ALL WILL BE WELL

By Yiyun Li

March 4, 2019

Audio: Yiyun Li reads.
Once upon a time, I was addicted to a salon. I never called ahead, and rarely had to wait—not everyone went to Lily’s for a haircut. The old men Lily called uncles sat at a card table, reading newspapers and magazines in Chinese and Vietnamese. The television above the counter was tuned to a channel based in Riverside, and the aunties—related or not related to the uncles—watched cooking shows and teledramas in Mandarin.

I was the only customer under sixty, and the only one who spoke in English. With others Lily used Vietnamese, Cantonese, or Mandarin. The first time we met, I lied and said that I had been adopted by a couple from Holland when I was a year old and that we moved to America when I was in middle school. Lily forgave me then for not being able to speak one of the languages she preferred. Brought up by foreign devils, she told a nearby auntie in Cantonese. Half foreign, the auntie said; hair still Chinese. Half devil, Lily said; brain not Chinese. Both laughed. I smiled blankly at Lily in the mirror, and she smiled back. What do you do? she asked, and I lied again and said I was a student. She picked up a strand of hair and let it fall. My hair had just begun to show signs of gray. What subject? she asked, and I said I’d gone back to school because I wanted to become a writer. Will you make money being a writer? she asked, and I said not really.

Lily’s salon was a few blocks from the high street where armed robberies rarely made even the local news. The salon was caged in metal bars, and there was a chain on the door, which Lily unlocked when she saw her customers coming and locked again right after they entered. If there was a fire, none of us would escape, I had thought when I first started to go there, though that didn’t alarm me. I had two small children then, both in preschool, but, despite others’ warnings, I did not feel susceptible to the various dangers that the world could dole out. If the world had a mind to harm, it would do so to the prepared and the unprepared equally. Does being a mother give one the right to bluff? If having children is a gamble, one has no choice but to bluff.

We lived on the college campus where I was teaching at the time. Enclosed within the fences was a land of trees and ponds and creeks and fountains. The flowering quinces near our house were said to have been planted by the servants of the founder’s family in the eighteen-sixties. The preschool was in a building that, with its white stucco and Spanish tiled roof, looked like an outdated resort in the Mediterranean. America was a young country, California among its youngest states. The college was a mere débutante in a world of grand, old institutes, but all those trees and bushes and buildings gave me the impression that life could be as slowly lived, as long-lasting, as we wanted it to be.
Still, the world was full of perils. Some rather real, some rather close. Once, campus security sent out a warning that an unaccompanied pit bull had been spotted roaming near the swimming pool. Once, an armed man was chased into the cluster of faculty houses on a Saturday night; with police cars and helicopters outside, we turned off our lights and listened to a CD of a French children’s drama called “Madame Magic,” designed as a language course. Sometimes a drive-by shooting happened on the street corner near the preschool, and on those days the children were deprived of their outdoor time. All these threats, strangely, didn’t worry me as much as the eucalyptus trees. A recurring fear I had, during those years, was that on a windy day a eucalyptus branch would fall on our heads. In one of the earliest conversations about nature I had with my children, I pointed out that the settlers had made a mistake introducing eucalyptus trees to California. A fire hazard in the dry season, I said, and in winter storms there was the danger of falling limbs. That didn’t scare them, though; on our walks they would sing, “Kookaburra Sits in the Old Gum Tree.” Someday, we decided, we would go to Australia and see koala bears and kangaroos and kookaburras.

When I went to Lily’s, I wore a dark sweatshirt and bluejeans, with a twenty-dollar bill tucked in the back pocket. Once, returning to campus after a haircut, I ran into a colleague. My goodness, she said, I thought you were a student. I blend in, I replied. I could easily have booked an appointment at a boutique salon in one of the more picturesque suburbs. Lily’s was only a few blocks from the college, but was my time so precious that I couldn’t drive twenty minutes to a safer neighborhood? Mencius said that a man of wisdom does not stand next to a wall that is about to topple. Even though I wore sneakers and was a fast runner, I should have known that nobody can outrun a bullet.

I went to Lily’s more often than was necessary. Had I been superstitious, I would have thought that she had put a spell on me.

Lily liked to chat. There were always dramas in her life. Once, her husband broke a toe when he tripped on the carpet that they had finally installed in their house, after ten years of planning. Once, her youngest son, who went to a state university, overslept on the very same morning that a man hacked at random pedestrians with a knife on their street. “He could’ve been killed,” Lily said. “He’s the laziest of the three, but now he says it pays to be lazy.” Her father-in-law, just before his death, had made friends with a man whose first name was Casino. “The poor man thought it was a sign that he would win some money,” she said. “Turned out Casino was not a true friend. Casino didn’t even go gambling with him.”
I listened, smiled, and asked questions—these were my most tiresome traits, and I used them tirelessly. Each encounter was a test I set up for myself: How long could I get people to talk about themselves without remembering to ask me a question? I had no stories to share. I had opinions, and yet I was as stubborn as Bartleby. I would prefer not to, I would reply if asked to remark on people’s stories. In any case, Lily didn’t care about my opinions or my stories—she got plenty of both from the uncles and aunties. I liked to believe that she had waited years for a perfect client like me.

Elsewhere, I wasn’t entirely free from the demands of stating my opinions. Once, a student complained about a J. M. Coetzee novel I’d assigned. It’s so insulting that this book is all about ideas and offers nothing for the heart, she said, and I snapped, unprofessionally, that in my view bad taste was more insulting. Once, a student called Charles Simic a misogynist because he hadn’t written enough about his mother in his memoir. Read a book for what it is, I admonished the student, not for what you want it to be. The student replied that I had only stale ideas of what literature was about. “My goal is to dismantle your canon,” she said, pointing to the Tolstoy and Chekhov on my desk. “They’re not about real life.”

What is life? I wanted to ask. What is real? But right away I felt exhausted. I longed to sit in Lily’s chair. She would trim my hair and talk about the bubble-tea-and-frozen-yogurt place her husband had decided to invest in, or her neighbor’s new profession as a breeder of rare goldfish, or her oldest son’s ridiculous dream of quitting his job at the law firm and attending a culinary institute. Canons did not have a place in Lily’s life. If she were to dismantle anything, it would be a house worth buying as a flipper.

So I went to Lily’s. To my surprise, that day she did not want to talk about her husband or children or in-laws. Or perhaps it was a different day when she decided to tell me a love story. It didn’t matter. All those stories she had told me before had been only a prologue.

It took one haircut for me to get the bare bones of the story, and a few more to gather the details, and still a few more for me to start looking at Lily askance. What was real? What was life? Perhaps we could all make up stories for ourselves when we didn’t know the answers.

Here’s Lily’s story.
She grew up in an ethnic-Chinese family in Vietnam. At sixteen, she fell in love with the Vietnamese boy next door, who was sixteen, too. She was beautiful, he was handsome, but when war broke out between their countries the following year Lily’s father decided that it was no longer safe for his family to live in Vietnam.

“Tuan came to my parents,” Lily said. “He asked to leave the country with us. He would do anything just to be with me, he told my parents. My father said, ‘You’re not our son, you’re your parents’ son.’”

I thought about that war, three weeks and six days long, which was nearly forgotten now. When I was in elementary school in Beijing, my best friend subscribed to a children’s magazine that often featured stories set on the border between Vietnam and China, with illustrations of maimed bodies and bombed villages and the heroic faces of intrepid soldiers. But, placed in history, that war was no more than a skinned knee or a sneeze to mankind. When Lily asked me if I knew the history between the two countries, I almost slipped and said yes. Then I remembered: I was supposed to have grown up in a country far from Asia, with an enviable childhood.

Lily’s family had become boat people, migrating from Vietnam to Hong Kong to Hawaii and later to California. She had helped her parents in their Chinese takeout, apprenticed with an older cousin who ran a hair salon in Los Angeles, married, and had children. This nondescript life of an immigrant would have continued, if she hadn’t recently had news of Tuan, the boy of her girlhood.

“Our story is like a movie,” she said.

“Like a play,” I said. “‘Romeo and Juliet.’”

“Do you know someone who can make our story into a movie?”

For a while, Lily kept asking me that, and each time I replied no, feeling bad for delivering disappointing news, yet not bad enough to stop going to see her. Years of standing in the same spot—cutting and shaving and dyeing and listening to the uncles and aunties—had turned Lily into an unhurried storyteller. She took detours, and, like a verbal magician, offered dazzling distractions and commonplace tricks. “Where does your husband get his hair cut?” she asked once. “Tell him to come here. I’ll give him a discount because you’re my best client.”

More people came into the story, marching in and out like a platoon of extras. Her schoolmates were remembered. Some of them had also had crushes on Tuan. The friendships between the
fathers and between the eldest sons of the two families were recollected, but friendships severed by war were hardly worth a movie. Lily’s parents had sympathized with their daughter when they first left Vietnam, but soon afterward they had shown impatience when she pined.

“Well, I can't blame them,” Lily said. “Love doesn't put rice in the cooker or a roof over our heads.”

“What does love do?” I asked.

“Oh, love makes a good movie,” she said. “Without movies, what would we do with ourselves?”

Tuan cried for three days and three nights in front of Lily’s old house after she and her family left. No one could pry his fingers off the chain lock. At the end of the third night, his older brothers were finally able to take him back to their house. Everyone thought he was going to die.

“Three days and three nights,” Lily said. “Never a step away from our door.” She had heard about this from an old friend whom she had seen recently when he and his wife were visiting their children in America.

Could anyone cry non-stop for three days and three nights without food or drink or sleep? But what right did I have to doubt the boy, what right did I have to want him to express his heartbreak more poetically or die more realistically, like Michael Furey? For all I knew, Michael Furey had been a figment of Joyce’s imagination, as perhaps the boy was of Lily’s. I did not know sorrow then, and later, when I did, after my elder son’s death, I thought that Lily’s young lover had been fortunate to have so many tears in him. Sorrow only desiccated me. Tears came to an end. Desiccation persisted.

The boy did not die. He recovered and eventually moved to another province in Vietnam to teach mathematics at a middle school. A woman in town fell in love with him, though he did not reciprocate. “He was waiting for me to come back,” Lily said. “Before we parted, he said he would wait for me all his life.”

A life of waiting was interrupted by a bout of illness, during which the woman took care of Tuan like a good wife. After that, the two were married, and together they raised three daughters.

“Isn't it interesting that he has three daughters and I have three sons?” Lily said. “Think of where our promises went.”
“Did you promise to return?” I asked.

“Of course I did, but we left as refugees. We knew we wouldn’t go back.”

“But he could’ve kept his promise.”

“Now, that’d be a really good love story,” Lily said. “But I don’t hold it against him that he didn’t. He shouldn’t have.”

The next time I went to Lily’s—after I’d been away for two months for the summer holidays—she looked ruffled. “Where have you been all these weeks?” she asked, and before I could answer she said, “My friends have put me in touch with Tuan.”

“Did you see him?”

“No. How can I? We aren’t the kind of people who take time off from work, and he lives in Vietnam,” Lily said. “But they gave my contact information to him. He wrote and asked about my family, and told me a few things about his wife and daughters.”

Everything was fine, then, I thought. A love story had arrived at a tranquil ending.

“He asked me to forgive him,” Lily said.

Oh dear, I thought.

“Do you think I should call him? He asked me if I would be willing to talk on the phone.”

“Why not?” I said.

“What if I turn out to be a disappointment? Not the girl he remembered?”

“It’s only a phone call. You won't see each other. You’ll just hear each other’s voice. Say a few nice things. You don't have to talk about the past. The two countries were to blame, not the two of you.”

“What if he turns out to be different from the boy I remember?” she said.

“Maybe you shouldn’t call him, then,” I said. “You don’t have to.”

“But how can I not? If I miss him this time, we’ll miss each other all our lives.”
The phone call didn’t go the way I had imagined. I had thought that Lily and her former lover would have a bittersweet conversation about their youth, and exchange a few superficial details about their marriages and their children, nothing too concrete, happiness and adversity both withheld. Or that they might be more forthright as adults and take a philosophical view, agreeing that their love might not have weathered the changes as they grew older. They would tell each other that they would remain friends. They might even say that their two families could become friends.

But I’m not a good writer of love stories. There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of by my limited imagination.

When Lily finally called, the man had no words but only tears, and she listened to him sob. “He was disturbed,” Lily told me. “I almost felt like crying myself, but I kept saying to him, ‘Hello, do you have something to say? We’ve waited for this for so many years. We can’t waste our time crying.’”

After a long while, as he was still crying, one of his daughters took the phone away from him. “It’s too much for Father,” she said to Lily, calling her Auntie. Lily asked the girl about their family life in Vietnam, and she answered with warmth. “Father often talks about you,” the girl said. “We all feel you’re part of our family.”

Lily was working on the nape of my neck when she said this. I couldn’t catch her eyes in the mirror. She didn’t sound perturbed when she recounted the girl’s words, which troubled me. Her voice was dreamy in a menacing way, like a voice-over in a movie. I pictured an actress standing in front of an open window, her back to an unlit room, the moonlight cold in her theatrical eyes. Does he deserve your love, or does he deserve to be killed by you? she asked herself, her face frozen with indecision. Do you have a choice?

“And then,” Lily said, “you won’t believe this. The daughter said that all three sisters’ names have a Chinese character from my name. I never told you. My Chinese name has the character ‘blossom’ in it. He put the same character in their names.”

I shuddered, the way one shudders when stepping out of the hot summer sun and into an abandoned tunnel. Where had that thought of a tunnel come from? And then I remembered. It was an abandoned nuclear shelter next to our apartment building in Beijing. My parents’ generation had dug the tunnels when it was feared that a war between China and the Soviet Union
was inevitable. In elementary school, I had played truant often and gone into one of the tunnels with a box of matches. The damp and moldy air, the scurrying bugs and rats, the rusty nails I had collected in a box as treasure—I felt terror imagining my children on an exploration like that. Yet I had been happy then.

“And then his daughter said, ‘Auntie, I don’t think Father can talk with you today. It’s too much for him. We worry about his health. But do you want to talk to Mother? She is here. She wants to talk with you, too.’ ”

“Did you talk to his wife?” I asked, knowing that Lily’s pause was a gesture to allow me to be included in her narrative.

She did. I would have, too.

“Do you know anyone who could make this into a movie? I’m telling you, it’s a love story, and it’s a movie.”

“I don’t know anyone who makes movies,” I said. “But what happened? You talked with his wife, and then what?”

“She came on the phone, and I liked her voice right away. I think he married a good woman. She called me Sister. Like the daughter, she also said he talked about me often. And then she said, ‘You don’t know how much he loves you. You will never understand.’ And all of a sudden I started to cry. Imagine that. I didn’t shed a single tear when he was bawling on the phone. His wife said, ‘But you shouldn’t cry, Sister. You should be happy. You’re the only love he’s had. All these years he’s kept your photo on our nightstand.’ ”

“In the bedroom the two of them share?” I asked.

“Yes,” Lily said.

“Are you serious?”

“Why would I lie?”

Why would anyone lie to anyone? But people do, I thought, all the time.

“I talked with his wife and then with the two other daughters,” Lily said. “It was a long phone call. And I didn’t hear a single word from him. But you know what made me the saddest? His wife said,
‘You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.’ No one has ever said that to me.”

We both looked up at the mirror. I had not thought of Lily as a pretty woman. I was an exhausted young mother then, courageously blind to the dangers of the world and stubbornly blind to its beauties. I now studied Lily, and thought that she was indeed pretty. I also started to think that she’d made up the whole story, just as I had invented my upbringing in Holland. We all had our reasons for doing this as long as no harm was done. Even so, I began to resent Lily. She must have put a spell on me, tricking me into her chair, hypnotizing me with girlish dreams that had not been hardened by life.

“Maybe you can write my story, and then someone will make a movie from it,” Lily said.

I should have stopped going to Lily’s right away. Perhaps she had seen through me. Tell me a story—she must have known that every time I sat down in her chair I was making that request—a real story, Lily.

Let me tell you a story—she agreed—and let me make it unreal for you.

We saw each other one more time after that. She had promised to show me a copy of the photo of her and the boy, the one he kept in his marriage bedroom. A photo would prove nothing, I thought, but where else could I go for a haircut? Finding another salon would be like starting a new relationship, forging a new friendship, while all I wanted was to keep the unknown, good or bad, at a distance. Forget life, real or unreal. What I wanted to do was to raise my children as a good mother should. In those years, the days seemed long, never-ending, and sometimes I felt impatient for my children to grow up, and then felt guilty for my impatience.

The photo that Lily showed me—what can I say? Years later, after my son died, I felt a constant ache, similar to what I had felt for Lily and the boy when I saw them in the photo. The same ache, I imagined, would afflict those who now looked at photos of my son—he died at about the age Lily and Tuan were when they fell in love.

But that ache was still as distant and as theoretical as a nebula when I was sitting in Lily’s chair. She opened an envelope in which a sepia-toned black-and-white photo was preserved between two sheets of tissue paper. The girl in the photo was dressed in a white áo dài, and the boy in a white silk shirt and a pair of white pants. She was beautiful, he was handsome, but those were not the words I would use to describe them. They were young, their faces cloudless, their bodies
insubstantial, closer to childhood than to adulthood. They looked like two lambs, impeccably
prepared by their elders as sacrifices to appease a beast or a god. Would anyone have been surprised
to hear that they died right after the photo was taken? Some children were born tragedies.

“What do you think?” Lily asked, studying my face.

“Wow,” I said.

“Maybe you can write a romantic novel about us.”

When tragedies drag on, do they become comedies instead, or grow more tragic?

I could not make a romance out of Lily’s story. She was not the first person I had let down with my
writing. During those years, when my children were in preschool, at the beginning of each
semester we were asked to send a care package that was to be kept at the school in case of a
catastrophic earthquake. In the care packages we were to include a few nonperishable snacks, a
family photo, a small stuffed animal, and a note to the children, telling them that, if their parents
could not make it to the school, there was nothing for them to worry about. Everything would be
fine, the note was to say. Everything would be all right in the end.

I had always prepared the snacks and the stuffed animal and the family photo, but I had never been
able to write that note to my children. What could I say to them? If your teacher is reading this to
you, it means that Mommy and Daddy are late picking you up; it may also mean that we will never
come back for you, but all will be well in the end.

We lived through their childhoods without being hit by a deadly earthquake. The care packages
were returned to us when the children graduated from preschool. Still, if a writer cannot write a
simple note as a parental duty, what meaning is there in the words she does write?

A few days ago, I got an e-mail from my former student who had vowed to dismantle my canon.
She said that she was travelling in South America. She mentioned a few things she had learned
from our clashes. “I remember that once you said to us: One must want to be great in order to be
good. To this day I still wonder why you looked sad when you said that,” she wrote.

Under what circumstances had I said that? And sad about what? Had she written to enlighten me
about what real life was, I would have applauded her consistency. Instead, in her long e-mail, she
talked about what I had taught her. I, too, had been young then; how could I have taught anyone
anything? All will be well all will be well and every kind of thing shall be well, yet I could not even write a lying note to console my children.

*Published in the print edition of the March 11, 2019, issue.*

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_Yiyun Li is the author of several books, including “Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life.” Her new novel, “Where Reasons End,” was published in February._

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