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At eight o'clock in the evening, the Baltimore airport was nearly deserted. The wide gray corridors were empty, and the newsstands were dark, and the coffee shops were closed. Most of the gates had admitted their last flights. Their signboards were blank and their rows of vinyl chairs unoccupied and ghostly.

But you could hear a distant hum, a murmur of anticipation, at the far end of Pier D. You could see an overexcited child spinning herself into dizziness in the center of the corridor, and then a grownup popping forth to scoop her up and carry her, giggling and squirming, back into the waiting area. And a latecomer, a woman in a yellow dress, was rushing toward the gate with an armful of long-stemmed roses.

Step around the bend, then, and you'd come upon what looked like a gigantic **Copyrighted Material** waiting area for

the flight from San Francisco was packed with people bearing pink- and blue-wrapped gifts, or hanging on to flotillas of silvery balloons printed with IT'S A GIRL! and trailing spirals of pink ribbon. A man gripped the wicker handle of a wheeled and skirted bassinet as if he planned to roll it onto the plane, and a woman stood ready with a stroller so chrome-trimmed and bristling with levers that it seemed capable of entering the Indy 500. At least half a dozen people held video cameras, and many more had regular cameras slung around their necks. A woman spoke into a tape recorder in an urgent, secretive way. The man next to her clasped an infant's velour-upholstered car seat close to his chest.

MOM, the button on the woman's shoulder read—one of those laminated buttons such as you might see in an election year. And the man's read DAD. A nice-looking couple, not as young as you might expect—the woman in wide black pants and an arty black-and-white top of a geometric design, her short hair streaked with gray; the man a big, beaming, jovial type with a stubbly blond buzz cut, his bald knees poking bashfully from voluminous khaki Bermudas.

And not only were there MOM and DAD; there were GRANDMA and GRANDPA, twice over—two complete sets. One grandma was a rumpled, comfortable woman in a denim sundress and bandanna-print baseball cap; the other was thin and gilded and expertly made up, wearing an ecru linen pantsuit and dyed-to-match pumps. The grandpas were dyed to match as well—the rumpled woman's husband equally rumpled, his iron-gray hair overdue for cutting, while the

gilded woman's husband wore linen trousers and some sort of gauzy tropical shirt, and part of his bright yellow hair was possibly not his own.

It's true there were other people waiting, people clearly not included in the celebration. A weary-eyed woman in curlers; an older woman with a younger one who might have been her daughter; a father with two small children already dressed in pajamas. These outsiders stood around the edges, quiet and somehow dimmed, from time to time sneaking glances in the direction of MOM and DAD.

The plane was late. People grew restless. A child pointed out accusingly that the arrivals board still read ON TIME—a plain old lie. Several teenagers wandered off to the unlit waiting area just across the corridor. A little girl in pigtails fell asleep on a vinyl chair, the button on her green plaid blouse proclaiming COUSIN.

Then something changed. There wasn't any announcement—the PA system had been silent for some time—but people gradually stopped talking and pressed toward the jetway, craning their necks, standing on tiptoe. A woman in a uniform punched in a code and swung open the jetway door. A skycap arrived with a wheelchair. The teenagers reappeared. MOM and DAD, till now in the very center of the crowd, were nudged forward with encouraging pats, a path magically widening to let them approach the door.

First off was a very tall young man in jeans, wearing the confused look of someone who'd been flying too long. He spotted the mother and daughter and went over to them and

bent to kiss the daughter, but only on the cheek because she was too busy peering past him, just briefly returning his hug while she kept her eyes on the new arrivals.

Two businessmen with briefcases, striding purposefully toward the terminal. A teenage boy with a backpack so huge that he resembled an ant with an oversized breadcrumb. Another businessman. Another teenage boy, this one claimed by the woman in curlers. A smiling, rosy-cheeked redhead instantly engulfed by the two children in pajamas.

Now a pause. A sort of gathering of focus.

A crisply dressed Asian woman stepped through the door with a baby. This baby was perhaps five or six months old—able to hold herself confidently upright. She had a cushiony face and a head of amazingly thick black hair, cut straight across her forehead and straight across the tops of her ears, and she wore a footed pink sleeper. “Ah!” everyone breathed—even the outsiders, even the mother and the grown daughter. (Although the daughter’s young man still appeared confused.) The mother-to-be stretched out both arms, letting her tape recorder bounce at the end of its strap. But the Asian woman stopped short in an authoritative manner that warded off any approach. She drew herself up and said, “Donaldson?”

“Donaldson. That’s us,” the father-to-be said. His voice was shaking. He had somehow got rid of the car seat, passed it blindly to someone or other, but he stayed slightly to the rear of his wife and kept one hand on her back as if in need of support.

“Congratulations,” the Asian woman said. “This is Jin-Ho.” She transferred the baby to the mother’s waiting arms, and then

she unhitched a pink diaper bag from her shoulder and handed it to the father. The mother buried her face in the crook of the baby's neck. The baby stayed upright, gazing calmly out at the crowd. "Ah," people kept saying, and "Isn't she a cutie!" and "Did you ever see such a doll?"

Flashbulbs, insistent video cameras, everyone pressing too close. The father's eyes were wet. Lots of people's were; there were sniffing sounds all through the waiting area and noses being blown. And when the mother raised her face, finally, her cheeks were sheeted with tears. "Here," she told the father. "You hold her."

"Aw, no, I'm scared I might . . . You do it, honey. I'll watch."

The Asian woman started riffling through a sheaf of papers. People still disembarking had to step around her, step around the little family and the well-wishers and the tangle of baby equipment. Luckily, the flight hadn't been a full one. The passengers arrived in spurts: man with a cane, pause; retired couple, pause . . .

And then another Asian woman, younger than the first and plainer, with a tucked, apologetic way of looking about. She was lugging a bucket-shaped infant carrier by the handle, and you could tell that the baby inside must not weigh all that much. This baby, too, was a girl, if you could judge by the pink T-shirt, but she was smaller than the first one, sallow and pinched, with fragile wisps of black hair trailing down her forehead. Like the young woman transporting her, she showed a sort of anxious interest in the crowd. Her watchful black eyes moved too quickly from face to face.

The young woman said something that sounded like “Yaz-dun?”

“Yaz-dan,” a woman called from the rear. It sounded like a correction. The crowd parted again, not certain which way to move but eager to be of help, and three people no one had noticed before approached in single file: a youngish couple, foreign-looking, olive-skinned and attractive, followed by a slim older woman with a chignon of sleek black hair knotted low on the nape of her neck. It must have been she who had called out their name, because now she called it again in the same clear, carrying voice. “Here we are. Yazdan.” There was just the trace of an accent evident in the ruffled *r*’s.

The young woman turned to face them, holding the carrier awkwardly in front of her. “Congratulations, this is Sooki,” she said, but so softly and so breathlessly that people had to ask each other, “What?” “Who did she say?” “Sooki, I believe it was.” “Sooki! Isn’t that sweet!”

There was a problem unfastening the straps that held the baby in her carrier. The new parents had to do it because the Asian woman’s hands were full, and the parents were flustered and unskilled—the mother laughing slightly and tossing back her explosive waterfall of hennaed curls, the father biting his lip and looking vexed with himself. He wore tiny, very clean rimless glasses that glittered as he angled first this way and then that, struggling with a plastic clasp. The grandmother, if that was who she was, made sympathetic tsk-tsking sounds.

But at last the baby was free. Such a little bit of a thing! The father plucked her out in a gingerly, tennis-length manner and

handed her to the mother, who gathered her in and rocked her and pressed her cheek against the top of the baby's feathery black head. The baby quirked her eyebrows but offered no resistance. Onlookers were blowing their noses again, and the father had to take off his glasses and wipe the lenses, but the mother and the grandmother stayed dry-eyed, smiling and softly murmuring. They paid no attention to the crowd. When someone asked, "Is yours from Korea too?" neither woman answered, and it was the father, finally, who said, "Hmm? Oh. Yes, she is."

"Hear that, Bitsy and Brad? Here's another Korean baby!"

The first mother glanced around—she was allowing the two grandmas a closer inspection—and said, "Really?" Her husband echoed her: "Really!" He stepped over to the other parents and held out his hand. "Brad Donaldson. That's my wife, Bitsy, over there."

"How do you do?" the second father said. "Sami Yazdan." He shook Brad's hand, but his lack of interest was almost comical; he couldn't keep his eyes off his baby. "Uh, my wife, Ziba," he added after a moment. "My mother, Maryam." He had a normal Baltimore accent, although he pronounced the two women's names as no American would have—*Zee-bah* and *Mar-yam*. His wife didn't even look up. She was cradling the baby and saying what sounded like "Soo-soo-soo." Brad Donaldson flapped a hand genially in her direction and returned to his own family.

By the time the transfers had been made official—both Asian women proving to be sticklers for detail—the Donaldson crowd had started to **Copy Evident Material** of gathering was

planned for later, though, because people kept calling, “See you back at the house!” as they moved toward the terminal. And then the parents themselves were free to go, Bitsy leading the way while the woman with the stroller wheeled it just behind her like a lady-in-waiting. (Clearly nothing would persuade Bitsy to give up her hold on that baby.) Brad lumbered after her, followed by a few stragglers and, at the very tail end, the Yazdans. One of the Donaldson grandpas, the rumpled one, dropped back to ask the Yazdans, “So. Did *you* have a long wait for *your* baby? Lots of paperwork and cross-examinations?”

“Yes,” Sami said, “a very long wait. A very long-drawn-out process.” And he glanced toward his wife. “At times we thought it never would happen,” he said.

The grandpa clucked and said, “Don’t I know it! Lord, what Bitsy and Brad had to put themselves through!”

They passed to one side of Security, which was staffed by a lone employee sitting on a stool, and started down the escalator—all but the man with the bassinet. He had to take the elevator. The woman with the stroller, however, seemed undaunted. She tipped the front end of the stroller back smartly and stepped on without hesitation.

“Listen,” Brad called up to the Yazdans from the lower level. “You-all feel like coming to our house? Joining the celebration?”

But Sami was absorbed in guiding his wife onto the escalator, and when he didn’t answer, Brad flapped a hand again in that oh-well, affable way of his. “Maybe another time,” he said to no one in particular. And he turned to catch up with the others.

The exit doors slid open and the Donaldsons streamed out. They headed toward the parking garage in twos and threes and fours, and shortly after that the Yazdans emerged to stand on the curb a moment, motionless, as if they needed time to adjust to the hot, humid, dimly lit, gasoline-smelling night.

Friday, August 15, 1997. The night the girls arrived.

Sometimes when Maryam Yazdan looked at her new little granddaughter she had an eerie, lightheaded feeling, as if she had stepped into some sort of alternate universe. Everything about the child was impossibly perfect. Her skin was a flawless ivory, and her hair was almost too soft to register on Maryam's fingertips. Her eyes were the shape of watermelon seeds, very black and cut very precisely into her small, solemn face. She weighed so little that Maryam often lifted her too high by mistake when she picked her up. And her hands! Tiny hands, with curling fingers. The wrinkles on her knuckles were halvah-colored (so amusing, that a baby had wrinkles!), and her nails were no bigger than dots.

Susan, they called her. They chose a name that resembled the name she had come with, Sooki, and also it was a comfortable sound for Iranians to pronounce.

“Su-san!” Maryam would sing when she went in to get her from her nap. “Su-Su-Su!” Susan would gaze out from behind the bars of her crib, sitting beautifully erect with one hand cupping each knee in a poised and self-possessed manner.

Maryam took care of her Tuesdays and Thursdays—the days her daughter-in-law worked and Maryam did not. She arrived at the house around eight-thirty, slightly later if the traffic was bad. (Sami and Ziba lived out in Hunt Valley, as much as a half-hour drive from the city during rush hour.) By that time Susan would be having breakfast in her high chair. She would light up and make a welcoming sound when Maryam walked into the kitchen. “Ah!” was what she most often said—nothing to do with “Mari-june,” which was what they had decided she should call Maryam. “Ah!” she would say, and she would give her distinctive smile, with her lips pursed together demurely, and tilt her cheek for a kiss.

Well, not in the first few weeks, of course. Oh, those first weeks had been agony, the two parents trying their best, shrilling “Susie-june!” and shaking toys in her face and waltzing her about in their arms. All she did was stare at them, or—worse yet—stare away from them, twisting to get free, fixing her eyes stubbornly anywhere else. She wouldn’t take more than a sip or two from her bottle, and when she woke crying in the night, as she did every few hours, her parents’ attempts to comfort her only made her cry harder. Maryam told them that was natural. In truth she had no idea, but she told them, “She came from a foster home! What do you expect? She’s not used to so much attention.”

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“Jin-Ho came from a foster home too. *She’s* not acting like this,” Ziba said.

They knew all about Jin-Ho because Jin-Ho’s mother had telephoned two weeks after the babies’ arrival. “I hope you don’t mind my tracking you down,” she’d said. “You’re the only Yazdans in the book and I just couldn’t resist calling you to find out how things were going.” Jin-Ho, it seemed, was doing marvelously. She was sleeping straight through till morning, and she laughed out loud when they played “This Is the Way the Lady Rides,” and already she had learned to stop clamoring for her bottle once she heard the microwave starting. And Jin-Ho was younger than Susan! She was five months to Susan’s seven, even if Susan was smaller. Were the Yazdans doing something wrong?

“No, no, no,” Maryam told them. Slightly altering her story, she said, “It’s *better* that Susan’s sad. It means the foster family took good care of her and now she’s homesick for them. You wouldn’t want a heartless, heedless baby, would you? She’s showing she has a warm nature.”

Maryam hoped that this was true.

And it was, thank heaven. One morning Ziba walked into the nursery and Susan gave her a smile. Ziba was so excited that she telephoned Maryam at once, although it was a Tuesday and Maryam was due to come over very shortly; and she phoned her mother in Washington and later her sisters-in-law in L.A. It seemed that some switch had clicked in Susan’s head, for she smiled at Maryam as well when she arrived—her smile already that charming, pursed-lip smile that made you feel the two of you

shared some merry little secret. And within the week she was chortling at Sami's antics, and sleeping through the night, and showing a fondness for Cheerios, which she pursued single-mindedly around her high-chair tray with her dainty, pincer fingers.

"Didn't I tell you?" Maryam said.

She was an optimist, Maryam was. Or on second thought, not an optimist: a pessimist. But her life had been rocky enough that she faced possible disasters more philosophically than most. She had had to forsake her family before she was twenty; she'd been widowed before she was forty; she had raised her son by herself in a country where she would never feel like anything but a foreigner. Basically, though, she believed that she was a happy person. She was confident that if things went wrong—as they very well might—she could manage.

Now she saw the same quality in Susan. Call her fanciful, but she had felt a deep connection to Susan the moment they met in the airport. Sometimes she imagined that Susan resembled her physically, even, but then she had to laugh at herself. Still, something around the eyes, some way of looking at things, some *onlooker's* look: that was what they shared. Neither one of them quite belonged.

Her son belonged. Her son didn't even have an accent; he had refused to speak Farsi from the time he was four years old, although he could understand it. Her daughter-in-law had a noticeable accent, having immigrated with her whole family when she was already in high school, but she had so immediately and enthusiastically adapted to listening nonstop to

98 Rock, hanging out at the mall, draping her small, bony, un-American frame in blue jeans and baggy T-shirts with writing printed across them—that now she seemed native-born, almost.

Ziba left for work when it suited her; she was an interior decorator and arranged her own appointments. Often she'd be loitering around the house a full hour after Maryam's arrival. She was already dressed for the office, not that you would guess it (she still wore jeans, although she'd graduated to blazers and high heels), but it seemed she couldn't quite tear herself away from Susan. "What do you think?" she would ask Maryam. "Is another tooth coming in, or is it not? A thin white line is on her gum; do you see?" Or she would collect her pocketbook, unplug her cell phone from its charger, but then: "Oh! Maryam! I nearly forgot! Watch how she's learned to play peekaboo!"

Maryam would inwardly chafe, longing to have this child to herself. "Go! Go!" she wanted to say. But she smiled and kept quiet.

Then at last Ziba would be on her way, and Maryam could sweep Susan into her arms and carry her off to the playroom. "All mine!" she crowed, and Susan giggled as if she understood. Left in charge, Maryam was more sure of herself. Child-rearing had changed so since her day—the endless new lists of forbidden foods (peanuts a toxic substance, you'd think); the regulation car seats; the ban on talcum powder and baby oil and pillows and crib bumper pads—that Maryam often felt incompetent in Ziba's presence. With Ziba there, she walked on tiptoe—the way her own mother had tiptoed, she realized, the one time she had come to visit. Her mother had arrived

with a holy medal to hang around Sami's neck, a little gold dime-sized Allah that a two-year-old would have swallowed in a blink, if Maryam had not insisted in putting it aside for later; and her mother had plied Sami with gummy white rosewater candies that would have ruined his teeth and stuck in his throat if Maryam had not clamped the box firmly shut and carried it off to the pantry. By the end of the visit, her mother had retreated to the television set, even though she couldn't understand a word of what was said. Now Maryam recalled with a pang her mother's stoical posture, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes fixed steadily upon a commercial for Kent cigarettes. She batted the image away. She said, "Bunny rabbit, Susie-june! Look!" and held up a little stuffed animal that jingled when she wagged it.

Susan wore blue jeans also. (Who knew they made jeans so tiny?) She wore a red-and-white-striped long-sleeved T-shirt that could just as well have been a boy's, and little red socks with nonskid soles. The socks were a new addition—till the weather turned cold she'd gone barefoot—and she didn't like them. She kept tugging them off her feet with a triumphant squawk, and then Maryam hoisted her into her lap and put them on again. "Wicked girl!" she scolded. Susan laughed. As soon as she was set back down on the rug she would fling herself on her favorite toy, a xylophone that she banged energetically with any object at hand. She didn't crawl yet—she was a bit behind in her physical skills, which Maryam blamed on life in the foster home—but clearly she was working on it.

If it were up to her, Maryam would have dressed this child

differently. She'd have chosen more feminine clothes, little white tights and A-line jumpers and blouses with ruffles. Wasn't that part of the fun of having a girl? (Oh, how she used to hope for a girl after Sami was born!) She herself dressed with the utmost care even just to babysit. She wore trousers, yes, but slim, tailored trousers, with a fitted sweater in some jewel color and good shoes. She regularly had the gray tinted from her hair, although she preferred that this not be known, and she secured her chignon with tortoiseshell combs or brightly patterned scarves. It was important to keep up appearances. She believed that. Let the Americans lounge about in their sweatsuits! She was not American.

"Not American! Check your passport," Sami always told her. She said, "You understand what I mean."

She was a guest, was what she meant. Still and forever a guest, on her very best behavior.

Perhaps if she lived in Iran, she would have been more casual. Oh, not that she would have let herself go, nothing so extreme as all that, but she might have worn a housecoat at home the way her mother and aunts used to do. Or would she? She couldn't even imagine now what her life would be like if she had not moved to Baltimore.

Susan was in the process of giving up her morning nap. She might fall asleep when she was put down or she might not; so while Maryam was waiting to find out which, she read the paper or flipped through a magazine, something that didn't require an uninterrupted block of time. If so much as half an hour passed and Susan was still chipping, Maryam would get her up again.

Once more they would go through their reunion scene—Susan’s “Ah!” and Maryam’s “Su-Su-Su!” Maryam would change her diaper and put her in a sweater and take her out in the stroller.

There were no sidewalks here. Maryam found that amazing. How could they have constructed an entire neighborhood—long curving roads of gigantic, raw new houses with two-story arched windows and double-wide front doors and three-car garages—and failed to realize that people might want to walk around it? There weren’t any trees either, unless you counted the twiglike saplings staked in all the front yards. (*Tiny* yards. The houses had devoured most of the available space.) In weeks past, when it was still hot, Maryam had often kept Susan inside, knowing they’d find not a chip of shade anywhere and the pavements would be radiating heat. But now that fall had arrived the sun felt good. She would stretch their walk till lunchtime, covering every smooth, blank, uncannily deserted street in Foxfoot Acres and commenting as she went. “Car, Susan! See the car? Mailbox! See the mailbox?”

In her own neighborhood there were squirrels, and dogs on leashes, and other children in carriages and strollers. She would have had many more sights to point out.

Lunch was strained baby foods for Susan and a salad for Maryam. Then Susan had a little playpen time in the family room extending from the kitchen while Maryam did the dishes, and after that a bottle and another nap—this one long enough that Maryam was free to fix something for Sami and Ziba’s supper. Not that they expected it, but she had always enjoyed

cooking and Ziba, it turned out, did not. Left to their own devices, they tended to eat Lean Cuisines.

While the rice was boiling, she straightened the house. She put Susan's toys in the toy chest and carried a bagful of wet diapers out to the garbage can. She stacked and aligned various reading materials but did not throw away so much as a scrap of paper, not a subscription card or a pizza flyer, for fear of overstepping.

Again she had an image of her mother, this time stooping painfully to retrieve a chewing-gum wrapper and placing it silently, almost reverently, in an ashtray on the coffee table.

This house was as big as the neighboring houses, with a room for every purpose. It had not only a family room but an exercise room and a computer room, each one carpeted wall to wall in solid off-white. There wasn't a Persian rug anywhere, although you might guess that the occupants were Iranian from the wedding gifts in the dining-room cabinet—the Isfahani coffee sets and the tea glasses caged in silver. The playroom had been fully stocked with toys as soon as the agency sent Susan's photograph. And the nursery was ready long before that, the crib and bureau and changing table purchased back when Ziba was first trying to get pregnant. (Maryam's mother would have said that preparing so far ahead was what had doomed them. "Didn't I warn you?" she would have asked, each month when Ziba once again reported failure.)

Maryam had told Ziba to trust in the power of time. "You'll have your baby! You'll have a houseful of babies," she'd said. And she had confided her own long wait: "Five years we tried,

before Sami was born. I was in despair.” This was a great concession on her part. To speak openly of “trying” was so indiscreet. (She had been stunned when Ziba first spoke of it. Not a comfortable thought at all, one’s son having a sex life, even though of course Maryam assumed that he did.) Besides which, she had always told her relatives that that five-year wait was deliberate. Visiting back home three years after her wedding, she had parried their sly questions with boasts about her independence, her relief that she was not burdened yet with children. “I take courses at the university; I’m active in the wives’ group at the hospital . . .” While in fact, she had wanted a baby right away—something to anchor her, she had envisioned, to her new country.

She saw herself now on that first visit home: her clothes chosen carefully for their Westernness, stylish sheaths in electric prints of hot pink and lime green and purple; her hair lacquered into a towering beehive; her feet encased in needle-toed, stiletto-heeled pumps. She winced.

She winced too at recalling her automatic assumption that Ziba’s failure to get pregnant was exactly that—*Ziba’s* failure. When they discovered that it was, instead, Sami’s failure, Maryam had been shocked. Mumps, perhaps, the doctors said. Mumps? Sami had never had mumps! Or had he? Wouldn’t she have known? Did he have them while he was away in college, and he had felt too embarrassed to mention such things to a woman?

He’d been fourteen years old when his father died—just beginning to turn adolescent, with a fuzzy dark upper lip and a grainy voice. She had wondered how she could possibly see him

through this stage on her own. She knew so little about the opposite sex; she'd lost her father when she was a child and had never been close to her brothers, who were nearly grown before she was born. If only Kiyam could have stayed alive just a little while longer, just four or five years longer, till Sami had become a man!

Although now she wasn't so sure that Kiyam would have known much, either, about the process of becoming an American man.

And if Kiyam could have shared grandparenthood with her! That was a major sorrow, now that Susan was here. She imagined how it would be if the two of them were babysitting together. They would send each other smiles over Susan's head, marveling at her puckery frown and her threadlike eyebrows and her studious examination of a stray bit of lint from the carpet. Kiyam would have retired by now. (He'd been nine years Maryam's senior.) They would have had all the time in the world to enjoy this part of their lives.

She went out to the kitchen and took the rice off the stove and dumped it briskly into a colander.

By the time Ziba had returned from work, Susan would be awake again and drinking her post-nap sippy cup of apple juice, or she'd have moved on to haul forth from the toy chest everything that Maryam had put away. Ziba would scoop her up even before she'd taken her blazer off. "Did you have fun with your Mari-june, Su-Su? Did you miss your mommy?" They would delicately touch noses—Ziba's profile beaky and sharp, Susan's as flat as a cookie. Did you miss your mommy would

stay away forever?” Always she spoke English to Susan; she said she didn’t want to confuse her. Maryam had expected her to lapse into Farsi from time to time, but Ziba plowed heroically through the most difficult words—“think,” with its sticky *th* sound, and “stay,” which came out “es-stay.” (To her own puzzlement, Maryam found Ziba’s broken rhythms much easier to understand than Sami’s smooth, easy flow.)

Maryam located her purse and put on her suede jacket. “Don’t go!” Ziba would say. “What’s your hurry? Let me make tea.” Most days, Maryam declined. Issuing farewell remarks—instructions for heating dinner, message from the dentist’s office—she would blow a kiss toward Susan and let herself out the front door. She was trying to be the perfect mother-in-law. She didn’t want Ziba to consider her a nuisance.

Often when she reached home she would just vegetate awhile, slumped in her favorite armchair, free at last to relax and let herself be herself.

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Jin-Ho’s mother phoned in October to invite them all to supper. This was while Maryam was babysitting, and so she was the one who answered. “You come too,” Bitsy told her. “It’s going to be just us, our two families, because I believe the girls should get to know each other, don’t you? So as to maintain their cultural heritage. I meant to ask you before this but what with one thing and another . . . An early, early supper, I thought, on Sunday afternoon. ~~We’ll make leave beforehand.~~”

Maryam said, “Rake . . . ?”

She wondered if this was some idiomatic expression having to do with socializing. Break the ice, mend fences, chew the fat, rake leaves . . . But Bitsy was saying, “We still have elms, believe it or not, and they’re always the first trees to shed. We thought we’d throw a big jolly leaf-raking party and let the girls roll around in the piles.”

“Oh. All right. You’re very kind,” Maryam said.

She liked the way Bitsy called the babies “the girls.” It made her visualize a Susan of the future, wearing knee socks and a pleated skirt, with her arm linked through her best friend’s arm.

Logically, they should have taken separate cars to the leaf-raking party. The Donaldsons lived in Mount Washington and Maryam a short distance south of them, in Roland Park. (The “wrong side” of Roland Park, so called, although even the wrong side was very nice, the houses just a bit smaller and closer together.) Sami and Ziba, coming from the north, would have to drive right past the Donaldsons’ neighborhood to get to Maryam’s; but even so, they insisted on giving her a ride. Maryam suspected that this was because Ziba felt the need of moral support. Ziba was subject to fits of insecurity every now and then. And sure enough, when they arrived at Maryam’s—where Maryam was already waiting out front, so as not to hold them up—Ziba popped from the car to announce that they were going to come in for a moment because she worried they were too early. Maryam said, “Early?” She checked her watch. It was 3:55. They’d been invited for four o’clock, and the drive would take roughly five minutes. “We’re not early!” she said.

But Ziba was already extricating Susan from her car seat. Sami, stepping out from behind the wheel, said, “Ziba claims that four o’clock means ten past four, in Baltimore.”

“Not when only one set of guests has been invited,” Maryam told him. (She had studied these customs at some length herself.) But Ziba had Susan in her arms by now and was coming up the front walk. She wore the offhand kind of clothes appropriate for leaf-raking—jeans and a bulky rose turtleneck—but had obviously spent some time on her hair and makeup. A huge, horizontal ponytail jutted from the back of her head, so frizzy that it defied gravity, and her lips were two different colors, shiny pink outlined in a red that was almost black. “You look very nice,” Maryam told her. She meant this sincerely. Ziba was a strikingly pretty young woman. And Sami was so handsome! He had his father’s chiseled mouth and thick eyebrows. His rimless, old-man spectacles somehow made him seem younger, and the collar of his plaid flannel shirt stood up boyishly at the back. “Ten minutes early, ten minutes late, what difference does it make?” he asked his mother. He kissed her on both cheeks. “Check out Susan’s work clothes.”

Susan wore blue denim overalls, faded convincingly at the knees, and a chambray shirt. Her jacket, also blue denim, had a tractor appliquéd on one pocket. “You’re all ready to help us rake!” Maryam told her, and she lifted her from Ziba’s arms.

“We’re bringing a bottle of wine,” Ziba said. “What do you think? Is that wrong? I know it’s still daylight, but we’re staying for supper, after all.”

“Wine is perfect,” Maryam said, jouncing Susan on her hip. “We should certainly bring wine. Isn’t that so, Susie-june?”

Susan gave her a secretive smile.

“Shall we go in and sit down?” Ziba asked.

“What for? We’ll just have to get up again,” Sami said. “She acts like it’s some big deal,” he told his mother, and then to Ziba he said, “We visit people all the time. Why is this any different?”

“But these people are older than our other friends,” Ziba said. “Bitsy is forty,” she told Maryam. “She mentioned it on the phone. She’s a weaver and she used to teach yoga and she writes poetry and . . . oh, what will we *talk* about?” she ended on a wailing note.

“Babies,” Maryam said.

“Ah,” Ziba said, brightening. “Babies.”

“What else do we talk about, these days?” Sami asked the sky.

“The Donaldsons’ baby is keeping her Korean name for good,” Ziba told Maryam.

“Jin-Ho Donaldson,” Maryam tried out. It had a peculiar ring. “Donaldson” seemed so ultra-American, or was that because she was reminded of McDonald’s hamburgers?

“Jin-Ho Dickinson-Donaldson, actually,” Ziba said.

Maryam’s jaw dropped. Sami laughed. Then he said, “Okay, folks, it’s four o’clock. Time to hit the road.”

Ziba turned to follow him back to the car, but she seemed to be lagging a bit, Maryam noticed.

As always, the two women had their ceremonial disagreement about who should sit where. “Please,” Ziba said, gesturing toward the front, but Maryam said, “I like the back. This way I

sit next to Susan.” She handed Susan to Ziba, who would make quicker work of buckling her in, and walked around the rear of the car to slip in on the other side. Sami had his seat adjusted far enough back so that it touched her knees, but not uncomfortably. She had spoken the truth when she said she preferred to sit there. How awkward if she had assumed the seat of honor, as her own mother-in-law used to do! Although she had an odd sense of being a child again, Susan’s sibling, as the two of them swayed from side to side when Sami turned a corner.

The Donaldsons’ house was a worn white clapboard Colonial on one of the narrower streets in Mount Washington. The sprawling, woodsy yard was ankle-deep in yellow leaves that clattered as the Yazdans waded up the front walk, and the porch was strewn with bicycles and boots and garden tools. It was Brad who opened the door, wearing corduroys and a woolen shirt stretched taut across his belly. “Well, hey!” he said. “Welcome! Great to see you!” and he chucked Susan under the chin. “This kid has plumped up some. She was looking a bit peaked at the airport.”

“Fifteen pounds, three ounces, at her last doctor visit,” Ziba told him.

“Fifteen?” He frowned.

“And three ounces.”

“I guess she’s going to be one of those *petite* little people,” he said.

Jin-Ho was going to be an Amazon, Maryam thought when she saw her straddling Bigsby’s waist. She was stocky and

bloomingly healthy-looking, with fat cheeks and bright, laughing eyes. She still wore that squared-off hairstyle she had arrived with, seemingly all of a piece, and although she too was in corduroys, her top was a multicolored, quilted affair with striped sleeves and a black silk sash—the kind of thing Maryam recalled from the days when Sami and Ziba were researching Korea. “Hasn’t she grown?” Bitsy asked, shifting Jin-Ho slightly to give everyone a good view. “These pants are size eighteen months! We had to switch her to a full crib the second week she was here.”

Bitsy herself wore a black-and-white-striped jersey and black slacks and fluorescent jogging shoes. There was something aggressive about her plainness, Maryam thought—her blatant lack of makeup, her chopped hair and angular, rawboned body. She might almost be making a statement. Next to her, Ziba looked very glamorous but also a little bit flashy.

First they sat a few minutes in the living room, waiting for Jin-Ho’s grandparents. Both couples were coming, Bitsy said, but none of the aunts or uncles or cousins because too large a crowd might overwhelm the girls. In fact, the girls seemed fairly impervious. They sat on a braided rug and pursued their separate activities—Jin-Ho piling alphabet blocks into a dump truck, Susan trying to maneuver a jingle-bell out of a wooden rattle. Susan was so sweet and intent, and her fingers worked so cleverly, that Maryam wondered if the Donaldsons might feel slightly envious.

Bitsy and Ziba were discussing lactose intolerance. Bitsy blamed it on a clash of cultures. It wasn’t in the Asian tradition