

Olivia Cheng

Leaving Shandong

Published in EPOCH Print

“Did you know that these things are really shark babies? That they have little sharks shriveled up in them?” Felix said, picking up a mermaid purse and holding it to his lips. Just when I was about to slap it from his mouth, he withdrew and dropped it in the sand. We walked along the beach, Felix lagging behind me.

Tomorrow would be his first day of fourth grade, and recent events had made him odd. Although he had never appeared comfortable in his body no matter what he was doing: his gait awkward and loping, the motion of his hands frantic and unwieldy when he spoke.

Yesterday, his therapist asked if his new obsession with factory farming had to do with anything going on at home. I said, no, we are not pumping cows with antibiotics or feeding chickens their own shit. It felt too taboo, too shameful to tell her that my ex-husband, John, was a devout vegetarian. I worried that Felix was clinging to his father by modeling a visceral fascination with animals. If only he had latched onto John’s obsession with tennis—at least that would have been useful. But it didn’t matter. John was already back in China, maybe forgetting us just as we were forgetting him.

The beach was a naturally polished environment, the waves leaving only a wrack line of seaweed and twigs. Felix threw a crab leg back into the ocean to “preserve its life.” Two weeks ago, I cut my foot on one that he had left on the living room floor. I cupped the broken pieces in my hands as if I were receiving a blessing at church, and dumped them at the bottom of the trashcan. The cut itself was small, but deep, and felt like a needle was edging its way inside me.

John left in May, shortly after Felix’s third grade graduation, and Felix had been in therapy since an incident at summer camp involving two girls and a lizard. After I told him John was not coming back, he started holding things very close to his mouth as if he was about to swallow them or give them a kiss—butterflies, worms, flowers, anything that lived or had once lived. But I didn’t see the point of lying. Children know when you’re lying.

Picking up a stone, I rubbed my thumb against its surface and imagined a wave the size of a building drowning me until all I

could gulp was mouthfuls of saltwater. Felix wrapped seaweed around his wrist and stared into the distance, eyes unfocused, taking in nothing. He looked foreign to me, more like John's child than mine.

John started posting those things on Reddit right around the time we were trying to conceive. I wouldn't have even registered it if he hadn't left his laptop unlocked; I was merely curious about what he was doing on the computer. Over the years, he had gone from writing comments about video games to becoming a volunteer moderator for subreddits like r/sino and r/Chinalife. His posts regularly received at least fifty replies.

*Westerners love to project their crimes on other people. Look at the Opium War or the Boxer Rebellion. With the Opium War, the narrative was that China was trying to slip opium into Britain, not the other way around! Any accusation from the West is a confession.*

By trying to not get hurt, by choosing to marry John, I had somehow forged the most painful path forward. Betrayal hurt most when it was least expected.

During our marriage, he went back to China only once, for his father's funeral. I didn't go with him because I became very busy with work around then. I would have been a burden anyway. I wasn't Chinese, I couldn't speak the language with all his sharp sounds and slurs, and we both knew that no words could ameliorate the reality of death.

The first and last time I met his parents was at our wedding. They were small people—his father crippled from labor and his mother thin with sallow cheeks I felt an urge to stroke. I had never seen somebody with such a sallow face. They looked out of place, he in a wrinkled, tan suit and she in a loose, floating dress with cap sleeves too large for her withered shoulders. Beside them, my parents reminded me of the couple in *American Gothic*. Even though my father had the slicked back hair of a bachelor and my mother the wispy figure of a '50s housewife, they somehow both seemed repressed and midwestern. My mother never forgave my father's past philandering, and their kind of love, wild and chaotic, full of screaming matches, had never appealed to me.

Of course I was nice to John's parents. They relied on me, on my kindness, to navigate the confusing ceremonies and fast voices and dozens of people sending their congratulations. The contract of love dictated I be good to his family, and I always was.

*How many other nations have raised their entire population out of poverty? How many? What China has done is extraordinary and America's hegemonic attempt to keep them down means they want millions of people to stay in poverty while they "celebrate" their "multiculturalism." We're so gaslit by Western imperialism that we can't see when it's gone horribly wrong.*

John was not a handsome man, and this was what I liked most about him. He liked tennis and historical fiction and silent movies. His English name, John, was simple, plain, unassuming, and although I knew his Chinese name, Westerners found it difficult to pronounce and he preferred John. My mother told me it was always better to be with a man less attractive than I was. My father had been too handsome and look where that ended up.

For our first date, we went into the wrong movie theater and saw a horror movie instead of a romantic comedy, but we were both too nervous to say anything. We held hands while watching a man try to vivisect the alien growing inside him. Over ice cream afterwards, he said nothing about himself. He sat and asked questions about my life and I am ashamed now to admit how much I enjoyed this. Very few people shared John's fascination with a childhood in suburban Ohio.

When we were dating, I only saw John get overly emotional once, when we went to watch *The Imitation Game*.

"Movies always show England's triumphs. Maybe they should show how destructive England was once in a while," he said, his brows furrowed. "Why are we forced to empathize with the British? They're not always the good guys."

Thinking of the past, I watched Felix let the water go all the way up to his knees. "It's chilly," he said. His hands were slightly purple, but I didn't pull him out of the water. There was a thrill in seeing how quickly the body deadened.

It was September. Sixty-one degrees. The Sakonnet Lighthouse was a little bright spot of blood-red in the sky.

"Did you know they breed lambs just to slice them up and eat them? They force sheep to have babies and then slice them up like bread."

"Don't be gruesome."

"Mom. The truth is gruesome."

A week later, I was driving Felix to his Monday therapy appointment after school. We were stuck in traffic exiting the parking lot. He had a chocolate splatter across his shirt from God knows where. Sometimes, I got the sense that Felix spoke only to himself. “Let him express himself,” his therapist once told me. Yes, let his horrible words spill over me.

At the therapist’s office, the soft leather chair in the waiting room engulfed me. I imagined I was sitting in an elevator descending underground so that the light slowly faded and I could no longer tell whether my eyes were open or closed.

*China is bidding for global intellectual dominance. We are chipping away at Western hegemony. And is this such a bad thing? Is this the fall of democracy? Or have they just never considered another power player and now they’re running scared?*

I had not recognized John’s voice on the forums, at the beginning. He sounded alien and fugitive, unmanageable and rushed, like when he whispered to his parents in Mandarin on the phone.

*Is there any evidence of the Ugyhur camps? Or is this all American propaganda again? Operation MKUltra? Ever heard of it? We see real evidence in Guantanamo Bay while CNN focuses on making images of China darker and blurrier than they actually are.*

At a party once, I told our friends that he had grown up in a very cosmopolitan area of Beijing. They all wanted to speak to him about their own experiences in Beijing—one taught English, another had gone on a vacation and came home an expert in Chinese culture.

He corrected me in front of everyone. “No, I grew up in a village in Shandong. I only went to high school a little outside of Beijing, not in the city.”

I wanted to be upset but couldn’t. I had only wanted him to seem impressive; I was doing him a favor. In bed that night, he draped his arm around me, and I shrugged him off and fell asleep with the blankets tucked under my chin.

*Did you guys know that the demand for China’s EV cars is far greater than Western EV cars? America can only “win” by creating trade blocks. But even they can’t stop China’s growth. The West is the author of its own weakness.*

Felix came out of the therapist’s office, his eyes drooping and tinged red. But his lips were twisted in a big smile like he had just heard a funny joke. The therapist pulled me aside while Felix read a coin collecting guide he always kept in his backpack.

“He’s very fixated on food today,” she said. “Did his father cook much?”

I shook my head. I was not sure why I lied, but it felt right to leave John behind us. Whenever I missed him, I reminded myself that the John I knew was gone.

The therapist and I discussed cognitive behavioral therapy I could do with Felix to curb his obsessions. The success of any relationship hinged on mutual compliance, and I worried, for his sake, that Felix would never learn how to pass as normal.

Six months pregnant with Felix, I waddled from the kitchen to the couch. “Did you see that another Asian grandmother got curbstonped? In New York?” John said, chopping eggplant.

“Yeah.” I stood behind him, watching him cook, breathing in his warm, sweaty neck.

“What do you think?”

“It’s pretty sad,” I said. “I’m sorry. Sometimes, people do bad things.” I knew John’s attraction to me depended on my unerring normalcy, my sitcom-housewife support. This felt like an opportunity to be there for him.

“It’s horrible.”

“Really, I’m shocked.”

He was cutting the eggplant so fast I worried he would nick his finger. “I’m not.” His voice was a low murmur.

“What do you mean?”

*Why should we give up our place in colleges for the same people who are smacking us down on the streets? Why should we shut up anymore? People in America don’t care about us, and it’s time we stop caring about them. The only safe place we can exist is Asia.*

“It’s always the same perpetrator.”

“John, don’t start.” I didn’t want us to wade into gray territory; I wanted him to pity, not project.

“I’m not starting. I’m just saying it’s a problem. It’s a problem...”

“Once you start focusing on race, all of a sudden, you’re villainizing an entire community.”

The knife hit the bamboo cutting board with a terrible, definitive thud. The stove beeped. A heat emanated from the room. I felt anesthetized, like when you slip into a hot bath and fall into a

woozy sleep. Letting my silence fill the room, I knew that soon, he would repent and come running to me.

“Look, you’re right. I’m not saying *that*,” he said, amending his tone.

“Good.”

“It’s just...how do you deal with racial crime in a nonracial way? If they want to be uplifted, they should at least take the first step.” He shifted his eyes from the eggplant to me and my belly. The sunlight streaming through the windows was strong and beautiful and bright, giving everything a balmy glow. “I don’t understand why people hate us so much.”

About two years ago, John’s demeanor around the house changed. When I asked if he wanted to have sex, he said he was too tired. When I asked him to pick up groceries after work, he complained that he did most of the chores. I tailed him after work to the local Chinese nail salon, where he stayed for hours. But there was no way he was cheating on me. John didn’t even like Chinese women.

When I spoke to my friends, they said John wasn’t the type; he was too dorky, too lame to do something like that. I didn’t have to worry. It was normal for men to get foot massages there after they a kid. They needed to unwind, and he was crazy about me.

But the next weekend, we dropped Felix off at the sitter’s and went to his coworkers’ party. He was combative with our friend Dill, a quintessentially handsome man. Dill’s particular breed of handsome—dark hair, blue eyes—was rare in this town. John argued that Li Na could have been No. 1 had it not been for a knee injury that ruined her entire tennis career. To be honest, Dill was being an asshole, saying that her victory over Schiavone at the French Open came from Schiavone’s numerous unforced errors. Dill liked to get beneath your skin sometimes; he was a contrarian. But John followed Dill around for the rest of the party, trying to restart their discussion, even challenging him to a tennis match. I hoped his behavior was just a phase, but he began striking up arguments with the men around us, usually over Li Na—which player had the better forehand, which player had the most potential, which player was wronged by line judges.

I broached the topic once, when we were getting ready for bed. Toothpaste was dripping from his mouth, and I was taking out my contacts.

“Could you please stop arguing about tennis with our friends?” I said. “It’s really not making us look good. Li Na doesn’t need your support.”

He whipped around, his lips crusted white, and said, in almost a shout, “Why are you taking their side? Why are you on their team?”

I didn’t respond, only glared at him in case he woke Felix up. But we didn’t hear a sound from the other side of the wall. Quietly, we slipped into bed together, and I never brought it up again. In a marriage, it’s good to know your roles, and I knew mine. Love, like any game, required rules that a couple subliminally decided on together. Now that John was breaking them, I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to respond.

But when he went down on me that night, he did it with gratitude, touching me like I was precious again. His tongue darted inside me, desperate, pleading. My hands massaged the top of his head. I opened my mouth, moaning quietly, worried about making too much noise.

I continued to make hummus sandwiches for lunch while he chopped watermelon, and we watched sitcoms over dinner, Felix sitting between us. Watching John slice through the meat of the watermelon with a soft crunch, I knew this was the sort of clumsy, honest man who would never cheat, never leave.

A few months later he told me our marriage wasn’t working. More surprised than angry, I wanted to sink back into mundanity. A part of me felt determined to return to the normalcy that John had once so desired; a part of me was an open wound. The skin around the wound caved in.

How could he do this? Even worse, John wanted to take Felix back to China to live with his mother. “He’ll grow up around family,” he said. “My mother has good values. She raised me, after all.”

But Felix was American. I was American. We were all supposed to be American.

I had built John up, made him part of my community, only for him to turn around and betray me because of what? His insecurities? His cultural masculinity? He had gone off the deep end.

I didn't mention the nail salon, but the entire ordeal filled me with a hot sense of shame.

The next day, I changed the locks to the house when he was at work. "Let me in, let me in!" he screamed. Make no mistake—he was the one who chose this.

I bit his hand weaseling through an open window while Felix shrieked beside me. Blood dripped onto the wooden floor. Felix slept in my bed that night, his breathing uneven and his twitches anxious. It was only a week before summer break, which he had been so looking forward to.

I was not sure where John stayed that night. Really, my mind was only on Felix—whether John would kidnap him and leave me all alone.

"You didn't show up for school yesterday? Where were you?" I followed Felix to the kitchen and waited while he rummaged through the fridge. "Why won't you answer me?"

Closing the fridge door with nothing in his hands and his cheeks slightly flushed from the cold air, Felix blinked three times and stared right through me. His hand slinked into the fridge and he brought a single, green string bean right to his lips. I hated that he opened the fridge a dozen times a day, just like John, that he stood in the same places, that he liked the same food as his father.

Were John's changes during our marriage inevitable? Or was it only because of circumstance—hate crimes and Rekia Boyd and Ee Lee and cops and guns? Every time I saw Felix, I was reminded of my shame, of the potential nail salon woman and the Reddit posts, of the truth that you are never really secure. Men were random and brutal.

"Did you know that in Vietnam, they skin the alligator while the alligator is still alive?" When I didn't respond, he kept on going, methodically scratching an already-red dry spot on his nose, his other hand still holding the string bean to his mouth. "Did you know that there's a type of dog in dogfighting that they—" and it came from nowhere, certainly not from me or maybe a little from me, but not all of me, but I slapped him hard and fast, so that he could feel the sting before he realized what happened.

I hadn't wanted to do it. But his chatter sounded so much like John's Reddit posts, circular and obsessive. Touching the same horrible topics over and over again.



My wedding ring burned on my finger, my finger burned on my hand, and my hand must have burned on his face. I had failed as a wife and mother. Had it been because I refused to learn Chinese? Because I couldn't squeak out the ee's and er's?

The string bean tumbled to the floor. Without a word, Felix ran up to his room.

Feeling scared and out of control, I drove to the beach. Before I left, I pasted a little sticky on the fridge for him, *Went to supermarket. Be back soon*. I wrote *sorry* and then erased it and scribbled over the space where the word was still visible.

It was already dark. Time often passed without my knowledge. The only source of illumination was the low, yellow beam of the Sakonnet Lighthouse, still running after one-hundred and twenty-five years.

The last time I walked on the beach with John, he had held my hand.

"If it's not really anything, then why is this happening?" I asked him.

He paused. "In Shandong, there's this story about a city man who tries to divorce his village wife, but she won't let him. He goes back from Beijing to his village every single year to divorce her, and despite all the obstacles, he still goes every year until he gets the divorce." His tone was business-like but polite, like he was talking to an acquaintance at the water cooler.

"What's your point?"

"See? We don't understand each other." He scratched at a mosquito bite on his neck. The red welt already had a scab over it. "I wouldn't go back every year to divorce another woman and marry you."

I coughed, unsure of what to say, but filled with bitter betrayal, hit pitilessly with all my previous assumptions about our marriage. He didn't love me enough to go back for me. "What are you saying? Is there someone else?"

He pursed his lips. "I broke things off with her a long time ago. We only saw each other for a few months."

My sadness evaporated to anger. Was it the nail salon woman? Was it some low-wage immigrant? And couldn't he see that a marriage was based off promises and expectations more than reality? Why had he told me this? "You made me look stupid for nothing," I said. My chest tightened and when I dropped his hand, he

did not resist our parting. He revealed nothing—no malice, no sorrow, as if daring me to act out and hurt him. “So then what is it?”

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “Our values. Or well, I’m not sure.” His eyes were milky and soft, like he was already somewhere else. I couldn’t tell him that I still yearned for his devotion. To speak a dream was to fill it with expectation.

I didn’t cry. I imagined my body turning entirely purple like I was bathing myself in the freezing water. But when I held my hand out, it was still the same pale shade of white.

Today, it was cold on the beach. The ocean was unforgiving in its ability to erase and restore, the sand covering any previous imperfections. Did I want him to return? Nostalgia, much like hypothermia, burned at first, but eventually overtook you with numbness. I didn’t want to think about the conversation any longer. I wished I hadn’t hit Felix. But he was telling me things I didn’t want to know.

I waded into the ocean. I wanted to yell, to flatten and be flattened by the waves, but it all felt too giant, too great a thing to dive into. Instead, I let the water go up to my ankles and kicked some sand around.

I had reached out to him once, after he left for China. I sent him a small note of love, an email with only three sentences and twenty-eight words. I wanted to change; I knew I could. He didn’t respond.

A few days later, he commented on a Reddit post about Xie Feng and Nicholas Burns:

*The truth is that most Westerners see themselves as the good guys and us as the villains. I guess it’s easier to be Chinese and have a peaceful mindset when you don’t feel the need to exploit anybody or put them down. In the US, I was exhausted. In China, I am happy.*