

TOMMY: *(Looks around jokingly.)* With me? It'd be on you I'm afraid.

AGNES: I know. Tell you the truth? Things do get a little lonely. Besides, I think I'm gettin' a kick out of the fact that I'm hangin' out with Tommy Ramsey. Even if he ended up a drunk loser.

TOMMY: *(Smiles.)* Ha. Ha. Failure isn't so bad sometimes. It levels you. The people I met since I've fallen are much nicer people by and large than those when I was flying high—like a bird.

AGNES: *(Beat.)* Very deep. You comin'?

TOMMY: Yeah. Yeah, I'm comin'.

## THE BEAUTY OF LIFE

*Garth, mid 20s, an ambitious reporter for National Public Radio, has come to speak to Ms. Li Huirong in hopes of writing a feature on the recent AIDS crisis in China. His article would bring to the forefront the Chinese government's lax infection control measures in taking the blood of rural Chinese peasants. These conditions have produced thousands of new AIDS infections across the country. More specifically, they have caused the pain and anguish of families like Ms. Li's. However, when Garth comes to the door, he is met by Ellen, an English teacher and good friend of Ms. Li. Ellen, an American, mid 20s, has a very different plan for Garth.*

GARTH: I'm here to see Ms. Li Huirong. My name's— *(Starts to reach out his hand.)*

ELLEN: Mr. Diggs. *(Waves him in.)* Come in. We've been expecting you.

GARTH: We?

ELLEN: Yes. Can I get you some tea? Or maybe you want something more leaded—I have coffee.

GARTH: That would be great. My Mandarin is pretty bad, so I'm glad you're here to translate. So are you a friend of Ms. Li's?

ELLEN: That would be me. I understand you're from NPR.

GARTH: Yes.

ELLEN: I love NPR. I'm a junkie.

GARTH: Well, thank you, uh—I think I missed your name.

ELLEN: No. You didn't miss it. I never said. *(Hands him his coffee.)* Ellen Holt. Ms. Li told me all about you the day you visited the hospital. Is your wife still here?

GARTH: *(Surprised by her mentioning his wife.)* Uh . . . yeah.

My wife doesn't always come with me when I work, but she's so fascinated with China. She decided to tag along.

ELLEN: That's great.

GARTH: Yeah. So you're aware of why I'm here? You know about Ms. Li's condition I assume?

ELLEN: Yeah. We've known each other for awhile now—good friends. It's not uncommon in Wenlou. Her husband died of it two years ago. A lot of people around here have AIDS. They're poor. Not well-educated. They all thought giving blood was safe. The money was easy. Like some sort of down-pouring from God. Now, they're outcasts. And the government, and other people, don't give a good—all right. I'm already getting on my soapbox. So how do *you* like China?

GARTH: Well, uh . . . I don't know. I've only been here a week. It seems like a mysterious place.

ELLEN: Yeah, the whole place makes me paranoid.

GARTH: Paranoid?

ELLEN: Well, it's no secret about the recording devices. If the government isn't happy with you, they have a way of letting either you or your family know about it. They don't play fair. People tend to disappear. *(Beat.)* And then, well, the roads always piss me off too.

GARTH: I hired a driver to help me navigate here. He got lost. Who ever came up with the idea of not mapping any of it?

ELLEN: Ahh, but if you map, people can spy.

GARTH: Ahh, but if you don't map, no one will visit. No tourists, no money.

ELLEN: Ahh, but you see, the tourists come for the beautiful buildings, sir. There's tons of new construction while everyone's starving. It's all about saving face and impressing people. All the gorgeous facades full of garbage inside. Impressive swimming pools that are only filled once a year. An amazing new library, but they can't afford the books.

GARTH: That's ridiculous.

ELLEN: Yes. But people here have a lot of pride.

GARTH: So do I, but it doesn't take a genius to know that if you can't use a space for its purpose, if it's only there to look pretty, it has no life—it crumbles or becomes corrupt just like a politician with no power or responsibility. *(Ellen nods, smiles.)* What?

ELLEN: I like you. We think a lot alike.

GARTH: Thanks. *(Beat.)* So how do you know Ms. Li?

ELLEN: I came to China to help teach English at the University. I was working on my dissertation on Asian studies—still am three years later. Wanted to experience things here. I hated it at first. I planned on leaving, but I made the mistake of volunteering—just being an extra set of hands with an organization that provides medical assistance for people with AIDS. That's when I met Ms. Li and others, but she was special. So smart. She wanted to learn English so badly. I started to teach her. She picked it up fast. We were finally able to communicate, and the rest is history or “herstory” if you want to be annoying.

GARTH: Are you the one who sent the note to my hotel? *(She nods.)* To tell you the truth, I wasn't sure whether to expect to hear from any of them. I got the feeling that they were afraid to speak about how they were infected.

ELLEN: Well, we're not talking about people who feel comfortable speaking freely anyway. So many people disappeared during Mao's Cultural Revolution. Just for practicing religion or reading philosophy or painting a flower for God's sake. These people remember that if you step out of line, even a little, you will be erased. Now, they've contracted AIDS from government blood donations. They know that if they start talking to foreign media, like yourself, government people will be very unhappy.

GARTH: So what if they're unhappy? Besides hasn't it all come out anyway? Dr. Chou told the press a week ago that the government blood facilities weren't sterile.

ELLEN: It goes far beyond not sterile, Mr. Diggs. *(Beat. He looks at her.)* This is not for the record, okay? *(He looks at*

her as if to agree.) They were taking the blood of a bunch of people at the same time, putting it into a huge vat, and removing the plasma for medicine and blood products. They then put the mixed blood back into the arms of the donators.

GARTH: Oh my God.

ELLEN: It's even how the government advertised it. We give you the money, and we even give you your blood back. Unfortunately, it wasn't just your blood. If only one person in the whole group had HIV, it's now likely that everyone who gave at the same time did.

GARTH: That's unfathomable. Okay, I'm not going to quote you, but I need to verify what you just said with another source so I can write about it. Do you know anyone who would be willing to talk about this?

ELLEN: I'm afraid I don't know anyone with a death wish—no. Anyway, we didn't call you here for the story. We have a much loftier proposition.

GARTH: What do you mean by “we didn't call you here for the story?” Who's we?

ELLEN: Ms. Li and myself.

GARTH: Where is she? I was wondering when you were going to bring her out. She is here, isn't she?

ELLEN: No.

GARTH: What?! Then how can we do an interview? This is why I came.

ELLEN: Did you know that the health officials in Henan are preventing Dr. Chou from getting a passport? She's been detained ever since she spoke to the foreign press about the non-sterile conditions five days ago.

GARTH: Look, I promise I won't use Ms. Li's name or yours either.

ELLEN: You're in China now, Mr. Diggs. China doesn't like bad news. Especially if the bad news is about their responsibility in infecting hundreds of thousands of people. It's not very impressive. The government of China will do anything

to stop a story like that from escaping, even if that means you have to lose a few people in the process. It won't matter. They were poor and sick anyway. Do you understand what I'm saying?

GARTH: Yes. But how will they know?

ELLEN: I told you about the recording devices and the people who disappeared.

GARTH: You also said you were paranoid. Look, the reason I want to tell this story is because of this incredible injustice. If I don't use your name or her name, what does it matter? I'll disguise myself for the interview if need be. Please just talk to her about meeting with me. You can trust me.

ELLEN: Remember the day you came to the hospital trying to get one of them to talk to you? (*He nods, looking puzzled.*) Ms. Li could see that you had a kind face. And then when she saw your wife and how you smiled at her, she knew. She told me that day to find you and meet with you. (*He looks even more puzzled.*) She wants you to take her youngest daughter—to adopt her. She believes you'll do it.

GARTH: What? What is . . . This is . . . I don't even know her. Besides, she's not dead. She didn't even look that sick.

ELLEN: Looks are deceiving. Ms. Li has full-blown AIDS. She's already had pneumonia twice. She has no money for the medication she needs to live. There is no life here for people who have AIDS. There is no cocktail like in the U.S. that keeps her alive for ten years. She has three children. Two are boys, ten and eleven. Friends have agreed to take them. But her youngest, who is only four, is a girl. And well, you know how popular girls are here. If the girl is not adopted, she'll starve.

GARTH: Oh my God. This is exactly why we need to tell this story. People need to hear this. They'll be moved. She'll have no problem having the girl adopted.

ELLEN: But you don't understand. She doesn't want just anyone to adopt her. She wants you.

GARTH: But why?! I'm just some foreign reporter she doesn't know.

ELLEN: She's seen you. She trusts you. I can't answer why. It's just a feeling. Ms. Li wants you to sign the papers and take her daughter as soon as you can. You can write the story when you get back home.

GARTH: But if I wait too long, the story might have already broken.

ELLEN: Screw the story! This is better than any story. We're talking about a beautiful child.

GARTH: So why aren't you taking her? You obviously know the girl.

ELLEN: I tried, but she doesn't think I'm the one. I'm not married. And I'm staying here for a few more years at least. Ms. Li wants her daughter to grow up in the United States.

GARTH: So what? You obviously care for Ms. Li and the girl. You'll take her to the U.S. eventually. You'd be a better choice. She must see that.

ELLEN: She knows I'd struggle to afford it. I'm not even out of school yet.

GARTH: Look, I know you're trying to help this poor lady out. She's had a hard life, but I can't just come here and just immediately adopt this child.

ELLEN: Why not?

GARTH: Well, I have a wife for one!

ELLEN: Who's incredibly fascinated with China. Why don't you ask her at least?

GARTH: I came here on assignment. I had no intention of adopting—

ELLEN: I understand. But what was your intention then?

GARTH: What do you mean? I'm here to write a story like I said.

ELLEN: But why? Philosophically why?

GARTH: To show people what's really going on in this country. From the mouths of the victims. So that this can never

be allowed to happen again. To, to force a much needed change.

ELLEN: You don't force change. It just happens. I mean, let's not get overly ambitious about this. Every country has had their AIDS scandal with the government handling things badly. Big yawn. You'll make people on the freeway shake their heads as they drink down their Starbucks. They'll say, "Oh, those poor people—It's shocking. It's terrible." A minute later when the traffic gets ugly—just like all things shocking and terrible in the U.S.—it will be forgotten. I know you might be naïve enough to believe if you tell this story, the government will never pull this again. But terrible atrocities have occurred constantly throughout history, even when a bunch of reporters covered them. You can't change a world, but you most definitely can change a life.

GARTH: If we don't tell the story, nothing will happen. No one will start funds for health. No one will assist in adopting these orphans. No medical centers will send their talent to help. Dr. Chou put herself at risk by stating that illegal blood collection centers still function in these rural areas so that we could at least effect change here. If we don't call the Chinese government on this, they won't stop. We're talking about changing public health policy here and saving lives.

ELLEN: And I'm talking about a little girl. All these things you're saying are uncertainties. It is certain this girl will starve if she's not adopted. You're here and her mother has said you're the one. Is there anything more important than this? Really? (*Beat.*) Is there?

GARTH: Okay, I hear what you're saying, but what about the hundreds of other little girls? Don't you think their mothers feel the same way? That saving their child is more important than the bigger issues? What am I supposed to do? Adopt them all?

ELLEN: Yeah. You and everyone you know. I know it sounds ridiculous. You think I'm crazy—we're crazy. That's the

beauty of life—sometimes something that seems wholly ridiculous is the one and only thing that truly makes sense. Actually, it reminds me of the one thing I truly do love about China. The way people sometimes meet you and immediately trust you for no apparent reason. It's not based on anything logical. It's just a connection—a feeling, an intuition. *(She points to a picture on the table.)* There. That's her—Shen.

GARTH: *(Ellen nods at the photo. He looks at it.)* She's adorable, but . . .

ELLEN: But what? Ms. Li's life has been a living hell, Mr. Diggs. She would have loved to study and go to school like us, but she was forced to work in the fields. She would have loved to travel to other places and visit, maybe write stories, but she's a woman. She would have loved to watch her babies grow up, but she donated blood to the government for forty yuan to help pay for shoes. She told me once, "When I look at my daughter, I see hope." She wanted her to go to the U.S. one day. Her hope was fading. That is until she saw you at the hospital. She knew you were the one. *(Beat.)* So are you? What do think?

GARTH: I think—I think, this is crazy, I think this is an incredible story, this is nuts . . . I, I think—I think—I think I better call my wife.

ELLEN: Your wife?

GARTH: She likes when I consult her on these matters. You know, when I buy a car. When I switch jobs. When I decided to adopt a baby from China. She's funny that way.

ELLEN: I knew we could count on you.

GARTH: I'm not promising anything yet.

ELLEN: I know. There's the phone. *(Beat.)* You won't regret it.

GARTH: And the story?

ELLEN: Tell it. Tell it when you get home with Shen.

## GRIEVING SPACE

*Kim and Andy's four-year-old daughter was kidnapped from her bedroom while they were making love one night. Kim's mom, who lives with them, had taken a trip, their little girl was sound asleep, and they were enjoying their romantic time alone. Kim blames Andy for the incident since it was his idea to make love. Maybe if they weren't preoccupied, she thinks, they would have heard something. It is now seven weeks since this event took place. The couple, both in their late 20s, has organized searches, papered neighborhoods, and nagged authorities in order to find something—anything. Unfortunately, there have been no breaks in the case. Tips have led only to dead-ends. The pressure and frustration has begun to destroy their relationship. Tonight, as usual, Andy has not been able to sleep.*

KIM: What are you doing?

ANDY: Just listening. I couldn't sleep. I hope I didn't wake you?

KIM: No. *(Beat.)* I didn't know you liked classical music?

ANDY: Yeah, I used to listen when I was in college more. I thought I was being so sophisticated.

KIM: Really? Did you take that pill?

ANDY: Yeah. Took two. Didn't do anything. Come sit?

KIM: I should go back to sleep actually. Maybe I'll take one.

ANDY: I forgot how moving it is. This music can grab you. Right in the gut. Reach inside. Stir up the entire spectrum of emotions—from deep sadness to rage to incredible passion. Ya know?

KIM: Sure. Did you ever check with your brother-in-law?

ANDY: About the friend? The FBI friend? *(She looks at him.)* I forgot.