

Anna

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Anna *Claire Lin*

Bewilderment, or so they said, twisted deep inside. Beneath the chest, something hollow and sick like a whirlpool pulled her in, drilling through, reaching the back wall of her ribcage.

She didn't like this feeling.

It was still dark outside, cold and misty as all winter mornings. The train would part at six o'clock, six o'clock sharp. The headlights shot into the darkness, melodramatic. Moisture mingled with dirt, climbing up intangible stairs, dissolved in the distance. She dragged her luggage across the main hall, smoothly slicing the grey mirror in the ceiling as a swan sliced the shimmering Zürisee in those melting summer days—the lake was upside down. It began to drizzle: Sparkling gold and silver pieces embedded in translucent emeralds with distorted human reflections, with not one, not two, but an infinite number of reflections, splashed against us and dribbled down the wall like Dali's pocket watch. She looked up. Real or surreal? She was uncertain. In the corner of the mirror stood a clock: upside down. It was there before Caroline's departure; it was there when she greeted Karl back from a skiing trip; it was there after she rushed to pick up a last-minute present from Sprüngli. She remembered the clock for as long as she could remember, in a perpetual state of vagueness, in the same way that we remember our own reflections in each other's eyes. «The train would part at six o'clock, six o'clock sharp,» said the clock.

«Madam, excuse me, but this is my seat.»

«Oh, Entschuldigung. Sorry.»

Frau Äbi didn't understand much English but she could guess from a pointing finger and a perplexed face. She reluctantly moved to the aisle seat as she wished her new travel companion would voluntarily take the seat opposite rather than the one next to—her. There was not much room. Compared to the old trains with shabby compartments, modern trains are much better. But still, there was not much room. She glanced across to catch a quick glimpse of her new travel companion: a slenderly built, probably polite and hopefully gentle girl, and her light blue jeans—broken, it was ripped across the girl's right thigh. Frau Äbi frowned as she contemplated her new travel companion's countenance: a clean, youthful, yet inscrutable face. Anna now bent down to pick up her luggage, a small black suitcase. Young people are always wearing jeans these days. What happened to the dresses? A ripped item of clothing? Tsk tsk.

Resisting a sulky pout, Frau Äbi pressed her lips and pointedly disdained the current indecency. Modernity, they call it. Really? What exactly do they call it? Anna now swung the small black suitcase over her shoulder to the rack. Maybe, but it was only a maybe, that this girl was ingenuous, interesting, and intelligent like the young Frau Äbi, Frau Äbi thought. Anna now turned around. Terrified that her surreptitious manners would provoke an unexpected protest from her new travel companion, Frau Äbi immediately looked down to grab her copy of Tages-Anzeiger. Anna now reached for the phone inside her pocket. Frau Äbi opened her newspaper and Anna stuck the headphones into her ears. The train parted at six o'clock, six o'clock sharp.

Anna didn't remember how many crossroads she had passed. They all looked the same: flat massive sand pavements, stretching out to the even more enormous, the even more horizontal plain. A breeze brought up a reflux of golden dirt, soon swallowed by dusk. It was stifling. Something amorphous was crawling up beneath her chest. She didn't like this feeling. There was not much room. Now that the five of them were encumbered by their remaining properties—a ponderous chest and a small bundle of farm tools—in that caravan. They took her father's farmland. They seized the grains too. They said the production would boost after establishing kolkhozes, according to the first five-year plan. Vladimir, her little brother, curled up next to her and rested his head on her shoulder: sleeping, finally. He was so frightened in the committee office that he hid his face behind her skirt all through that morning. Vladimir didn't want to leave his friends, his village, or his land. They were talking to her father, but she could not recount much. She only remembered the exhilarating face and the red headscarf of that woman on the poster, and her snowy white teeth: «Comrades (!),» the woman roared with excitement. It was stifling. There was not much room. Anna cautiously moved to the right, turned her torso slightly toward the window, lifted the corner of the heavy oilcloth curtain, and gulped a lungful of cold night air. They were now surrounded by eternal darkness. No, there were the faint stars. Suddenly tranquility returned and it was all right again.

Those that resisted the darkness were her light blue eyes, spilling sparks on the glass pane. Indifferent. They say that all blue-eyed people share a common ancestor from northern Europe, based on a single mutation located on the gene *herc2*. Anna knew this. They say that cancer research has adopted the conventional approach focusing on the identification of disease-related alleles, yet such methodology excludes the impact of genetic and epigenetic heterogeneity. Anna knew this. They question the efficiency of current cancer therapies

especially in the light of the inherent heterogeneity of malignant tumors. Anna didn't know this. Sometimes even Anna was uncertain about what she knew and what she did not know. They said that she was named after her grandma but Anna had never met her grandma. A cheerful woman, or so they said, who survived the collectivization, but died of lung cancer. They say that forty percent of the population will be diagnosed with cancer during their lifetime; but Anna closed her blinds. Indifferent. Anna synthesized 5 probes to label the epigenetic mark, and then came the real test—work. She sent her samples yesterday. René would take care of them next Monday. If the molecular structures were verified, Anna would proceed to the final experiment on Wednesday. Everything was streamlined. Anna was part of the production line, much like the assembly line leading to the legendary Ford Model T, but again, Anna was just part of that production line.

Anna didn't remember how many crossroads she had passed in Siberia. One remarkable feature of the landscape however, she remembered, was that no matter how desperately you tried to escape Siberia, you were still in—Siberia. She was born in the same year when Vladimir Lenin returned to Russia to bring them «peace, land and bread.» She was her father's lucky star. Now they took everything away. It was a lie. Anna did not know who lied or who kept their promise. There were the faint stars. Vladimir, asleep now, rolled to the other side of the caravan and Anna vigilantly got up on her knees and slid into the corner. She held the heavy oilcloth with one hand, secured herself with the other and peered through the slit between the curtain and the wall. There were the faint stars. There was the vast, tranquil, mysterious land. Here, they travelled, traversing nothing but that land. Nobody could take over and nobody could escape. There was no certainty at the utmost beginning and therefore no uncertainty: It was just a hallucination. At that moment, Anna felt an instantaneous relief as if she too, had been engulfed by that utterly enigmatic land. There were the faint stars. The almost imperceptible starlight lit up the vault of heaven. They did not take everything away, she thought. There was not much room in heaven either. If, but it was only an if, they would not make it out of Siberia, it was all right. Heaven was once here: What would remain would remain.

Anna looked beyond the window and fixed her eyes on the landscape. She could make out the mountain ridge in the distance—the beautiful Alps—and hoped that dawn would be so generous to paint the mountaintop rose pink. That was the only right way to start your day. She rested her head against the window. Now with her eyes closed, she saw the land expanded between her and the orange, pink, and light blue sky.

Claire Lin, born 1986, studied chemistry and art history (material culture studies) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has recently finished the master program in chemistry at ETH Zurich.