

An Incident at the Plaza

BY ELIZABETH KADETKSY

She waited for Foster outside the mart on her new corner, one of those dried-mushroom and cephalopod stalls so abundant here in Chinatown. Frogs and eels slithered one atop the other in the murky waters of several rubber vats. A frog splashed out of one only to be grasped mid-leap by the fishmonger and replaced in its aquarium. The man looked in the tub and said something in Chinese, apparently to the frog, his speech punctuated and yet slurred, sharp and yet soft.

Later, she would be able to mark the beginning of her strange sensation as exactly then, the moment of the frog outside its rubber pool. She identified with the frog, that was a first sign. How piercing the air must have felt, a hot blade on exposed organs. The amphibians looked like inside-out things—the frogs gall bladders with legs, the eels intestines, skinless and vulnerable. Only a mother could love them, a mother or Maria.

From that instant forward she felt a need become palpable. She needed a child, needed one like a lost child at a fair needed a mother. If another toddler crossed her path, she'd burst with equal parts grief and love. An imaginary infant had taken a place in her imaginary embrace, along with a sneaking fear she would never behold this child, imagined and yet immanent, so real as to practically exist.

She watched the monger. She hope his pointed words were consoling the frog about its sad fate, its penury inside this prison of water outside of which life was but struggle and grief. She wished she could help the amphibians. Or that someone could help her. Give her a baby or a lobotomy, either would do.

The monger noticed her stare and gestured to a bright yellow banner with Chinese characters in red. "You have problem?" the monger asked her in English.

"Yes," she admitted. "I have longings." There was a desire, too large to hold within the space of her body. Her world was aglow with

disappointment, aflame with a fury of need. It was a bitter and raging world, too harsh, really, for that new baby in the womb of her mind.

“Longings.” He pronounced it not like a word but like two disconnected syllables. He had no idea from longings.

“You take.” He turned to the banner again and fixed his eyes on it. For several seconds he held his gaze there while breathing in and out heavily; then he lifted his arms above his head and lowered them a half dozen times. “You do this, your problem solved.” He reached up to untack the banner and handed it to her. “*Th’ree dollah.*”

She was tucking it into her purse when Foster came. They’d never met before, only on e-mail. “What’s that?” he asked as the shadow of the thing sank deep inside her bag.

“Shiitakes,” she said. She didn’t really understand exactly how the thing would help her, though on closer examination she’d seen it had diagrams that looked like Tai Chi exercises. “I make a three-mushroom omelet.”

Later that night in her new apartment, she felt something like desire for Foster, for his beauty, his delicate arms, the shine of his pale skin. He was slender and nearly hairless. Holding him in bed, it was pleasurable, but certainly not the stuff of passion. Her desire for Foster hadn’t lifted up from her abdomen.

She felt another desire, the one from earlier in the day, more like true love. It rose to her heart and emanated in spectral rays out her limbs. Waking deep into that night, she’d never felt simultaneously less in love with a man and more in love with a baby, an imaginary baby, a thing cradled in her arms, a shining ball of light that fit perfectly into the crevices of her torso.

He’d suggested a condom. *Condoms!* Now there was a thought. Not a chance. What stuck in Maria’s mind most about her date with Foster was how he was serious about animal rights. He was probably someone who’d rush off when the baby got sick to douse the furs of rich ladies in mustard. He wasn’t father material.

No, she never felt a hankering for Foster. In this place of other signs and codes, of misdirection and stealth knowing, she was perfectly alone, perfectly blank. She was ready to become someone, a pair of someones, different from who she’d ever been.

It was two months now since the night with Foster. She'd thought that pregnancy would answer her need, but the strange sensations gripped her more rather than less.

Something was off. Like pregnant women everywhere she'd become aware of her ankles, particularly during those hours more generally reserved for morning sickness. All blood flowed directly there, making them thick and immobile. Her waistband cut into her middle from the weight gain, and if there were anyone to complain to she'd talk of nausea. Restaurant windows flaunted raw flesh and dumplings doughy and congealed, gelatinous and greasy. Lettuce had too much texture, it was clammy and wet.

Food. She sat at a sidewalk café next to the fish mart. A man next to her was eating Hong Kong milque toast. It became important—*necessary*—to turn away her whole body. A Chinese toddler in polka dots and a boater cap sat at the other end of the café, just this side of the frog and mushroom stall. Maria watched the toddler, and then the thing happened again. A feeling rushed over her, elation mixed with swoon, and she was no longer aware of her ankles or any part of her body. She made a nuzzle gesture toward the child, that nuzzle gathering momentum on its own.

Wasn't this normal, this exaggerated love for new life? It must happen to pregnant women everywhere. It was the reaction of others that seemed not right. Even children seemed to sense a threat. The ankle bloating and strange cravings that struck early and often and fierce like BB pellets: there seemed to be an agent. Giving in to them seemed to have only made them worse.

A Chinese man tended the child while also keeping an eye on Maria. He got a helpless expression each time he looked over at her, and kept darting his eyes toward the bathroom. Eventually, a woman came out of it, resplendent with pregnancy. She smiled beatifically at Maria, but the man continued to eye her. Then the family got up to leave, the mother walking ahead with a stroller while the father turned back and caught Maria's glance once more. He made his eyes narrow and fierce and shaped his hand into a point and shook it at her with menace.

Her heart beat fast, and once more she became aware of her ankles.

She tried to catch sight of the boy's stroller as it diminished to a pinpoint two and then three blocks ahead. The urges propelled her toward the boy. She squinted and gazed, followed. A new rush of blood to her ankles made it hard to walk. She followed the family in the

direction of Confucius Plaza, but at the twist on Bayard lost them. The street was thin and dense with people and crowded food shops. Ducks rotated on skewers in storefront windows beside dumplings shined as if with shellac. Even Vegetarian Paradise displayed a carnivorous-seeming bounty, of mock duck, mock beef, mock chicken elbows.

She headed to the plaza. Parks had become danger zones, where any fast-moving small thing now triggered such an outpouring of tenderness from her that nannies, mothers, and small animals had begun to shy from her. “It’s the Kiss Lady,” a young boy near her apartment had christened her. Even her cat now bolted for the closet when he heard her.

In the plaza she saw a gleaming spectacle of young life. Children and pregnant Chinese ladies cavorted around its towering statue of Confucius: little girls with butterfly barrettes, boys kicking up heels in their strollers, women shuffling with the satisfied, front-heavy gait of pregnancy. Maria tried to look away. She forced herself to take in the wider panorama, but there was hardly anyone who wasn’t pregnant or a child. She scanned the buildings. There were a half-dozen red and yellow signs in different sizes and shapes pasted onto walls, tree trunks and fences. They looked the same as the banner from the fishmonger’s, which was now hanging near her bed. There might be some kind of a convention going on, a silent political rally, perhaps. Some women held placards or had stickers on their clothing, some with the Tai Chi moves, though none seemed to be speaking at all. What were they demonstrating *for*?

Maria’s eyes fell on two toddlers playing with a yoyo. She couldn’t shake her gaze from them. Then one of the boys ran up to her and grasped her by the shins. He was wearing polka dots and a boater cap—he was the toddler from the café of course. As she knelt she spotted the pregnant mother watching her from across the plaza. She seemed about seven months along. The mother was carrying one of the placards and seemed surrounded by an effulgent halo. The father was nowhere in sight. In fact, there was not a man in the plaza.

In her crouch, Maria held the boy by the shoulders. “Hello,” she said. She moved to kiss him on the cheek.

He stared up at her. His eyes were round, black and perfect, exuding a seraphic, otherworldly, grace. Looking into them, she felt she could see straight to their backs and on through to some image reflected onto the scrim of his brain. The image was watery and blue and made her want to dive into it. She saw herself swimming through a

tunnel that began at the portals of his eyes. Euphoria washed over her. The boy's eyes got liquid as she watched, drawing her further inside.

Then the boy jerked his head. The spell broke. He let out a howl.

Maria started. She released his shoulders and fell back from her heels and onto the ground, pushing the boy onto the pavement on the recoil.

Tears shot from his eyes. He was bawling.

Before Maria could imagine an antidote, the saint-like pregnant lady ran up and collapsed onto the boy.

Maria was winded. She was just—*what?* Getting up, she leaned toward the woman. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean—” *Didn’t mean what?* “I’m pregnant, too,” she said, pointing to her abdomen as if that explained anything.

It didn’t matter: the woman paid no attention. She spoke softly to the boy in Chinese, in the same muddy but staccato sounds spoken by the fishmonger. The boy was quickly mollified, snuggling into the space between his mother’s thighs and belly. Tears shot out of Maria’s eyes, creating a mist that made the beautiful sight before her, mother with babe in arms, blurry. Through that mist, the child looked, merely, like a shining ball of light.

“I didn’t know, I’m sorry—” Maria kept crying.

Day after day, something inexplicable drew her to the café with its array of new life. One day she ordered a three-colored drink, or so it was called on the menu. It arrived in a tall sundae glass with a milkshake spoon elegantly emerging from a froth. The three-colored drink indeed came in three colored layers: a pebbly brown sludge at the bottom that was mung beans; in the middle a gray chalk-like liquid that was coconut milk; and on top a mixture of brightly colored gelatinous things that included lychees. The garish lychees curled into themselves like oysters inside their shells alongside bright red, orange and yellow candied-fruit shavings. The drink looked like a fireworks pageant.

She mixed the drink carefully with the long spoon to create a swirl pattern out of the three layers. The first sip tasted different from how the thing looked—not chalky exactly or even slippery. Orange. She tasted orange. Even lychee tasted like something, though she’d never had lychee before.

The taste spread inside her mouth. She hadn’t tasted anything so singular since she’d contracted the longing. She’s only felt nausea and

disgust for food. When she'd eaten she'd tasted nothing. The disease had to end. She was not a slave to biology. The spell could not control her. Why had she allowed taste to be denied to her?

She scanned the café: no children, actually. She noticed the absence of the boy in the boater cap and felt relief. It had been Chinese New Year's, and the ground was dirtied with smears of red powder and a litter of torn gold-and-scarlet paper wrappings. She sighed and settled back in her chair, carefully cradling her drink, with its spoon and thick straw, in the crook of her arm. She took in the busy Chinatown street life. She could be content. If she *could* be content, why shouldn't she be? The very thought gave rise to the thing itself: contentment. She'd been practicing the old fishmonger's exercises, and when she did so felt this also: contentment. She sucked a small sip through the straw. Once more the taste startled her. Yes, this was a flavor she'd never experienced.

She closed her eyes as a wave of heat and prickles rushed through her, starting in her chest. At first she feared it would take the form of that creeping kiss-disease nausea, but the expected stomach rumbling did not arise. The wave rose to her head and stayed there, releasing heat along the lining of her skull. It was what she'd felt that night with Foster, when she realized she was in love, in love with that ball of light cradled at her breast. With her eyes closed she observed the heat move through her head and then over her shoulders and back again through her chest. This love was not the craving. It was something else.

Sometime in the middle of the night, she dreamed of sex. She dreamed that the ball of light seeped through her limbs and shot out of her fingertips and toe tips and from her heart, bathing her bedroom, for a short instant, in an aura of shine.

Why not tell Foster about all this? She thought this instantly when the light and its energy woke her up. The child was his. Didn't he deserve to know? Wasn't that what normal people did? What had this sickness been compelling her to do? The kiss mania had been a psychosis, creating other compulsions too. Why shouldn't she behave like a normal person? Wasn't recovery just a matter of deciding? She went to her computer to e-mail Foster, and as an afterthought snatched down the monger's old yellow banner. The disease had come with the monger's words and exercises. Maybe they'd been bad advice.

“I thought you were on the pill!” Foster exclaimed when they met, in a puncture voice.

She’d asked him to come have lunch at the café, a terrible idea. “It’s not an issue for the Department of Consumer Affairs,” she replied, staring into her water.

“I thought the pill was ninety-nine and a half percent effective!”

Maria squinted back at him and stared. He didn’t get it at all. “Ninety-six if taken incorrectly.”

“Did you miss a pill!” his puncture voice said.

She didn’t like Foster at all. Her body let her know—hunching into itself as if by its own decision—and yet this elemental fact of her distaste for him had escaped her earlier. He’d never had to know about the baby, and now she’d told him, and so now he did. She looked at him—his slack limbs, his watery mouth, his bony face—and tried to re-create in her mind the act of touching him. It was bleary and far away; she couldn’t remember ever having wanted to.

The waiter came over and gestured at their menus. They waved him away.

“It’s not something where you can get your money back. It doesn’t matter how it happened.”

“I just don’t understand. I’m against abortion.”

“I’m saying leave me alone,” she snapped back, breaking the stare. She signaled for the waiter to come back. “I’ll have—” She paused. “Soup. The soup please. No,” she added. “Veal. Do you have veal?” The waiter stared back at her with incomprehension.

Foster glared at her. “Do you know what kind of pens they keep them in?”

She stared back. “I was never on the pill.” She looked at the menu again. She was hungry. She wanted that hunger, its emptiness. An image popped in her head of a miniature young man, clothed in full business dress down to the wingtips, leaping from her abdomen. She closed her eyes, partly to fend off Foster’s glare, hanging on to the image. She would catch the small human mid-air and give it a talking to, tell it the world was a suffocating and hot cauldron of a place unfit for something so neat and trim as he, delicate as a matchstick. She’d have no instincts as a mother at all. In her head, the man hopped onto the ground, opened up an umbrella and strode off on his own.

“Well I’m aborting,” she said. “I’m not a victim of biology.”

He gaped at her. “Don’t you see it’s more complicated than

that?"

"Don't *you* see it's more complicated than that? You have no idea. I can't do this." Yes it was complicated, so much so she couldn't grasp it herself. There was another child, imaginary, incubating inside an imaginary womb. Foster was not the father of this child. This child existed already—a beautiful, perfectly shaped thing. This child had another name.

On the way home, Maria passed through Confucius Plaza. This time, it was dark and nearly deserted except for a few Chinese old men practicing Tai Chi exercises, seemingly oblivious to all the other men moving in echoing patterns. Those same banners hung in shadows. Whereas in the sunlight they had seemed to scream with their bright colors, now they were silent and muted. She passed closer to one that hung crookedly from a tree trunk. Someone had scrawled words in jagged Chinese characters over the print. They read up and down and gave the impression of someone holding forth on some topic with great bitterness; it seemed very significant what that topic was, but she couldn't parse it. What was the political message? This place was closed to her.

Perhaps the scrawl was telling her the proper course of action. Or maybe she knew that course already. The man had given her that banner as a cure, and yet his cure had made things worse. The decision Foster had pushed her to was the right one. Simply knowing made her feel newly at peace, free from those desires that once threatened to swallow her.

She felt lightheaded, but also possessed with a new clarity. Sometimes she got a feeling she was seeing something that had been in front of her a long while, but she hadn't been able to see it because she'd been blind to it. She felt that now. There were men in this plaza, previously invisible to her. A clutter of pregnant women and their babies had been obscuring the rest of the world; she'd been incapable of seeing past them. Looking around for a bench to catch her breath, she perceived a movement in a small vestibule and saw a toddler, but then she'd only hallucinated it and it was a shadow, and this moment of distorted perception, too, seemed an unambiguous omen. Then a cat nearby stared at her and scrambled away. She, too, fled, slowed, but a little less so, by her ankles. It was as if the mental burden had had a weight of its own.

She called Foster to tell him after it was done, and then he left her alone. He was gone, along with the longings and duties that had come with him, the burdens and extra weight. Now sometimes when she passed the plaza, it was men—new men, all men—who drew her attention. She no longer adored children. She felt nothing for them.

Other times traces of the disease returned. She tried to push them away, but sometimes the craving grew insistent and she had to relent. There seemed nothing to excise it completely. Giving in hadn't quelled it, but on the contrary had made it worse. And yet when she pushed it down it merely built to implosion.

One day she fell sway to it, and took the turn toward Confucius Plaza. She noticed the perennial pregnant ladies and toddlers. There was an explosion of life around her, fecund as spring in bloom. It became hard to breathe. The children had stains down the fronts of their shirts; they sneezed germily; their mothers looked fatigued, their faces glaze-eyed. Maria didn't want this. But at the same time, she couldn't help herself.

More pregnant ladies were out shopping at the vegetable stands under the bridge, stuffing bundles of shoots and greens into canvas shoulder bags. These women were gatherers. They seemed to inflate with each new purchase, gaining girth, gaining, even, children. Toddlers were everywhere. Each time Maria looked down there seemed to be more of them. They raced cheap remote-control pickup trucks through the legs of shoppers, taunted vendors with yoyo tricks and demands for free lychees. The vendors, the only men in the plaza, raised fists and shouted.

"Look at that," said a vendor. "That little—" He paused, as if searching for just the right word. "*Katzenjammer*."

She looked at him, and realized that she was absently fingering one of his lemongrass stalks.

He was gesturing with two fingers angrily toward a clump of children several yards past the food stalls. She'd heard wrong, she must have. "*Katzenjammer*," he said again, this time with a hiss. He gestured to the crowd. There were so many children, it was hard to make out any single one. She saw frenzied clouds of objects in motion—super balls, transformer toys, sparklers. She wanted to shout at the children, too, to quiet them down. The vendor caught her eye again and did something with his lips, a manner of pointing, as if toward a

specific child.

She glanced there, catching sight of a boy who seemed calmer than the rest. He was sitting on the ground cross-legged and not looking at any plaything or other child, but straight ahead. He was so still it was as if he was floating. She felt a tug, different from the old tug, stronger and clearer. That tug was fate.

Maria walked toward him. He was, yes, the same boy and, even six months later, in the same outfit: boater cap, polka dots. And she knew. For all those months, she'd been overcome by irrational longings for not just any child. She'd been longing for this child. She felt dazed as she moved toward him, seeming to close the distance without actually walking. He, too, seemed to be taking her in, beckoning. He was the lost child at the fair.

There were many other women, all pregnant, all gathering toward the center of the plaza and its Confucius statue. The crowd grew dense. She moved in the same direction as the crowd, toward the boy, toward the statue, her arms extended. That's when she saw his mother standing well behind him. She was still pregnant and glowing, no more or less so than six months earlier.

Maria was now only steps from the boy, but she couldn't move farther because she was squeezed between the bellies of two women. A toddler tripped through her ankles, causing her to stumble. She fell into one of the ladies and was suddenly in the arms of the two of them. She tried to lift back up, but she fell off balance and sank farther into the women. It was like a dream. She couldn't move her limbs. Something pushed on her chest and made it impossible for her to scream.

The women placed her on the cement and kneeled next to her. One stroked her head. The mother was there now, too, holding the cherished boy by the shoulders. He observed Maria with bemused interest, a Tonka truck dangling loosely in his hand. She reached for his other hand and he held it.

From the ground it was hard to make out what was going on in the plaza, but the women were getting loud. There were shouts and sounds of trampling footsteps and, off in the distance, chanting in Chinese. Some women put their bodies into the shapes of the exercises. Maria watched the sky and the towering figure of Confucius with his square skullcap and robes. She couldn't move.

As if to make up for her inability to control her muscles, her senses seemed hyper-acute. Her thoughts were focused and un-muddled in a way they'd been rarely during the months of hormones and pregnancy

and recuperation and coming to equilibrium. She could feel the pulse in the boy's palm. The ladies chattered, and though she didn't understand their language, she could distinguish their accents and make out discrete words, some of which seemed to repeat.

A woman—not visibly pregnant—appeared on a riser beside the statue. The pregnant women and even the toddlers became rapt. The speaker extemporized angrily and with great energy in those round punctuated sounds. Maria was paralyzed, but in her mind she was standing and watching the leader, and the little boy was at her side with his hand gripped in hers. In her mind's eye she saw the speaker's words leaping out from her mouth in a jumble of calligraphic characters and landing on the pavement making bright bursts in front of Maria and the boy, like New Year's gunpowder poppers. The speaker's gaze on Maria and the boy was like a physical thing, effulgent and yet weighty. Maria heard short English phrases buried in the Chinese argot: *Take him*, the speaker seemed to be saying. She stood in a welcoming posture, her arms outstretched as if to present a gift, something larger than could tangibly fit within her arm span. *The boy*, Maria heard. *He is yours*.

Maria grasped the boy's hand more tightly. The mother was looking away, distracted by the speaker. Maria perceived the boy squeeze back her hand. *Take him*. That is what she heard in those words with their rounded shapes. *Take him*. Maria lifted up her body, and, gathering the boy's in her arms, prepared to run.