



















chubby fists on the ground until Meifeng placated him with promises to buy a toy—“a *dollar toy?*”—or a trip to McDonald’s, something typically reserved for special occasions. Meifeng would never have tolerated such a display from Ivy, but everyone in the Lin household indulged Austin, the younger child, and a boy at that. Ivy wished she had been born a boy. Never did she wish this more fervently than at twelve years old, the morning she awoke to find her underwear streaked with a matte, rust-like color. Womanhood was every bit as inconvenient as she’d feared. Nan did not own makeup or skincare products. She cut her own hair and washed her face every morning with water and a plain washcloth. One week a month, she wore a cloth pad—reinforced with paper towels on the days her flow was heaviest—which she rinsed each night in the sink and hung out to dry on the balcony. But American women had different needs: disposable pads, tampons, bras, razors, tweezers. It was unthinkable for Ivy to *ask* for these things. The idea of removing one’s leg or underarm hair for aesthetic reasons would have instilled in her mother a horror akin to slicing one’s skin open. In this respect, Nan and Meifeng were of one mind. Ivy knew she could only rely on herself to obtain these items. That was when she graduated from yard sales to the two big-box stores in town: Kmart and T.J.Maxx.

Her first conquests: tampons, lip gloss, a box of Valentine’s Day cards, a bag of disposable razors. Later, when she became bolder: rubber sandals, a sports bra, mascara, an aquamarine mood ring, and her most prized theft yet—a leather-bound diary with a gold clasp lock. These contrabands she hid in the nooks and crannies of her dresser, away from puritan eyes. At night, Ivy would sneak out her diary and copy beautiful phrases from her novels—*For things seen pass away, but the things that are unseen are eternal*—and throughout those last two years of middle school, she wrote love letters to Gideon Speyer: *I had a vivid dream this morning, it was so passionate I woke up with an ache . . . I held your face in my hands and trembled . . . if only I wasn’t so scared of getting close to you . . . if only you weren’t so perfect in every way . . .*

And so Ivy grew like a wayward branch. Planted to the same root as her family but reaching for something beyond their grasp. Years of reconciling her grandmother's teachings with her American values had somehow culminated in a confused but firm belief that in order to become the "good," *ting hua* girl everyone asked of her, she had to use "smart" methods. But she never admitted how much she enjoyed these methods. She never got too greedy. She never got sloppy. And most important, she never got caught. It comforted her to think that even if she were accused of wrongdoing someday, it would be her accuser's word against hers—and if there was anything she prided herself on other than being a thief, it was being a first-rate liar.