The Solace of Grammar

There’s nothing at stake, Mom. No one can get hurt.” Arielle, sautéing mushrooms, believes this. “My 800 math score is safe. I’m not retaking the SAT. You’re right that that would be risky.”

Her mother spins her lettuce spinner with obvious relief. The woman who adopted Arielle may be a Mayflower-white old hippie, but Arielle knows Elizabeth Somerville Larsen loves a math 800 as much as any Tiger Mom. “Thank you, my dear.”

Arielle is pretty sure now that she can talk her mother into going along; Arielle just has to remain chill, not make a Supreme Court case out of getting what she’s asking for—and what she’s asking for isn’t really a big deal. Arielle’s friend Alice Jung needs tutoring sessions and Alice’s mother wants the sibling discount. Arielle and Alice will pretend to be twins. It’ll be fun: Alice is Korean; Arielle is Asian on the outside and “American” on the inside. Neither has an actual sibling, so it’s hard to see what’s unfair.

But when the salad greens stop whirling, her mother says, “I still don’t feel right about sanctioning a deliberate deception.”

“You’re serious?”

“Well, I realize that what we’re discussing is not a serious crime.”

“It’s like a parking ticket.”

“No. It’s worse than a parking ticket.” She tosses her graying hair and assumes her substitute-minister face. “A parking ticket is essentially a passive act: letting time run out on the meter without returning to the car.”

“Fine. I’m proposing the equivalent of a bookkeeping violation. And I’m making an exquisitely delicious sauce for our spinach pesto ravioli.”

“You are a delight with vegetables.” Her mother picks up an electric bass, which isn’t plugged in, and plays something Celtic-sad. Even in the middle of an argument, Arielle gets melancholy, thinking of her mother’s plan to join a ladies’ rock ‘n’ roll band when her nest is empty. The pathetic boldness of the leap makes Arielle dizzy.

She drains the pasta and says, as the steam clears, “I think we should try to help our friends.” No need to rub her mother’s face in the fact that money is a lot tighter for other single moms—
generations of her mother’s New England Unitarian guilt will come to Arielle’s aid. As will the fact that her mother does not want to admit to not actually liking Alice, the one and only Asian friend Arielle has made without coercion. Arielle and Alice, who laughed a lot while working together on the Korean trends column for the school newspaper, know that both of their mothers disapprove of their friendship. No one discusses this; it is simply understood in the way families understand things. As if Alice and Arielle really are twins.

Her mother sighs, defeated in all but fact. “What is it you want to get from these tutoring classes?”

“I’ll have research papers in college, and I’m still not clear on how to document sources.” Not untrue. But what Arielle really wants is the chance to take a break, at least for a couple of hours a week, from the mixed blessing of being adopted.

She has no idea that her mother, at this very moment, is recalling the man who would have been Arielle’s father. Edward Larsen and Elizabeth had embarked upon Arielle’s adoption together as husband and wife; he’d died before the trip to Korea. At his funeral, Elizabeth had been focused on arrangements to bring home their baby alone. But tonight, and not for the first time, she believes she sees, by the grace of a God she doesn’t believe in, traces of Edward in Arielle. She knows that he, like their daughter, would put helping a friend ahead of playing by the rules. And that, had he not been driving in a windstorm and killed by a fallen tree, he also would have grown tired of Elizabeth’s righteousness. In truth, even Elizabeth often finds her righteousness annoying.

“Mom, Alice needs all the tutoring her mother can afford. It’s a nice way to help them save some money.”

“Unless I’m the fly in the ointment.”

“You don’t want to fly around in ointment.”

Elizabeth looks at a poised and driven young girl from Korea and tries to tap into a well of grief for the man whose life insurance has allowed for her comfortable and morally smug suburban life. Instead, she recalls a story Arielle told her about Alice’s ancestors: they were Buddhists, but the temple to Buddha was far away from their village and they grew tired of walking, so without searching their souls, they joined the nearby Christian church. Naturally, Elizabeth’s daughter, raised to suspect anything that offers spiritual convenience, loves this story.
“How’s the pasta?” Arielle asks.
Reminded to taste, Elizabeth realizes it’s the best pasta in the entire world.

* * *

At the Flying Phoenix Learning Center, the tutors are called Miss and Mister First-Name, and they sit at tables and correct with red pens. Arielle and Alice have both been assigned to Mr. Alan, the only Mister. There is a joint at the base of Mr. Alan’s thumb that Arielle watches as he marks up her paper, striking out “this can be explained by” and “the author shows this when.” She loves his hands. She also loves the voice he uses with her, which is more nuanced and urgent than the voice he uses for the other students.

He tells her to trust her reader to make connections. “You’re smart. Your reasoning is sound. We can follow it without these signposts.”

She makes no excuses, though she could blame her eighth-grade teacher for training her, literally, to assume the reader is an idiot. She has noticed that Mr. Alan doesn’t like it when kids blame teachers. She remains quietly respectful as he makes her essay into something shorter and crisper. She tells him, “I think I finally get it about the active voice.”

He says, “The active voice is something about which you are beginning to understand.”

She laughs her flirty laugh. So weird. Somehow when he tinkers with her writing she wants him to kiss her.

“Care for a Curiously Strong Mint?” he asks, passing around the Curiously Strong tin. Arielle says, “No, thank you.”

Then Alice, with her coy little ponytail flick, says, “No, thank you.”

And a grave little Chinese boy says, “No, thank you.” At the Flying Phoenix Learning Center, Arielle has become, within three weeks, the model to follow in matters relating to American adults. Though recently a couple of the girls have started copying Alice’s ponytail.

Arielle has become aware that Alice spends too much time on her hair, weaving in sparkling plastic, dying strands unnatural
pinks. She has good Asian hair, nicer than Arielle’s, which isn’t as shiny. Alice is working at grade level, but struggling with comma splices and sentence fragments. She is lazy by Flying Phoenix standards, which are decidedly Asian. She’s started asking Arielle for more and more help with her Flying Phoenix homework. Arielle would like to refuse, but then Alice would probably want to quit altogether. And Arielle, who doesn’t need tutoring, would miss seeing the tutor.

She waits to ask Mr. Alan a who/whom question while he fills out the little Chinese boy’s point sheet: points for homework, points for class work, total points to date. Mr. Alan riffs to no one in particular, “Curiously Strong Mints. Mysteriously urbane dwarves. Astoundingly crippled giants.”

The boy does not react. Alice giggles. But Mr. Alan smiles at Arielle. Hers is the reaction worth soliciting.

She’s ready with “Adverbally adjectived plural nouns.” He grins. His hair is buzz-cut and balding. His ears stick out. *Inexplicably sexy dorks*, she thinks.

Alice asks a random question about quotation marks. She is wearing vintage jeans, which Arielle has to admit are classic, but her sweatshirt, zipped up tight, is pink and says PINK. Arielle suspects that Mr. Alan dislikes such fashion logos. He seems to dislike most of the things Arielle’s mother dislikes. Arielle understands her mother’s kind of snobbery, which is different from Alice and her mother’s 300-dollar-leather-miniskirt-and-Mercedes kind of snobbery. The sibling discount ruse had nothing to do with actual poverty. It was just about getting the deal.

What Arielle does not understand is the kick of butterflies in the belly when Mr. Alan singles her out. He is old and not handsome and she is not a hormonally unbalanced middle-school virgin. She is almost eighteen. She has a white boyfriend who goes to Penn. In the spring of her junior year, his senior year, they slept together in a hotel room in San Francisco, on the other side of the U.S.A., during a journalism convention. No one at the convention knew she was adopted. Her mother knows that she is sexually active and does not believe that sex is sinful.

But Arielle is coming to believe it is wrong to deceive anyone the way she has been deceiving Mr. Alan who, at forty-something, and with a Ph.D., is way overqualified to be a tutor and does not deserve to be played with.
It is not okay just because Miss Li, the boss at Flying Phoenix, is actually in on the sibling discount ruse. Only the tutors are not. So Mr. Alan, who tutors the girls simultaneously, remains in the dark, and the burden of maintaining the charade falls on Arielle: whenever there is a lie to be told, Alice goes all Korean-demure and defers to her *twin*.

Now Mr. Alan hands Arielle a quick drawing he’s done of a crippled giant with his arms in slings and his head in bandages. She smiles in a way she knows is cute and watches him blush. *The kick.*

*  *  *

Alan Wildstein, delighting in the savviness of the savvier twin, steals the pen he used to sketch the crippled giant. He puts it in the inside pocket of his worn corduroy jacket. And then he makes a quick trip to the coffee station in the corner to steal four cigar-sized packets of sweet Korean instant coffee mix. He doesn’t particularly like the coffee mix.

He doesn’t understand at all why he steals.

But he is grateful that at least he doesn’t steal from kids. He used to steal when he was a kid, a kiss-assy child actor who hardly knew he was alive unless he was being directed or praised. The stealing stopped with puberty, when he became an arrogant jerk. He’s come out of his treatments kinder and more patient in spite of the reversion to petty theft.

And he likes being called Mr. Alan. Enjoys the disembodiment from the rest of his name, which makes it impossible to Google him. He also relishes having no easy access to the Internet for several hours a day. The absence of technology, combined with the presence of children at his old round wooden table, grounds him in the present better than any meditation CD or guru ever could. The dead-endedness of the job doesn’t bother him, either.

He’s published and he’s practically perished. But here he is. The beloved Mr. Alan of Flying Phoenix. And here the twins are, a biweekly delight. The differences between the girls fascinate Mr. Alan. He studies the way in which their years apart—when Arielle traveled the States with the father (a businessman, she claims, but Mr. Alan thinks he was a spy) and Alice stayed in Korea with the mother—molded their different attitudes and the difference in
their command of English. Mr. Alan notes the way attitude and language are intertwined. Also impotence and language. Take, for example, the word *intertwine*. Before the chemo drugs de-manned him, the very word in the context of two lovely high-school Asian girls would have moved him inappropriately. Not that he would have *acted* inappropriately. He would have been careful not to do anything that might be mistaken for crossing the line. Arielle’s little crush and Alice’s silly jealousy would have meant asking that the girls both be moved to another tutor’s table. End of story.

Instead, he has let them, separately and together, confide in kind Mr. Alan. They have explained about their parents’ divorce and how divorce is unusual in this high-income Asian demographic, and he has mentioned his parents’ divorce, though not much else about his past. He doesn’t want them to know that he was an adorably homely child, star of a hugely popular peanut butter commercial. Nor that he’d emerged from a hideous puberty merely homely—nothing adorable about his pitted skin, large ears and nose. His legs are too short, his shoulders sloped too low. Yet in the process of analyzing the effect of his perverse early fame on his parents’ marriage, Alan became a fine writer. His graduate school thesis on divorce in literature opened the door to an assistant professorship that seemed likely to lead to tenure but, thanks to budget cuts, did not. And right after the denial decree came down from the dean, Alan had to be treated for an embarrassing but not usually lethal cancer.

Alice says, “There’s our mother,” pointing into the lobby.

He knows which one: the black jacket, the gray slacks, the bangs cut at an angle. She is as lovely as her daughters and the right age and divorced, and the tender longings he’s suppressed week after week for the twins rush over him in a wave of enormous, irrational desire—

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Arielle watches Mr. Alan check out Alice’s mom. Alice turns to Arielle and makes a smoochy face. Arielle suddenly really wants to get out of there, but not in Alice’s mother’s gas-guzzling van.

Mr. Alan, all red in the face, asks the little Chinese boy if he knows the difference between “then” and “than.” “If I am more foolish than you, then you are wiser than I.”
The little boy nods without a smile.
Alice says, “Mr. Alan, our mother is a widow and a princess. She is in the line to go to throne.”
He says, “In line for the throne.”
Alice repeats, “In line for the throne.”
Arielle snaps, “The throne no longer exists,” for which Alice shoots her a laser beam of contempt. Arielle wants to zap back: *Stop jerking him around.*
Mr. Alan says, “I’ve never been a royalist. Not even an ironic one.”

*That is just random.*
Alice says, “You should date our mother, Mr. Alan.”
“Would a princess want to date a lowly tutor?” *Oh, shit.*
Alice defers to Arielle, who wants to scream. But she won’t give Alice the satisfaction. Arielle says, “My mother would find your work honorable, Mr. Alan. She respects education and dedication above all else.” The truth.

Mr. Alan lets a mint slip out of his mouth onto the table. All stare. The little Chinese boy recoils and says, “It has spit on it.”
Alice says, “It’s like a tiny shiny pearl.”
Arielle gives them all a little lecture in her mother’s substitute-minister voice on how the candy is covered with table-germs while scooping it into a tissue and throwing it away.

Mr. Alan thanks her and asks what he would do without Arielle. She thinks but doesn’t say that without her he wouldn’t be in love with the hot mother of fake twins. Instead she rolls her eyes and says, “I’m so awesome I amaze even me.”

* * *

Alice exercises self-control. She tells herself to remain calm and mysterious and lovely, though she feels like pretend-barfing at Arielle’s self-infatuation. She doesn’t want Mr. Alan to see them fight like bitches. He likes them both, which is okay—for now.

When he’s married to Alice’s mother, he’ll have to like Alice more. And he’ll have to hear the true story: Alice’s father is a cook who tried to make a restaurant in the United States and ended up failing and drinking too much from shame. Alice’s mother inherited her uncle’s laundry and dry-cleaning business *and* three condos.
with respectable tenants. When Alice’s father got too close to a Latina laundry girl who ironed and folded, Alice’s mother divorced him and made a party.

But now Alice’s mother has the same lonely smell as Mr. Alan. Also both of them like mints. Mr. Alan is a kind and good teacher, and if Alice’s mother goes out with him, she will have to break up with the fat man from church who always smells too clean. He works in a dentist’s office and has big white teeth like a wolf in a cartoon. He gives Alice dolls that she’s too old for and sugarless gum. She calls him Mr. Sugarless when he can’t hear. Sometimes this makes her mother slap Alice’s shoulder; sometimes it makes her mother laugh with love, as if she and Alice are friends.

Mr. Sugarless is a widower, and Alice is scared that there could be something in him that makes wives die; Alice can’t imagine living without her mother.

So instead of doing a revision of her essay, Alice writes a note to Mr. Alan bragging about her mother’s cooking and condos and beauty and pretend royal relatives. Alice watches him read and squirm and knows she’s included good details without Arielle’s help. He hands it back and whispers, “Well done.” When he and Alice’s mother get together, Arielle the genius-face and her dried-up mother will be so jealous they will cry.

* * *

Two days later, the Metro leaves the tunnel and Alan, his eyes adjusting to the natural light, watches bits of sun bob along the Potomac River. Perhaps he will share the events of this sunny winter day with his future grandchildren—no need to say step-grandchildren. He will tell them, *It was a cold December afternoon, my forty-third birthday. I invited your grandmother to a chamber music concert at the Kennedy Center—*  

They would never know that their grandfather was limited in the man department or that, in spite of limitations, he provided pleasure and comfort to a mature and willing woman.

Alan steps out of the train with a little hop. His step is so un-Washington. So un- him. His plan: First, he will meet with his students as if this were any other Thursday (subjunctive-mood *were*, since it was *not* any other Thursday). Second, he will ask for a few minutes alone with Miss Li, the boss, and procure her permission to proceed. She will give it; she takes pride in the family-like
atmosphere of her learning center. And Mr. Alan is a prize tutor, the one who could manage middle-school boys and the one requested by the most demanding parents.

The lovely Mrs. Jung, God bless her, was not one of those parents. Chance alone put her twins’ names on his roster. They too will be invited to the concert. The girls will be exposed to live music in an intimate setting—the Terrace Theatre, not the cavernous concert hall—while serving as chaperones for their mother and Mr. Alan.

He smiles at the bus, his bus—good timing—waiting at the Kiss & Ride. He imagines wives dropping off their husbands, or husbands dropping off wives, with kisses. He imagines the twins’ mother dropping him off with a kiss. He sits. The driver pulls out of the station. Alan congratulates himself for making it to this birthday and for doing due diligence before embarking on a respectful courtship. One of his first courtships, period. He pushes away the memories of sad affairs with needy academics. He calculates:

Three years ago, the recession hadn’t hit the college and he still believed he’d get tenure.

Two years ago, he still didn’t know he had cancer.

One year ago, every primal function, mental and physical, caused pain.

Today, his prognosis is excellent and the cystic acne that plagued him since puberty and disappeared during chemo has yet to come back—it may never.

Even better, he’s managed to hold on to the savings from the peanut butter commercial, leaving the money in government bonds. It seems capitalism finally suits him fine, as it suited his mother. May she rest in peace. If there is ever any peace for a former lefty history teacher who made a small fortune in frozen yogurt franchises. That money sure had melted away. And his father never made much. Finances notwithstanding, his parents had died of heart attacks within a year of each other when Alan was barely out of high school. His father, first to go, was jogging with a girlfriend. Alan tells himself: Don’t go there.

He breathes from the belly and goes to the place of peace he’s discovered while meditating. He asks the powers that be for compassion, for the ability to give it and the grace to receive it.
Onward.

He thanks the bus driver, walks a block, opens the door: Holy Moly. Phoenix Learning Center has morphed overnight and turned tinselly bright for the holidays. He tries to assure himself that there is no pressure to feel conspicuously Jewish, decorations notwithstanding. Perhaps the room is full of gods: Buddhist, Korean Christian, Confucian, even Alan’s own New-Age hodgepodge. His table awaits him, and Miss Li has laid out his red pen and evaluation sheets. He sees Arielle. Alone. She is reading the Princeton Review college guide. She should have her pick of excellent schools.

Alice would be the one about whom he and the mother would lie in bed at night and worry. Such unromantic thoughts, but he has to be prepared for new responsibilities. Alice would need a practical major—maybe physical therapy? He would have to look into putting a portion of his savings into some kind of educational fund. Probably best for the girls to get the financial aid forms in before the wedding.

He sits across from Arielle, in his usual chair. She is flanked by two fifth-grade boys, both rattled by the proximity of her prettiness. He hands them each a worksheet on coordinating conjunctions. Then he asks Arielle, “Where’s Alice?”

Arielle closes the Princeton Review and sits tall. “Out in the van. She doesn’t want to come in.”

“That’s not good.”

“Well, it’s not exactly tragic.”

“Did I make it sound tragic?”

“Uh, yeah.” Her tone implies that he knows he sounded tragic and he should get over it. Now he is worried. He imagines something seriously wrong with dear, sweet, dim Alice and panics at what his family-to-be will do about mental health care.

Arielle says, “Alice thinks her essay sucks more than usual.”

Relief temporarily exhausts him. He collects the boys’ worksheets and makes corrections. Then he tells them to highlight the subject of each sentence. They immediately start to argue over who gets which highlighter. He takes a pair of dice from his pocket, asks each boy to pick a number between seven and twelve, rolls and doles out markers accordingly. His power regenerating, he tells Arielle, “Your sister’s essays aren’t that bad.”


Susan Land
He forces himself to focus and is, as usual, pleased with her prose. He gleans from the introduction that she’s taken a nuanced position. Rare and wonderful. She is all that. He praises her graceful summarizing and proper use of an em dash. He suggests that she cut an unnecessary restatement toward the end of the first paragraph. “We get it that the invisible man does not set out to terrorize the village. He’s a scientist. He wants knowledge.”

“Right.”

“What was that prompt again?” He reads: What are the advantages and disadvantages of invisibility? Please explain, using examples from the book.

She says, matter-of-factly, not whining, “No one is invisible, so it doesn’t really matter what the disadvantages are.”

“If life hands you dumb prompts—”

“I know. I’ve learned a lot from you, Mr. Alan.”

“Thank you. So tell me, what are your thoughts on colleges?”

“All good. As of last week, I’m early-decisioned into Brown.”

Wow. A daughter at Brown. My daughter at Brown. He likes the sound of it so much that in lieu of congratulations, he blurts: “I want to ask your mother out.”

“My mother? Oh. You mean . . . right.” She suddenly seems to have a bad taste in her mouth. “Go ahead. Knock yourself out.”

“That isn’t the response I was after.”

“Whatever. Just do it.”

“Wait. Listen. Let me run this by you. I have the perfect date, and you and Alice are both invited: Chamber music at the Terrace Theatre. Brahms and Dvorak.”

“Fine. Just ask her. She’s with Alice.”

“I don’t want to disturb them. If Alice needs some time off—”

“Alice is pretending to have cramps. I never get cramps. I’m on the pill. I have a boyfriend. He thinks you work for a company that reinforces the achievement gap.”

My daughter’s boyfriend’s a jerk. “I’d like to meet him.”

She takes out her smartphone. “I’m texting the van.”

“But the atmosphere is all wrong. I’m working. I’m not dressed right. I was going to call your home tonight. This afternoon was just for getting permission.”

She’s sending.

“Where did you get the dice, Mr. Alan?” asks the boy with the blue marker.
“From a gas station kiosk. I stole them.”
Arielle says, “Here comes the princess.”
Blue Marker says, “You stole?”
Green Marker says, “He’s teasing.”
Blue Marker is not convinced.
Arielle snaps, “Do your worksheets.”
They listen to Arielle.
Whose mother is coming straight toward Mr. Alan—in the here and now, this moment from whence he will measure time: when she walked to his table, pink jeans and a black quilted jacket, a princess with a silver headband instead of a crown. He says his line: “I wanted first to tell you that your daughters are good, hard workers.” He prays: *Please let her be beguiled by the old Alan charm.*
“Alice is ready to go up a level?” Not beguiled quite yet.
“Soon.” He says, soothingly. *May she respond to my calm, gleaned from the regular practice of loving-kindness meditation.*
“When can she go up a level?”
“I’m not sure. I think Arielle has been helping her. Arielle might just have the makings of a master teacher in her.” *Master teacher?* Where did that come from—a Karate Kid movie?
“Arielle should do her own work.” Justifiably snappy—a princess Mama Bear. He likes that.
He goes for the neutral smooth-over: “Siblings often help each other.”
“What is sibling?”
“A sibling is a sister or brother.”
She turns on Arielle: “You have to let Alice make her own mistake.”
“Sorry.”
“You are only here because of Alice.”
“It was your idea.”
“I don’t understand this sentence,” Blue Marker complains.
“What does ‘comportment’ mean?”
Arielle snaps at her mother: “My mother would have paid the fair amount.”
*What?* Alan says, “I don’t get it.”
Mrs. Jung looks at him with her beautiful eyes and says, “It’s no problem for you.”
Arielle says, “I don’t think that’s true.”
Her mother hisses, “Don’t be disrespectful.”
Alan says, “Your daughters are very respectful to me.” He wants to touch her face, smooth her brow. 
She tells him, “Alice has no sister.”
Arielle sneers, “Sibling discount.”
Alan looks around for Miss Li, who is nowhere, as his veins fill up with a killer cocktail of disappointment and humiliation. Then he orders Arielle to go to the computer and write a paragraph about her real parents: “The thesis is up to you, but it should include an although or an I believe.” She nods. She knows instantly what he wants. She is so goddamned with-the-program. Her real parents are probably M.D./Ph.D. lab leaders at NIH. He grabs the marker-boys’ worksheets and takes a pen to a series of incorrect subjects. He shows them how to make corrections. He tells them to look up “comportment.” The princess walks her nice ass out the door. He assigns himself three synonyms for mind-fucked.
Manipulated.
Bamboozled.
Screwed over.
Not to mention that some minuscule portion of the sibling discount comes out of his minuscule potential for bonus pay.
He needs something to steal and grabs a handful of red- and green-foiled Hershey’s Kisses. Arielle hands over her paper. “It’s more than a paragraph. Sorry.”
He sends the marker-boys to the computer. Barks at them, “Start your math.”
And he reads: I was left at an orphanage in Korea that has since burned to the ground. No files remain. The woman who adopted me is convinced that my parents were poor but healthy, strong and brilliant. She won’t admit it, but I suspect she feels that I came into the world with her name and my name encoded in the Unitarian design for the universe. I do not happen to share the belief that I was born to help her heal from the pain of losing her husband. I’m told he was an environmental engineer who played the saxophone. I wish I could have met him.
Alice, whom you know, has been told by her mother, for whom you’ve lusted, that my biological mother was most likely a karaoke-lounge singer and my biological father one of her johns. I actually prefer Alice’s mother’s version. I believe that it is less sad to be an occupational hazard than it is to be the child of worthy and loving parents whose only crime was bad luck.
So let us embrace the karaoke whore.
He looks up, eyes teary though dry—another side effect of his chemo. She asks, “Do I have too many sentence fragments? Is ‘whore’ too strong?”


But he’s heard enough: A little more slouch, a little more grimace. He’s got it.

Arielle takes the paper.

His hopes and talents spent for the day, Alan leaves the building and wanders through the dusk, from strip mall to strip mall—Sports Authority, Marshall’s, Trader Joe’s, Friday’s—and then decides he’ll run to the Metro. So what if he has no running chops anymore? The air is freezing. His feet are moving. His blood is pumping. And lo and behold, what miracle is this? His dick fills up with what survived the poison and the radiation and the perfect date that wasn’t to be, and the twins who never even were. His glasses fog up and he puts them into his jacket pocket and lumbers through a darkening blur, muscles moaning, lungs wheezing, nose snotting.

He starts to choke but keeps moving. He thinks maybe the negative feelings he’s tried to hold back with forgiveness and gratitude and the solace of grammar are finally solid-tissue-tumoring themselves into an enormous mass of—of what? Of anger, you shit-for-brains moron. He remembers his father’s funeral: his mother, the jilted wife, smug at having outlived the bastard, and his father’s girlfriend flirting with Alan, who wanted to kill them both, or maybe he’s just imagining that he wanted to kill. He knows for sure he wanted to kill the nurse who laughed at his hairy ass when she thought he was knocked out—
Arielle is basically disgusted. Now that Mr. Alan’s dead, everyone wonders why he left early that day, though at the time no one was concerned, because Arielle took over with his students. Alice acts as if he never existed, and also as if she and Arielle never pretended to be twins, which is fine with Arielle. She is fine with having no Korean sibling. She suspects Alice’s mother is the one who started the rumors about Mr. Alan’s cancer, suggesting it started in a private place and spread to his brain. Yes, according to his obituary, he had cancer. But it was his heart that killed him. Exploded at the Metro station. Commuters saw him stumble to the pavement and dialed 9-1-1.

Alice’s mother calls Elizabeth to report that Alice is settling in with a new tutor: “A white woman. She comes to our house. More money, but safer. The girls encourage Mr. Alan to fall in love with me.”

“I see.” Elizabeth decides not to mention this conversation to Arielle.

But to try to get her sad daughter to open up, Elizabeth uncorks a bottle of wine with dinner. She says, “Talk to me. Tell me about him. What did he teach you?”

Arielle pours and drinks with chilling nonchalance. “He taught me how to edit out deadwood.” Elizabeth says nothing, just nods. “Pretty basic self-editing. He was really good at it.”

Elizabeth wants to say, “I wish I’d had a chance to meet him, to thank him, to date him.” But that seems likely to open a can of worms, so she asks, “Was he a runner?”

“Mom, he wore Chuck Taylors.”

Elizabeth nods. Says, “I see.”

“Do you even know what Chuck Taylors are? They’re old-fashioned canvas and go up to the ankle and have no absolutely no support.”

“Why do you think he was in such a hurry?”

Arielle hates her mother’s curiosity. But her mother wasn’t the one who sent the Come talk to the tutor text message that scared the shit out of Mr. Alan and still haunts Arielle and her phone. She is so done with the Flying Phoenix experiment in not being adopted. Yet she is grateful, these gloomy days, for a few of the words
she picked up there: Despondent. Despairing. Rueful. She is a bit of all that.

One cold afternoon Arielle goes to the Kiss & Ride sign where the police found the body. No shrine awaits her. Nothing romantic or whimsical or makeshift-tacky. Just the command to kiss and get moving. It’s a Saturday and the station is quiet. She takes from her pocket the karaoke-lady, kisses the paper, rips it up and scatters the bits. Before leaving, she grieves, knowing she will never be certain of where the power of the portrait began and ended: in the sad face on the paper, in the memory of Mr. Alan’s hurt and anger, or in her own remorse and shame.

Shoshana Kertesz, “In the Park,” photograph