

The Lost and Found Department

A Vera Wang wedding dress with a ball gown made of light ivory silk basket weave organza, an asymmetrical hand draped skirt, and off-shoulder floor-length sleeves...

Estella had been sitting in her parked car for three hours, soaking into the front seat like it was a bathtub filled to the brim with steaming water. The passenger next to her in the front seat was an enormous plastic bag with a protruding metal hanger. She turned the key in ignition towards her violently. The crisp sound of the news reporter's voice talking about the six women who had filed the sexual assault lawsuit blared from the radio. Estella started flinging her head back into the headrest repeatedly until stars studded her vision.

The only time Estella thought Phil would seriously leave her happened the fall before they graduated from college. The unspoken agreement permeating the air in the space between them – and their families and the rest of the universe – was that Estella would follow him anywhere. When people reacted with disapproval disguised as surprise, Estella went along with it. There was a certainty that she knew they wouldn't and couldn't understand, because they didn't know what it was like to love Phil.

It was too embarrassing to say out loud, but Estella always wondered when it would happen. At the end of her lunch date with Phil in October, she absentmindedly twisted the clunky class ring around her middle finger, imagining what it would feel like if it were a little slimmer and smoother. Their usual seat at the restaurant was by the window that looked out onto the busy road where cars sped by, unappreciative of the canopy of oranges and reds dancing above them. When the waiter returned Phil's card, Estella took a final sip out of her glass of water. As she started to stand up, Phil grabbed her right hand, sitting her back down.

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking about joining the priesthood.” The sentence was well-rehearsed, but Phil looked just as surprised as Estella when the words left his mouth.

“What?” Estella repeated the word again. The outline of Phil started blurring.

“Estella, I should’ve told you a while ago…” Phil trailed off, his clammy hands still wrapped around Estella’s.

“You’re joking.” Estella was religious, but not like that. The idea of living in a convent, wrapped in an unbreathable cotton wimple, singing, praying, and writing all day made her laugh.

“No, absolutely not.”

“How long have you been thinking about doing this?”

“I started attending the meetings in August. I’ve been speaking with the priests in the order after mass every week.”

Silence filled the space between them. “What does this mean?”

“I don’t know.” Phil started twisting the ring on Estella’s middle finger, deeply concentrated on the friction between the subtle ridges on the inside of her finger and the metal.

“I’m still figuring it out.”

“Okay.” Estella pulled her fingers away from Phil’s hand and looked back out the window.

She knew he wanted her to wait, so she did.

That summer, after graduation, Estella and Phil headed up to the mountains to visit his older sister’s family. Estella liked Piper and her husband enough, but more importantly, she loved their children – Ricky, Addy, little Gigi. Phil decided he would stay with Estella until he finished the seminary discernment process – after that, he would decide what he wanted to do.

They were cleaning up after Piper's potluck dinner on the first evening of their arrival when the children begged to swim in the lake.

"Ask your Uncle Phil and Aunt Stelly to go with you!" Piper shook her head and laughed, pointing with her soap-sudded hands. "Mommy's washing the dishes."

Ricky, Addy, and Gigi promptly ran upstairs to change into their bathing suits, and gathered around Phil and Estella before they headed outside. Estella went to the porch to grab towels, and Phil walked the three children down to the floating dock. Before Estella walked back down the steps, she paused to look out at the lake. The sun had almost set, the oranges and reds flirting with the horizon. Ricky and Addy had already begun wading in the water, but little Gigi refused because she didn't want it to get in her face while she was swimming. Estella watched Phil crouch to little Gigi's height and braid her hair. When she reached the bottom of the steps, he had finished tying the last elastic around little Gigi's second braid. Gigi skipped gleefully into the water to join her brother and sister. Phil followed her, pretending to be a shark, making growling noises that dueted perfectly with their high pitched screams. His subsequent roar of laughter blended with the constant noise of mating cicadas, melting perfectly into the summer air. Estella smiled and watched. She smiled because she knew.

He proposed exactly a year after that trip. It happened in front of the chapel on the campus of their alma mater. Piper's husband had filmed the whole thing, catching on camera Estella's practiced hand over mouth, body turned away, body turned back, dimple bearing a hole on her left cheek, head nod, hug, legs in the air, kiss on the lips. Immediately after, Phil's mother told her she would pay for her dress, which Estella thought was weird, but she insisted.

The man on the radio had started listing the names of the defendants. The first syllable of Phillip hadn't even finished rolling off his tongue when Estella, without opening her eyes,

reached out to twist the volume knob to the left until she couldn't hear his voice. She flicked open her eyes, destroying the constellations. Estella grabbed the enormous pulsing bag next to her and got out of the car, leaving the door ajar.

When she entered the thrift store, the face of the woman behind the counter lit up. It was like she had been waiting there for her this whole time.

...sits in the far corner of the store, sandwiched between a red satin bridesmaid dress and black taffeta ballgown, until someone buys it for \$19.99. Last minute alterations have to be made before the big day.

A stretch silk charmeuse strapless bra in baby pink with cotton-nylon cups, band size US 36, cup size C, all tags removed...

Inez scanned the selection of chips in the snack aisle of the convenience store. It didn't matter which one she chose, but the half opened bag of pretzels lying at the end of the bottom shelf kept distracting her. She looked at the watch on her left wrist, calculating the amount of time she had left. This wasn't the first time she had bought something in a convenience store as a ruse, but she was still nervous. She paced back and forth, holding a can of barbecue chips in her left hand and a bag of popcorn in her right. Her right pinky kept tapping on the bag, crinkling the plastic loudly. The bag of popcorn would be objectively easier to carry around and throw away. She glanced at the half opened bag one last time and brought her popcorn to the counter.

The cashier's name tag told Inez that her name was Molly. She was young, definitely not over twenty-five, and wore two braided pigtails, a black baseball cap, and glasses with clear rims. Inez slid the bag of popcorn over.

"Did you find everything you need?"

Inez nodded and handed her the dollar bills as Molly punched the numbers into the cash register. She jammed her fingers as she closed the tray.

“Shit!” Something inside of Inez lit up. She tried not to laugh at the pathetic sight of Molly with her stupid braids, clutching her left hand. Before Inez turned around to leave the store, she paused.

“Any chance I could use the restroom?” Molly, still holding onto herself, nodded and motioned to the right.

Inside the bathroom, Inez dropped the bag of popcorn into the trash and entered the stall closest to the door. After locking it, she began to carefully undress herself from the waist up, jacket, shirt, and bra falling to the floor. Wedged between her breasts was a piece of paper. She smiled, then dropped it into the toilet and flushed it away.

The sound of water swirling around was immediately taken over by wailing sirens. Their crescendos made Inez’s blood crawl. She jumped up and dressed herself, storming back outside to find Molly. The girl was still at the cash register, looking down, when Inez whipped out the gun from the waistband of her jeans and held it to Molly’s temple, her hand not shaking at all.

“Did you call them? Did you call them?” She repeated, screaming until her voice was hoarse. Molly shook her head slowly. She looks frightened, Inez thought. Good. Molly didn’t know what was going on, why the police were knocking at her door, why she was even here at all. It was all good.

“Where’s the back door?” Inez shifted the position of the gun and Molly flinched.

“You turn left. But it’s locked.” Her voice cracked.

“Give me the fucking keys to the back door or I’ll put the bullet right through your head.”

Each word coldly sliced through the air as Inez watched Molly writhe like she was in physical

pain. Inez thought about killing her anyway, but decided she wouldn't have enough time. Molly showed Inez her bare hands and reached down to her belt, slowly unhooking one of the keys from the metal carabiner. Inez took it and went into the back of the store, turning left to find the steel door. Inez shoved the key into the lock, swung the door open, and ran. The cool air hit her face as she made her way to her car, head simultaneously pounding and tuning out the police sirens, forcing herself to focus. She backed out of the parking lot and sped away.

It was only until she had exited the freeway did Inez realize she had forgotten something in the bathroom of the convenience store. Her nipples stood erect and proud outlined against the thinness of her shirt, now bathed in the neon red of the stop light.

...eventually travels to the donation box of a nearby city women's shelter, and then to the home of a family-owned tailor shop.

A navy blue cardigan zip-up jacket, size small, a hand-me-down from Wing Yin Ze Ze...

Wing Yin Ze Ze was six years older than Mei Ling. She studied computer science at a Canadian university far away. Mei Ling's mother would always say if there was one thing she didn't want Mei Ling doing with her future, it was that.

"To live in Canada?"

"To leave home and go far away."

"Isn't that what you did?"

"I came here because there's more here – for my family, for you." Her mother looked angry. "I didn't have time to worry about how I looked or dressed. I was too busy raising your Wing Yin Ze Ze and her brothers."

"You came to the United States to babysit your cousin's children?"

“It’s not just babysitting, Mei Ling. It’s not trivial to care for children.” Her mother heaved a great sigh while she shook her head, lip curled and eyebrows furrowed above the wiry frames she wore on her nose. When they argued, Mei Ling tuned out her mother’s voice and studied her face instead. It was pretty, but not in an obvious way. She had good cheekbones and her face was symmetrical, but the eyes often rested on the crow’s feet around her eyes first. Her mother was old. Mei Ling had never thought of her as pretty until she saw the wedding pictures from so many years ago. It was the only time she had ever worn makeup in her life – and never again after. She always said it was because she didn’t like the way it sat on her face, but Mei Ling suspected that there was part of her who believed that looking pretty – and wanting to look pretty – was embarrassing, even criminal.

Mei Ling’s mother grew up with five siblings in a house no bigger than the size of her own bedroom. We could never afford new clothes, she would always say to Mei Ling, so you’ll survive without them too. It made sense, then, why almost all of Mei Ling’s clothes used to belong to Wing Yin Ze Ze’s. Her hand-me-downs were stored in a gray plastic Tupperware bin. When Mei Ling was younger, she never complained about the clothes her mother dressed in. She hated the bin now. Nothing was cropped like the shirts the prettiest girls at her school wore. All the pants were too loose and skirts too long. The dresses had collars and peeling ugly Chinese cartoon graphics plastered on the front. After her mother made her wear one of those dresses to her middle school’s eighth grade dance, Mei Ling swore she would get a job at the pizza parlor down the street from their apartment. She bought her own dress with her first paycheck. It was bright yellow and clung to the shape of her body.

That was the dress she wore on the Sunday her mother’s uncle, Kau Gung, was in town. Every other weekend after church, Mei Ling and her mother headed to Ming Court for dim sum,

a restaurant sitting on top of one of the tallest buildings in their neighborhood. Before they left the apartment, Mei Ling zipped up a navy blue cardigan on top of her dress. Her mother made a comment about how it was cold and that whatever she was wearing underneath was too short, but she was too worried about remembering Kau Gung's gift to ask Mei Ling to change. When they arrived at the restaurant, Kau Gung was already pouring the oolong tea he had ordered into tiny ceramic teacups. She politely hugged him and sat down as her mother started speaking to him in rapid Cantonese that Mei Ling could only understand a third of. She sat quietly until she decided to peel off and hang the cardigan on the back of her chair. Immediately, she could feel her mother's disapproving gaze try to burn a searing hole through her yellow dress, through her layers of skin, through her bones. When Mei Ling didn't move, her mother pivoted her body toward her.

“Why are you wearing that? Your Kau Gung is here,” she muttered around her breath.

“It's just a dress.” Mei Ling rolled her eyes, hardly bringing them to meet her mother's face.

“Put your sweater back on.” Mei Ling's mother hissed loudly.

Her mother's eyes darted nervously to Kau Gung. He was talking to the pretty waitress who had stopped her dim sum cart by the table. Mei Ling didn't say a word. Instead, her eyes narrowed toward the awning windows lining the wall behind her. The lion had silently woken inside her. Without missing a beat, she stood up, grabbed the cardigan from the back of her chair, and walked to the fifth window that was already slightly cracked open. She cranked the handle twice so the opening was larger. Mei Ling stuck her arm out the window to feel the light breeze. She felt the ribbed cardigan slide out of her hands almost involuntarily – but not quite. It happened so quickly. Her finger tips seemed to linger on each minute stitch of the material. From

twelve stories high, Mei Ling peered out the window, watching the cardigan billow away in spirals. The wind yanked it seamlessly, twisting it into unflattering shapes. As the cardigan flew, it seemed to leave behind a trail of the most sublime navy blue streaks. Billowing, billowing, billowing, until it became an iota of cloth, until it became nothing.

...is rumored to still be floating in the sky somewhere.

I've been looking for you.

I arrived on a bus this morning, greeting the cold winter like an old friend as I stepped out of the bus, grasping the folds of white cloth that cascaded down me like a waterfall. A few strangers stared at me, but only for a few seconds. You always said people in this city like to mind their own business. I never agreed. They weren't private. They just didn't care about you and me.

I started walking. The heavy dress dragged along the pavement, picking up pieces of unrecognizable debris along the way. The weight from this would have dragged the whole dress to the floor if it had not been for the strapless bra with the soft cups sewn into the bodice of the wedding gown. They kept the neckline in place. A gust of wind violently ripped through the street as I turned left to see a strip of taller buildings. I stopped and touched my bare shoulders. People wove around me, about me, maybe even in and out of me. Nobody stopped.

Suddenly, I felt a tingle – the tingle that grows inside when I know something. You were the one who first taught me how to feel that tingle. Something resembling a bird flew down towards me from the gray sky. It twisted and turned until it landed in my arms – something warm – not a bird, but a blue cardigan. It was too small, but I could still fit my arms through the sleeves.

After spending so much time with you, I've realized that it's not a question of whether I'll find what I need, but when it'll come to me.

So, if you're looking for me too, I'll be here.

On my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not. I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?" Scarcely had I passed them when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her who conceived me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

- *Song of Solomon 3*