared to ninety minutes by car. *Look, I'll pay for the parking*, he said. *Why is this such a big deal?* They ended up not going. It just didn't make sense to him. It's getting to the point where not much about her is making sense to him. She wears the same flip-flops she had when they met four years ago, and at this point whole chunks of them are gone, as if a great white shark gnawed them off. He worries that she will always be this way.

The homeless guy outside their front door is the root of the problem. Usually he camps a few streets down, close to the YMCA, except when it rains (quite often these days), and then he comes to their place, because they have a nice wide awning. He has some nice bedding and a bunch of take-out boxes from the local Chinatown restaurants that take pity on him, and in the morning there will be chicken bones, tattered aluminum foil and a puddle of piss. During the night, the homeless man coughs. Never continuously, not very loudly, but always at the most inopportune time, just as he's trying to get to sleep one floor above. It's like the homeless man knows his biorhythms to the second and is taunting him. He tried talking to the man once, asking him to leave, and all he got was garbled swear words and spittle that landed right on his nose. He immediately ran into the house and washed his face. His girlfriend is understanding. She brings the homeless man leftovers sometimes. She decries the politicians who are sweeping these people under the rug. She has heard stories of homeless people getting apprehended and bused down to San Diego, where they would stay and never dirty San Francisco's neighborhoods again. He imagines a Cold War between cities, homeless people getting bused back and forth like battalions. He smells the man's piss, even when he's miles away. He imagines taking a baseball bat to

the man's head. The only question would be the getaway, especially if the man made noise as he finished him. One time he told his girlfriend his intention. She gave a horrid little laugh, patted his arm. You wouldn't have it in you, she told him. She is right and he hates that she is right, and he also hates himself for having these thoughts. Contradiction, heal thyself.

They rarely see each other. During the day while she's at home he's a driver for hire, crowd-sourced, 35 dollars an hour, gas expenses his, and somehow he always ends up with a fare that takes him all the way to San Jose, where he idles for hours, hoping someone else in the area pings him for a ride so the trip down will be financially worthwhile. In the evenings he drags himself back home, the skin between his eyebrows twitching from the stress of dealing with pedestrians who are drunk or high or insane or worse. She is usually out at another networking happy hour known only to those who are plugged in. His phone pings, and it is a fare or it is Mother, or both simultaneous, or even worse, he is with a fare and Mother calls, and he never looks in the rear view mirror because he can imagine what is going through the head of his fare as he says, *Mom, Mom, Mom*. The street lights even work against him as they stick themselves to red and he sits there, Mother's voice an ongoing rasp, his shoulders bunching up around his head, the passenger in back clearing his or her throat, nothing moving.

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This is her fourth bicycle. She can't avoid that fact. When she sees the bicycle in the garage it's not just a bicycle, it's not just her bicycle, it's her fourth bicycle. Her husband reminds her. He especially reminds her of the third bicycle, because she left it out in the street, unlocked, for literally five minutes, okay, maybe six or seven, because she had forgotten something in the house and had to run in to find it. Her pad and pen, come to think of it. Still clinging to the hope of becoming a writer. She writes pages and pages of notes to herself, usually just phrases, flotsam from the day, maybe a line of clever dialogue. If she is lucky she will stumble on these scribbles a few years later, and the first (and sometimes only) thing that will register is how much her handwriting has changed. Anyway, that day it had taken her six or seven minutes to find her pad, and by the time she was back out the front door her third bicycle was gone. So this is the fourth.

Her husband focuses on things like that. A very focused man, about certain things. Things and things and things. Frequent flyer miles are important. He has a specific credit card for the miles, and Black Friday and Cyber Monday are the big days, game-planned for. Coupon websites, group deals. Purchase, note, reconfirm miles on statement. He knows how to spend to save. In a better life he would be one of those financial advisors on the cable news network, sticking his chin out whenever he gave a particularly strong tip. When he gets a notice from the tax board claiming he owes another seven hundred dollars he fights it all the way. It takes years, and even if a resolution is reached it never seems to end, because by that time another tax bill has been sent. *Why not just pay and be done with it*, she says, and he says with that forbearing, theatrical smile of his, *It's the principle of it*.

Lately he has been all about their wills. Everything must be in order, because he has seen what happens when things aren't spelled out. At his office every day, suited up, sitting in conferences, legalizing with potential clients and foes, he sees what happens. This sort of thing isn't her. She never looks at things like trusts and contingencies and legacies. Sure someday she might be a vegetable in a coma ward and no one will know what to do for lack of instructions. Doesn't matter, she wouldn't be in a position to care anyway. She knows it's bad, it's reckless. Why leave any iota of doubt when it can be taken advantage of by another? Yet she likes that thrill, that little twinge of excitement that comes from leaving herself open.

His latest thing is marathon running. Okay, no issue with that, a hot healthy body at home is good, even if he's usually too tired from his workouts to actually do anything once he gets home. But the running is a sore subject. Years ago she recommended Murakami's *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* because she loves Murakami, or rather she loved Murakami. This was back in the days when she hoped that he would love what she loved. He ignored the recommendation back then, and then years later when he got serious about this running thing he came across the book on his own, fell in love with it, and asked her why didn't she ever recommend this fantastic book before. She reminded him, he forgot that she reminded him, and from that point forth he was obsessed with Murakami. Just the way he would recite some of the lines from that book – *Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional* – made her look at it in a different light, and not a good one. Or how about: *I've always done whatever I felt like doing in life. People may try to stop me, and convince me I'm wrong, but I won't change.* God, how fucking entitled that sounded, out of context! Her husband had moved on from there to Murakami's other books. She didn't hear the end of it. *That cucumber stuff in Norwegian Wood is so odd, but I love it...* She had dropped Murakami after he went from first-person to third-person in his later novels, and now her husband has been haunting her with her own reading past. The other week she bought a used book at Green Apple and on the first page, in very pretty handwriting, were the words *My darling: I want to share with you my favorite author. What's mine should be yours.* Originally it said *What's mine is yours* but the *is* had been crossed off.

That is his way though. Sink teeth into something, refuse to let go. Always at his best with a solitary goal to wrap his OCD around. Once he starts talking about something he will keep on going. The trouble is, his stories lack a point. He'll be at dinner with family or friends, recounting something that happened at the office earlier in the day. The telling is comprehensive, exact and without any kind of narrative grace. One thing after another, everything thudding at the same undifferentiated speed, the same tone. He doesn't realize that what he's talking about contains minutiae particular to his job, beyond the grasp of any normal, sane, regular person. You don't realize there is a punch line until after it's arrived and he punctuates with a gasping *ha-ha-ha*. What to do then? Smile. Switch the subject. His family doesn't even pretend to listen anymore. Vacant eyes, rictus grins, and just as his story goes opaque, they immediately turn their attention to something else, someone else. The first time she witnessed his family do that to him it was over dinner. Straight up ignored his words. In the middle of one of his sentences someone asked something completely unrelated of someone else, and everyone jumped in and over him.

She flinched. He kept on talking, and talking. He just didn't get it. That circuit in his head to pick up on social cues had burned out, or never existed.

Now he's in trouble at the office. He does his job well, in a mechanical way. The technical judges would give him a 9.8. But he is fixated on being correct, not diplomatic. She hates office politics too. But what can you do? He should have made senior partner by now but he's ticked too many people off. He is completely unaware of his effect. You point out something someone did wrong, it's the person who ends up offended, not the thing. The thing, the thing, the thing. If nothing else, no one wants to talk to him because once he starts, well you know. She has pointed this out to him, in subtle and obvious ways. He nods and he averts his eyes and he says he understands. Doesn't matter.

He's thinking about changing law firms. *Well, great, quit*, she thinks. What is that, five jobs in seven years? Magic seven. Seven-year itch. Somehow they have gone from Albany to DC to Los Angeles to San Francisco. More expensive each time. Pretty impressive. You quit a job once or twice, okay, it wasn't a good fit. Five times? Look in the mirror. She has said as much to him.

She knows she's fucked up too. Get into a print publishing career in the middle of the dot-com boom. She can do a galley like no one's business. Great. To get work she's had to learn technical writing; right now she's working on a camera instruction manual. She's fixated on those cute little graphics at the front of the book. The camera has eyes, a button nose, a squiggle for a mouth. In one panel the edge of the camera's head is cracked open from getting dropped on the pavement. Its eyes are shut, its mouth is wide open with pain. In another the camera is scrunched with distress under exposure to the sun, its pipestick arms wiping the sweat with a handkerchief. She gets emotional every time she sees these graphics. Upset. They remind her of being a kid and being vulnerable and feeling just everything at once. The manual is taking much longer to complete than it should due to random moments like this. She should work harder, emphasize quantity over quality because that's where we all are right now, but things like this trip her up. Her husband never judges or mentions it. He just smiles and cuddles and talks about his day, and even she treats it as white noise at this point, but it's comforting.

Today she's bringing his cell phone to him at the office. They're refurbishing offices at the firm and somehow he's been shunted into the one needing the most work. (Just plain disrespect at this point, she thinks.) Only one power outlet working, so no place to charge his phone. Can't they provide a power strip? *Sure, I can put in a request, but they're just so inefficient at the office*, he says. So he charges at home. Actually she charges for him because he always misplaces the phone. She has a knack for finding it. It's her one indisputable contribution to the marriage. She doesn't mind, usually, because he does stuff for her, like clean the gunk out from under her toenails. He enjoys it, and she does too. Both in bed, she'll watch the TV and he'll be lounging at a right angle to her, cleaning her up. Better than a massage, maybe better than sex.

Today, though? Today she's kind of pissed, because he forgot his phone, like he often does, and she is in a mood where she would prefer to stay inside, and think, and maybe cry

a bit. Hormones, most would say upon a glance. Her husband never says that. She believes she does rather well overall. If an argument ever threatens to get heated, he will simply turn away and lose himself in his thoughts. Most women would prefer to keep talking and ranting ad infinitum. Most women would trail behind as their husbands moved from room to room, refusing to let it go. But she gives him space and gives herself her own space. She's rather proud of herself for that. Today, though: it's not a day for understanding. Why doesn't he have his phone with him at work anyway? Doesn't he need it for what he does? He probably ends up using someone else's phone, or a secretary's phone. Peccadillos, that's the word. She likes that word.

Today, though: No. Mainly because she was throwing up this morning, and she suspects something. She must get to a drug store and buy that kit. She wills herself not to think about that right now. She really hates her fourth bicycle. It's a big, tank-like thing, which seemed like a good idea when she bought it. Now she realizes her error every time she has to drag it up the stairs from the curb, or tries to chain the thick top tube around an equally thick telephone pole and the chain does not quite wrap all the way around. The gears are malfunctioning too. Every time she puts it in sixth or seventh (naturally, the gears she uses most), the bike seizes up and grinds every few hundred feet. It's easily the most disliked bicycle she's ever had. Of course it's never come close to getting stolen, and of course she's owned it longer than any of her other bicycles. She's tempted to leave it outside her building, unlocked, for say, six or seven hours. Maybe that would do it.

The train is stopping. She has to get out. Damn phone in her hands, almost slipping free. Why didn't she put it in her backpack? Move, move now before it's too late and you get halted short of the closing doors. Grab the bike firmly. Compensate for shifting momentum as the train jerks to a stop. As if throwing herself off a cliff, she makes her move.

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When the train doors slid open to let him in a few minutes before, the words *Mind the platform gap* rang in his head. He didn't think too hard about why that phrase had popped in there. He read once about car crash victims who were already dead when police arrived, and yet they would still be speaking, the last thought going through their minds getting repeated over and over. *I want my mommy, I want my mommy, I want my mommy.* Marionettes on a tape loop. *Mind the platform gap* was the same way.

When he unfolds the stray newspaper on his seat and sees a Hong Kong dateline, it comes back to him. Spoken in a clipped, half-British accent on the Hong Kong subway's PA. *Please mind the platform gap.* Kind of jowly, the way the vowels would just hang there. It wasn't sexy, but there was something enticing about it. This was back when he traveled. He was discovering stuff back then. In Hong Kong a decade ago, they still had CD stores. He could find jazz imports and bootleg concerts for bands like Roxy Music and Crowded House. That in turn reminds him of a copy of an old letter he found the other day. He had typed it to a girl he knew in college. They were both on summer break; she was tending bar in some ritzy getaway up in the Hamptons, and he was at his family's home down in Virginia, down with the trees and the heat and the rain. It was back when Dad was still

alive and absorbing most of Mother's blows. The letter he had written was in response to a letter she had written to him – who knew where it was now. At one point in the letter he had written, *Before I go any further, I have to say that you have an interesting conversational style in your letter writing.* Jesus. What the fuck. Later on in the same letter he wrote: *If I have a major weakness in life, it's CDs. If anyone ever wanted to rob me, they shouldn't take the stereo or computer, hell, grab all the CDs.* That was even more embarrassing. How empty and soulless it sounded now.

Nothing ever happened between him and that college girl. She ended up with the Rhodes Scholar guy and who knew if they were still together or where she was now. That was the way it went in college, a lot of women, a lot of letters, a lot of nothing eventually happening. Infatuation was free back then. Later it became much more expensive, like his trip to Hong Kong. There was that Japanese woman he met in grad school, a friend of a friend, and she mentioned that she would be in Hong Kong for the holidays. *Hey, me too,* he said, even though he didn't know he would be traveling to Hong Kong until that very moment. He spoke to her on the phone a few times before the trip, long distance. He put it on his parents' phone card and later he found out they were charged \$400 for his calls. Mother loved that one. He found out she was from Kobe, where they have their own regional dialect, and he learned how to say *How goes it: Nani shiton ja?* So when he finally saw her again, a thousand dollars and a few thousand miles later, just before New Year in the Kowloon Tong train station, he said to her, *Nani shiton ja?* She gave a brief laugh, not a bad reaction but not as demonstrative as maybe he would have expected or liked. He should have taken it as a sign at the time.

They stayed in a cramped hotel near Mongkok, where the bathroom floor is the shower floor and the shower has to be heated for a few minutes before using. They had their own beds (standard room layout) and there was no place to pile their backpacks except between them. She had a very dignified way of sleeping that impressed him. Her hands would be crossed over her stomach, she would breathe very gently, and her cheekbones got very stark. He doesn't remember much else from that time. He was into anime music then and always got a kick over how they mangled the lyrics whenever they were in English. He fondly recited some from his favorite song to her: *Things you always do is only for you, it's not changed since we started in this place... I know you're staying, you know I'm going, keep two hearts one, anytime whoa whoa...* (He warbled a good *whoa*, it was good for a laugh.) *You see your future, I see my dreaming, there's no good-bye even being all alone...* She had a habit of squinting with her left eye, while her other would grow disproportionately larger of its own accord. It was like she was forever half-skeptical, half-awestruck. It was hard work to truly delight her, but when one of his jokes landed and he got a full laugh out of her, it was like being on an aircraft carrier, announcing mission accomplished.

Looking back on it, it was destined to never go anywhere. He should have known when she told him she liked that British voice saying *Mind the platform gap.* She always preferred British men. The accent and all that. He almost came out and told her that he was in love with her. She probably sensed it. She said to him once, *I am glad there is no meaning in our relationship.* He knew what she meant to say. He couldn't help taking that



statement at literal value though. *Hona mata*, he said to her at the airport when they parted, and she gave him a hug that lasted a while. The following Christmas he sent her a photo of them he had taken in Hong Kong, down at the harbor at night with the skyscrapers and lights, and if he did say so himself, they both looked good. A year or so later he sent her another Christmas card, but he goofed and sent her another copy of that same exact photo. He didn't realize the error until after he had mailed the card out. It didn't matter because he never heard from her again, but to him the mistake was inexcusable. It still feels inexcusable now.

How long has it been since he wrote a letter? How long has it been since he wrote anything? His favorite class college course had been the fiction writing workshop where the grad student teacher showed up the first day with a bottle of tequila in hand. (Everything else in that class could not help but be an anticlimax after that.) Maybe he just needed a pen pal. Were there such things anymore? Yes, it was called social media. Internet Bah Humbug! It was Christmastime. He and his girlfriend had had an argument the day before about *It's a Wonderful Life*. With great certitude he had told her that Mr. Potter was the true hero of the movie. Did he really believe that? Maybe he was just being contrarian. Even he didn't know. Maybe he was trying to get a rise out of her. Mission failure. Somehow he had moved from kid to curmudgeon in a single bound. It would be simpler to surrender to the current ways. Take some business classes, learn *something*, get with the current jargon. He looked like a hipster anyway, without even trying. A shambled-looking guy he had passed on the street the other day had called him that: *You fucking hipster, ruining this town!* Well, there was no denying it. He had a pink mustache on his car. He had entrenched himself while the real people, the artists and fuck-ups and folks without resources, had been forced out.

He has been staring at the newspaper without reading it. Last night, a few hours after their Mr. Potter conversation, his girlfriend told him she was dealing with a guy at work. He asked her what she meant by *dealing*. *He's new on the team. Young. We've got a really good rapport. I don't know. I don't know what it means. I just felt I should be honest and tell you.* He said: *Tell me what? What are you telling me?* She said: *I don't know. That's what I'm telling you.* He said: *What are you thinking?* She said: *It's confusing. It's like I'm not in control of myself.* He said: *Do you want to sleep with him?* She said: *No, it's not that. He's attractive but it's not that.* He said: *Then what?* She said: *It's like wanting to make a connection.* He said: *What kind of connection?* She said: *I can't describe it.* He said: *What you're not describing is pretty fucking upsetting.* She gave a little shrug of the shoulders similar to what you'd expect from someone who just saw their favorite team lose. She said again: *I just felt I should be honest.* He said: *Should I expect flowers to come for you? Should I expect you to lie about being at an off-site when you're really flying to Hawaii with this guy?* Another shrug. Then his phone rang and they both beat tactical retreats. It was Mother with important news. She had selected a priest to deliver the eulogy at her funeral. When she said the priest's name he ground his teeth. Not *him*. Same guy who delivered the eulogy when Dad died. That time the ceremony had gone as you'd expect any funeral ceremony to go, right down to the ceremonial first heap of dirt on the casket. Everyone half-rose from their lawn chairs to leave, leaving to the rest of it to the grave diggers hired for the occasion, when the priest said in his booming accusatory voice:

*Where are you going? The ceremony is not over until the burial is completed.* The priest didn't say another word. No one wanted to be the one to run out while everyone else was stuck, so everyone sat there for the next two hours, watching the two grave diggers, both of them old and clearly past their primes, struggle with their shovels. Finally Mother looked at him, and he rolled up his sleeves and joined in. Two hours of it, and finally it was done, and the priest turned and walked away. Everyone else was too stunned by the whole thing to say a word, so they got in their cars and left. His dad's legacy, the one memory stuck in the heads of everyone who knew him, would be that interminable burial. And he would have to go through it again with Mother. She was being dramatic, telling him about the priest. But the specificity of that physical memory, the sore arms, the raw wood of the shovel handle, somehow convinced him: she was really dying this time.

What he really wants to be is Keith Carradine in *Nashville*. Well, almost. His character is an asshole and a fuck-up in the movie, and yet there's the one scene where he's singing in the bar. He's slept with several women in the audience, and all of them think that song is about them, and hanging in the back is Lily Tomlin, who is married and attracted to him yet has resisted him all through the movie. She knows the song is really for her. You have to forget that Keith sleeps with Lily and then goes on his merry rutting way soon afterwards, while she goes back to her difficult life with uncaring husband and deaf kids. You have to focus on the moment in the song when they both understand each other.

The letter he found the other day to the girl in the Hamptons opens with a Joni Mitchell quote: *They say all romantics meet the same fate someday, cynical and drunk and boring someone in a small café.* That's not bad. He had some taste back then. Now that someday is today, how has he fared? He isn't drunk and he isn't boring someone. He's worse than that. He's insignificant. A bundle of intentions crumpled in a seat.

A bicyclist passes by. Something hits him. Part of the bike. Does he? Dare he? He does. Maybe because the word *intentions* is nagging the insides of his head. The bicyclist is moving away. It doesn't register until after he speaks that the bicyclist is a woman, a ponytail sprouting from the back of her helmet. Would it matter if it were a man? White or black? He likes to think not. He overthinks usually. Not this time.

*Thank you.*

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She hooks her fourth bicycle around her shoulder and hauls it up the stairs towards the subway exit. Her jaw is like rock. The rail of the bicycles bites into her skin. She likes the pain, it gives extra juice to her fury. Fuck that guy on the subway. Fuck him. Rush hour, I'm just trying to squeeze through, and he gets all fucking *peevish*. She is breathing too hard. She could take the elevator but she can't stand the urine smell. Anyway she must keep moving. She has counted the total number of steps on this stairwell in the past: fifty-nine. An odd number. Odd and too big. She must be around step thirty. Now she is wheezing. She must take it easy. She must take care of herself now.

Her husband is weird around kids. She's seen it with his nephews and nieces. He isn't evil or passive-aggressive or anything like that, and she knows what those things are all about. Her aunt was like that. To her aunt, children were competition. If she wasn't the star of the show, then it had to be made clear to the little upstarts in no uncertain ways. Her aunt's kids were pretty much wrecked by the time they were five. How old were the twins now? Nine? She seriously wondered if they were potty-trained. They hadn't been the last time she had seen them, three years ago. Her husband isn't like that. He definitely is not adept though. Like when her two year-old nephew was climbing up onto a dining room chair with clear designs about getting on the table, and the words just exploded from him: *Justin! No! Get down from there!* It was like he was witnessing a fire. She was certain neighbors down the block must have heard it. Good thing Justin was still too young to be upset by it. Or when Justin tipped over his cup and orange juice spilled everywhere, and he gave this elongated shriek. His hands were up by his ears, jiving. Completely out of proportion to the event. Where these dramatics come from, she has no idea. It didn't bode well for him being useful when she had the kid.

(Top of the stairs now: A guy is sitting cross-legged just beyond the fare gates, playing guitar and singing blues. Some of his strings rattle. This is always the hard part, getting past the gates with a bicycle. You have to take the bicycle through the swinging emergency door, park it for a moment, then go back through the door and pay your exit fare. If you're honest. If you have integrity. She is, she does. The guitarist smiles at her. Maybe a leer. He smells of stale sweat. Better than stale urine. Happy holidays.)

Maybe they should move to Singapore. She has heard good things about that place: a real family town. She's had enough of guns and bigotry and taxes and decay. Singapore has gardens that look like they're from the movie *Avatar*. Cheap food everywhere. She likes the heat too. She's a lightweight in that regard. Mark Twain had it right with San Francisco. When they moved out here she said to her husband, we just need two things: A car and central heating. They got the heating but there was nowhere to park. It wasn't safe to drive anyway. This is the first city she's lived in where the pedestrians are crazier than the drivers. Trudging across the street on a red light, like they were wandering into their bathrooms at 5 in the morning. Or people in motorized wheelchairs, rocketing down the street, grim and clenched and leaning forward all the time. We get it, you're disabled. Or the guy who insists on jogging during lunch hour downtown, when the streets are at their fullest, and yelling *Out of the way! Move it!* everywhere he goes. She hopes she sees someone like that right now. She will run him over, happily. Give him a little extra to the face with the back tire. Maybe roll back and forth over him. Just like kneading dough.

Moving would be easier if she had gotten that law degree. That's what her dad wanted. *You want to write, that's fine, but get yourself some steady work first and then you can write in your spare time. The way John Grisham did it.* Her husband says it's great she's not a lawyer. Maybe it would all have been simpler, though. If she is going to make a real attempt at writing, she definitely must write something soon. No time once the kid is born. She is prepared for that reality, and has been conservative with her estimates. Eighteen years. What if the child has a mental disability? A lifetime, perhaps. Good thing they've never lived in Marin. For some reason breast cancer is high in Marin. Maybe they can hire

a nanny, if they can afford it. *If*. Earlier in the day she found a bunch of writing notes from an unspecified time in the past. Just scabs of words. *Desert days*. By themselves, they could mean anything. A cry from the soul, a New Age album. Or how about this one: *Decidedly sour*. It's like carrying on a conversation with a nutjob. She is furious with herself. She hates the phrase attention to detail, it makes her think of job evaluations, and yet it is clear that she lacks it, and it is killing her nonexistent writing career.

Outside the day is cloudless and bright. It's Santa pub crawl day. Folks in Santa hats of all shapes and sizes stream past. About half of them are already drunk. She could use a good fucking drink right now. Got to learn to stop swearing, she thinks. The kid must avoid real life as long as possible, and that includes swear words. Instead of *fuck* how about *fub*. *Fubbity-fub-fub*. *No fubbing way*. When she was a kid she used to say *shit-a-maroo* a lot. It sounded too friendly to be a swear, and she liked the way it rolled off her tongue.

*Shit-a-maroo*, she says out loud. She thinks of that fubber on the train and it all seems ridiculous. She's seized by a giggle, then another. *Shit-a-maroo, shit-a-maroo, shit-a-maroo*. Now the Santas look at her as if she's crazy. *If*. Her husband's flat-iron office building is just a block away and there is much to discuss. Kid, homeless guy, Singapore, a power strip for the cell phone. Her legs have stopped moving. The bicycle squeaks in place. She is having a good little laugh. It's not procrastination, she reassures herself. Procrastination is getting distracted, doing something without purpose. She knows well what she will do, is doing. The Café Royale is having its monthly Beatles karaoke night tonight. She just wants to fub around a little. She will go straight to the café and set herself down at the bar and stare at herself in the mirror, framed by the blood-red drapery against the far wall, and she will sing two, maybe three Beatles songs, depending on how big the crowd is tonight. Everyone will want to sing the old songs like *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* and *And I Love Her*, while she will want to tackle the later songs, like *Buffalo Bill* and *Golden Slumbers*. There will be a clear age gap because most of the people there will either be college kids or Boomers. That is all right. I will be a rare species, she thinks as she starts running, pushing the bicycle ahead of her, attaining speeds she would never reach if she was merely bicycling. A bird with crystal plumage.

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Years later, at Christmastime, he is stepping on board a train during Hong Kong rush hour, and a discreet female voice on the PA advises him: *Please mind the platform gap*. He is on his way to a cheap noodle lunch near Lan Kwai Fong, on one of those fearsome smoggy, cloudy days. He hears the words and he jumps back to that time in San Francisco, on the train, the bicyclist running into him, *Fuck you*. The bicyclist probably doesn't even remember at this point, he thinks, as he notes the memory in his journal. I'm the only one keeping this stupid piece of history alive. Still, he smiles.

At around the same time she is rubbing her eyes. It's been a long day and she has been teaching herself how to mix music tracks on her computer. She finally has a homemade album finished: simple stuff recorded in the living room, just guitar and vocals and a few friends helping out on bass, drums. She will self-publish it and she will never gain fame or

note but it will earn her a few gigs at local wine bars, and she will feel much better about things. She is definitely not going to call the album *Desert Days*. Still, the words *Desert Days* linger in her head. They remind her of the day she was on the train and yelled at that guy. The fourth bicycle. She has chained it to the *no parking* sign in front of her apartment building and left it there. Now as she turns away from the computer she looks out through her window, down on the empty street and the bicycle. In the intervening years thieves have made off with the tires, the gears, the seat. It is just an empty frame lolling against the sign. She has taken great satisfaction from seeing that fubbing vehicle decay before her eyes.

Both of them think of that day on the train, and both remember what was going through their heads at the conclusion of that day: *We'll probably have to go through the same shit tomorrow.*

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Ho Lin is co-editor of *Caveat Lector*. For more of his work, visit [www.ho-lin.us](http://www.ho-lin.us).