

## **THE WAIT**

by Lowry Pei

When Will and Susannah were lovers, the fact that she was married seemed irrelevant to him, except that it limited their time together. He was sure she couldn't love him any more than she did, husband or no husband. If she made love to her husband in the morning and Will at noon, it subtracted nothing from the truth of their love. She did do that at least once that Will knew of, because she told him. Not to make him jealous, or threaten him in any way, but because she knew he would be entertained by this curious event in her life. Will and Susannah were complete; they were a world, and though this world of theirs was tightly bounded in time and space, it was no less of a world for that.

He married Connie a year after Susannah told him they couldn't be lovers anymore. She ended their affair because she became pregnant, and she wasn't sure whether it was by Will or her husband. Not that she didn't love him, but now that she was pregnant – well, didn't he see?

“What if it's mine?” he said, though he knew she didn't want him to ask that, and the thought of having a child scared him.

“He'd never have to know. Even if it were. It could just as well be his.”

Or mine, Will wanted to insist, ours, the child of our love, we have to know; but the clarity of her candid blue gaze silenced him. He loved her, and he did as she wished, even though he was aware that he should resist, that he should be graceless and stubborn. The trouble was, he knew he was the extra helping, the cherry on top of her life. She

loved him, but there are some loves and then there is the other thing. He came face to face with it right then.

While Will was married he continued to remember Susannah, when he couldn't help it. He tried not to, but trying not to think about someone is thinking about them. If he was trying to catch up with her by marrying Connie – to have the other thing and make it even between them – it didn't work; he ended up divorced and Susannah did not. But the marriage did bring him his two daughters, Amy and Jocelyn, so he could never call it a mistake.

Will's ex-wife hated him a good deal more than she had ever loved him, unless he failed to notice she loved him when she did. She started hating him in the first place because he had an affair with another woman, but after several years, when they were divorced and that was old news, Will was pretty certain that Connie kept hating him because she needed to. She kept reheating cold rage so she wouldn't have to look in the mirror and ask herself if she was right to move their two girls from Boston to Chicago, make them go to new schools and lose all their friends – to say nothing of losing their father except on certain bitterly negotiated holidays and during the summers – just so that she could have her revenge. Will hated Connie too, of course, but at some point he decided to quit fighting her at every turn, for Amy and Jocelyn's sake. In the end, whether he was happy mattered less than doing the right thing by them; and if he didn't enjoy the later chapters of his life very much, well, who ever said he would?

At the time when Will met Susannah, he sold anesthetic gases and regulators, blood gas machines, and gas chromatographs. He was in Children's Hospital in Boston to replace a faulty GC in a diagnostic lab, and she was doing play therapy with some kids in a space off a waiting room. He stood in the doorway and watched her kneeling there with four small children around her, one of them buckled into a contraption that was somewhere between a stroller and a wheelchair. She seemed to be as oblivious to her own beauty as they were, but seeing her had cut the thread of his life and he could not move until its continuity was restored. After a minute she felt him looking at her and turned her gaze upon him; she was not offended or even surprised that he was standing there staring at her. It was as if they had an appointment. Finally she said, "Would you like to join us?"

The first time Will and Susannah kissed, they had known each other two months. They had lunch together in a different neighborhood, away from the hospitals, and were walking up a side street toward where Will had parked his car. Abruptly he stopped walking, and she stopped with him; he put his hand up to her cheek as if something were

getting in her eye and he was going to brush it away. He was like a teenage boy using a transparent excuse to touch a girl, and Susannah was beginning to laugh at him for that, but before he could complete the gesture or she could laugh they were kissing. The world fell away, there was no more pretense, only truth; when they could think again, they both knew what was going to happen between them.

Some time after Susannah broke it off with Will, he switched to selling X-ray equipment, and then MRI and CT scanners; he became more consultant than salesman, which was the top of his profession unless he went into management. That he didn't want to do; he preferred life in the hospitals, where he felt as though he was behind the scenes of a drama that mattered because somebody got helped. When he met Susannah's husband David, he was setting up a CT scan suite at Beth Israel and David was on the radiology team there. Of course, Will did not tell David that he was his wife's ex-lover and possibly his daughter's father. Will had a daughter of his own by then, and he knew what that meant; even if his particular gamete had gone into creating David's child, she was David's now and forever.

Even Will would have admitted that David was an admirable man, and that he in some sense deserved Susannah, though not more than Will himself did – at least as long as she thought so.

When Will was in the process of getting divorced, he thought of calling Susannah one day; but exactly how would he tell her the news that he was single again, especially when she was not? So, single though he was and remained, he didn't make that phone call. From time to time he was fortunate enough to meet a woman whose needs, for a while, were like his own, and sometimes for a while they would have great sex. He felt at those times that he was blessed by life-giving waters; but more often, the idea of sex was better than the sex itself. He was aware of not being anymore the lover he had once been, with Susannah, when the blessing renewed itself inexhaustibly.

Will was thoroughly unattached, except to his children, on the day he was reading the paper and saw that David had died of a heart attack. Loneliness had become a creature that inhabited the house with him, prowling through the rooms and threading its way among his possessions. Will didn't try to pile up stuff, but he owned a house and houses tend to fill up – especially because he owned a two-family and the renters on the first floor paid most of his mortgage. He had high-speed Internet, premium cable, a gas grill, a leaf blower, a weed whacker, a mulching lawn mower, a few hundred books, more CD's than he could listen to, subscriptions to the Boston Globe and the New York Times, a mountain bike, a sea kayak, downhill and cross-country

skis, call waiting, instant messaging, a pager, a fax, and a cell phone. All of which failed to provide the promised distraction. He knew at once that he was going to call Susannah; the only question was how long he would wait.

When he read the obituary her clear gaze was present to him again. She had never been cut out for sneaking or keeping a secret; it was only her natural consideration for others that made her hide their love. She had no doubt that she was entitled to it, entitled to husband and lover both, but though Will accepted that, she knew David never could. Her lack of doubt made her invincible; she could show up for an assignation with her hair in a purple ribbon, flat shoes, tennis shorts, wedding ring, pink cotton sweater over a lavender T-shirt, cloth handbag with leather trim, and when she rang the buzzer in Will's apartment building, no one on earth except him would have imagined that on her list of errands for that day four or five hours were blocked off for making illicit love.

Will knew that Susannah's grief would be as direct and genuine as anything else about her, and he knew that after some time she would go on with her life. The question was just how long the time would be. And of course whether she would care if he ever called her or not. Why shouldn't he, and their love, be far behind her in vague and infrequent memories of that time of life which ends, irrevocably, when one becomes a parent? But she wasn't that far in the past for Will, and if they had shared so much, why shouldn't they share this too? Such is the logic of a man who spends many nights alone.

There is something in people which refuses to give in; it keeps insisting, when it can make itself heard, on seeking the possibility of joy. That was what made Will finally call Susannah a year and a month after David died. His heart was pounding when he dialed the phone; he felt he had not been fully alive in that way in many years. The aliveness in his life came when he saw his two girls, and it had been a couple of months since he had; and anyway, that was an entirely separate compartment of his soul.

"Hello?" Susannah said, and her voice was the same voice – for an instant Will felt no time had passed, after all.

"Susa," he said automatically. That was what he had called her when they were together. He had decided before he picked up the phone that he wouldn't call her that now, at least not right away. "Susannah," he corrected himself.

"Yes? Is this – "

"It's Will."

“I thought so. I thought it had to be you. But I didn’t think it could be. How are you?”

“Oh, I’m fine, I guess.” At that moment how he was depended on her.

“Where are you, anyway? Do you still live in Newton?”

“No, I moved, I live in Jamaica Plain, it’s closer to the hospitals.”

“Really. So you still have the same job?”

“More or less. What are you doing now?”

“Oh, I have this funky little dance studio where kids take tap and so on. You know. I’m really too old for it, but they still come. It keeps me in shape.”

“Good for you,” Will said, feeling fatuous because he could think of nothing better to say. Inside he was asking himself what she looked like now, and thinking that if she saw him, the first thing she’d think would be “out of shape.”

“It’s nice down there in Jamaica Plain, isn’t it? With the Arboretum and everything. But what about the schools, I mean, they aren’t so great, are they?”

“No. But it doesn’t matter. The kids are in Chicago with Connie. We’re divorced.”

“Oh.” Now, he thought, she must know what this call is all about, now we’re on the same edge. “Oh. When?”

He tried to make out the tone of her response, but couldn’t. “It’s five years since we separated. She moved out there three years ago last fall.”

“Did you say kids? Do you have more than one?”

“Two girls.”

“That must be really hard for you,” Susannah said, and Will felt for an instant they touched.

“I hate it,” he said. “You’ve been through a hard time too, I know.”

“Yes.”

“He died way too young, didn’t he? I’m sorry. I wanted to call you but I wasn’t sure I should.”

“It’s all right,” she said. He felt a complicity between them not to say his name, as if saying it now would be to insult the dead. No harm, no foul was what he had always thought about his role in David’s life, but now it wasn’t so clear.

“How’s your daughter?” She had told him the child’s name – Tamara – but it wasn’t as if he knew her.

“Tam? She’s fine. I mean, for a teenager who has to live with just mom day in and day out. You know, she loves me but she sorta really can’t stand me at all? But that’s the way it’s supposed to work.”

Just mom, Will thought: so she doesn’t have a man in her life yet. And maybe doesn’t want one anymore? No, that wouldn’t be Susannah. Maybe in a couple of years Amy would be like Tamara, get fed up with her mother and want to move back East with him. “How do you like being a mom?” he said, absurdly, as if it were a recent development.

“I wouldn’t trade it for the world.”

“I know what you mean.”

“So how did she get away with taking the kids to Chicago?”

“I wasn’t willing to be as nasty as she was.”

“I thought in Massachusetts you couldn’t just do that. Take the kids, I mean. I don’t mean it was your fault or anything, it just seems so unfair.”

“Tell me about it.”

They were both quiet for a moment.

“I guess it’s none of my business,” she said.

“No, no, I’ll tell you the whole story some time.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know that,” he said, and for a moment it was exactly as it once had been between them. Direct. “How are you really?” Will said.

She thought, and he wondered if she wanted to be asked that. “I’m okay. Mostly. Sometimes it’s like I’m just starting to come to. Sometimes I’m really fine, I sort of . . . forget – that sounds bad, doesn’t it? I don’t forget David, I never could, but you know, I forget to be unhappy. Isn’t it that way for you with your kids?”

“I’d like to forget more of the time, if that’s what you mean by it.”

“You still have them, though.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Why?”

“I don’t mean to remind you.” He couldn’t tell her that he had never felt what her loss must be like, until that moment.

“It’s okay. I don’t need reminding, believe me. The worst is when people won’t talk to you about it at all. When they pretend nothing’s changed. That really pisses me off. I seem to have lost my patience after he died.”

That put him on guard. “I’ll try not to be too aggravating.”

“You – Will, I’m not talking about you. I’m just kind of tired of most people. I don’t have the energy for them. I have to take care of me and Tam, you know?”

“Of course you do.”

“It’s improving, bit by bit,” she said in a voice that drifted, half to herself. Or was she reassuring him? “I’ll get there.”

“You will. You’re a strong person, you always have been.”

“Tsk – what do you know?” Susannah said. “You’re just trying to make me feel better. Same as ever.”

“Really? Was that what I was trying to do?”

There was a silence; Will wondered if he had overstepped his bounds. “You always were a nice guy,” she said. “I’ll bet you’re a good father.”

“Thank you.” Was she writing him off, he thought, or had she long ago?

“Oh, now – come on. I mean it. I’m glad you called me.”

He knew it was his move. “Would you like to get together sometime? We could meet someplace, have lunch, I don’t know, whatever you like.” It felt as if he was trying to set up a blind date. “Although you’d probably be shocked at how old I’ve gotten.”

“What about me? You have no idea who you’re talking to.” She didn’t say it in an unfriendly way, but he thought maybe she was right, maybe he was far gone in illusion and life’s joke was on him.

“I have an idea,” Will said.

They did meet for lunch, at a restaurant in Harvard Square that had no associations with their past. Susannah wasn’t thirty anymore, but Will could still see her as she had been, that image refracted by the intervening time as if just below the surface of rippling water; and he knew that if she had still been thirty she would have been too young for him. A woman that age would want to get pregnant, and he’d been through that part of life.

Awkwardly they talked about their work and their houses until she pulled a picture of Tamara out of her purse; she watched him closely as he studied it. Will didn’t see himself in Susannah’s sixteen-year-old daughter, but he saw Susannah, as if he were seeing into the past that they might have shared if they had met when they were that young. And then layered on top of that, transparently, a girl he didn’t know who was also the child he might have had. He couldn’t stop gazing even when Susannah handed him a picture of her second child, a boy named Terry. “So now you have two of your own,” she said, a bit uncomfortably, as if she knew what he was thinking.

“Yes.” He showed her their pictures out of his wallet, one brown-haired girl building a castle at the beach, one just reaching

adolescence, looking impatient in a blue polyester robe at eighth grade graduation.

“Funny we should both have girls,” she said.

“Yes.”

“She’s going to be a very pretty young woman,” Susannah said, holding the picture of Amy.

“You won’t get an argument from me.” But it made Will wonder when Amy would have her first boyfriend and how he would feel about that. Probably he wouldn’t even be there to react when it happened. All of that lost to him, by whose fault, his or Connie’s, it hardly mattered anymore. “I miss her a lot. Miss them both.”

“I can tell.” She leaned forward to hand him the photo, and after he took it she didn’t sit back, or withdraw her hand, but only waited with her eyes on his. He knew what she meant him to do; he just hadn’t thought it would come that soon. Will laid his hand on hers and she stroked his knuckles with her thumb. When he felt the sensation he remembered she always had done that in just the same way, and it was almost as though they felt at home with each other.

“I don’t know what to say,” he told her, because it was the truth.

“Say what you want. You don’t have to act so – careful, it’s okay, you don’t have to pretend.”

“Was I? I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s okay, Will, there’s nobody here but us.”

Maybe careful was exactly what they needed to be; regardless of what she said, he felt Tamara and Terry, and Amy and Jocelyn, and David’s ghost all watching them as they sat in that restaurant with her stroking his hand with her thumb.

“I never thought you’d call me,” she said. “How long has it been?”

“Years.” He knew the number but didn’t say it; the last time had been when Amy was less than a year old.

“I’ve missed you. But you probably didn’t know that. I mean, why would you?”

It wasn’t the words she said, as much as the way her lips formed the word “you” in the shape of a kiss; for a moment he saw the old Susa flicker to the surface, making the old irresistible claim on him. Then she retreated, but that one glimpse sent him pursuing her. “I always wanted it,” he said (words came without thought); she smiled with the corners of her mouth. “I’ve never really stopped thinking about you.”

“Never?” she said, tilting her head to one side, as if she had caught him in a foolish exaggeration.

“Oh, you know what I mean.”

“But you could tell me,” she said. “It’s been a long time.”



Light-headed, Will became reckless. “Did I love you?” he said, looking her straight in the eye. He had to make her admit it.

“I always thought you did.”

“Then I never stopped.”

He had not meant to go that far, had not known that he would even want to so soon, and it had happened before he could think. If she didn’t want to hear that, if he didn’t want to have said it, it was too late.

She reached over and laid her fingers on his mouth as if to silence him, and then withdrew her hand, looked away and made a little face between a wince and a smile, then bent down to fish in her purse, as if she wanted to hide behind the table. She turned away from him and blew her nose. With the back of her hand she wiped at her eye. “Ha,” she said to no one, trying not to cry. Will felt that he was out of practice at being with her. “I don’t know if I can still do this,” she said without looking at him.

She turned back toward him, blinking away a tear, her cheek hectic and drawn. She opened her mouth as if to say something but thought better of it, raised her hand to say Wait, then let out a held breath. “Too many feelings at once,” she said. “I’m not as . . . “

“It’s all right.”

“Want to go?” she said.

“Sure.”

He paid and they left the almost untouched plates. The restaurant was below street level; the two of them mounted brick stairs up into a typical March day, gray with a swirling cold mist, full of energy but inhospitable. On the sidewalk he hesitated before he put his arm around her shoulders. They had heavy coats on, he thought it did not seem too intimate. She smiled up at him tremulously; when he saw that the smile was an effort he took his arm away. Susannah grasped Will’s hand and held on as they walked down the block toward her car; he seemed to be supporting her, lending her strength. Never this way between them before. Sometimes she carried her beauty in secret, under the conventional facade, sometimes it blazed out before the world, but she always came to him and went away in sovereignty and glory. Now for the first time she trusted him with her weakness, and he thought this was how she had been with her husband.

When they got to the car she turned to him and threw her arms around his neck and he held her; she hid her face against his coat. Will couldn’t tell what was happening, except that she needed it to happen; she held on longer than he expected, he was conscious of maintaining the embrace.

“Look,” she said when she stepped back, but didn’t go on. She didn’t meet his eyes.

“I am.”

“I just need to get used to the idea.”

“God knows,” he said. But he didn’t know; she seemed to have decided for both of them, without telling him.

“Let me call you when I can. I will.”

“Okay,” he said.

She opened the door of her car, and he saw that he was not supposed to try to kiss her, and that she silently apologized for that. He didn’t move closer. “See you,” he said.

“Bye,” she said in a muffled voice. Will turned away, thinking he had something to get used to as well. Behind him her car started.

Three weeks passed before she called; he was beginning to think she wouldn’t after all. He went through all the permutations more than once: waiting for the phone to ring, remembering their time together, reminding himself that there is no such thing in life as a second chance, telling himself to beware of getting what he asked for, assaying his fantasies until he identified the constituent elements of need and self-deception, forgetting about the waiting and then becoming annoyed with himself for remembering again, for caring if she called or not. It was almost school vacation week, when he would finally get to see the girls. Then the phone did ring and she invited him to dinner; and she told him, apropos of nothing, that Tam was going to sleep over at a friend’s house.

By midafternoon on the appointed day, a fast vibration would not stop humming somewhere between Will’s heart and his gut. He was trying to price out X-ray systems for a group practice that had bought a new building. The humming vibration would not have shown up on any machine, but it prevented him from finishing something he could normally have done with half of his attention. It was as though his body knew more than he did about what was to come, and was readying itself for what it already understood.

Will felt as though he should be making some sacrifice, observing some ritual of commemoration or even grieving. If he came back to her for even one night, the parenthesis that had been opened the day she left him would irrevocably close: their old love, who they had been then, his marriage and divorce, the births of his children and every year they had lived up till that day, all would be ruthlessly thrust into the distance by living a present moment with Susannah. That was what

scared him. Nobody else could have made that happen but her. If he didn't turn his back and walk away, which seemed unthinkable, he would make love to her. He would sleep in Susannah's bed, he would wake up with her and find himself in an unknown chapter of what could only be called his life. A now. He had grown accustomed to thinking that now was over, that everything had already happened, that the story that starred him, with him at the helm to succeed or fail, was behind him and nothing remained but to play out his hand; and if that was not so after all, wasn't it disloyal to Amy and Jocelyn, and to the person he had always been for them?

Or maybe none of it would happen. Maybe there was too much fact in his life now to admit of the possibility of romance. Maybe he and Susannah were other people who misleadingly carried the same old names. Maybe she would not want him after all, would have to admit her mistake with mumbled embarrassment. Or would he be the one to slip and let disappointment show? As he drove home from the office he played out in his mind a crushing scene of two half-naked middle-aged people realizing that all this would have been better left to the imagination. And then he would leave her house in the middle of the night like a burglar, having robbed them both of memories and wishes, their past flattened for good.

There was no way to know anything beforehand. Only time could carry him forward into what would come, only the hands of the clock turning and delivering him, finally, to the moment of getting back in his car, driving unfamiliar streets in Cambridge, the moment of standing at her door.

Her daughter opened it, Tamara who might be, but he knew he must not think that, and he saw she wanted to know who he thought he was – to look at her that way, to come at seven on a Friday night, to be cooked for by her mother; she was ready not to like him, not to want him in her life. He told her he was a friend of her mom's, which was much less than she already surmised. "Well, come in then," she said resignedly, as if it was too late to stop him now, and behind her, in the next room, he saw Susannah appear, drying her hands on a dishtowel that she threw hastily on the back of a chair. He stepped into their home: the home of a shared life about which he knew nothing, and in which he was, as yet, no one.